2012) reports that “between 1995 and 2010 the number of over-50-year-old Americans who regularly visited the cinema increased by 68%.” The article goes on to say that largely in response to this demographic shift in filmgoers, “it is estimated that around a third of Hollywood productions are being made with an eye on older audiences.”

Indeed, over the past 5–6 years, there have been a large number of major-release feature length films that deal with aging-related themes and/or characters. (A quick count off the top of my head yielded more than 20 in just the past 6 years.) Many of these films are not, in my opinion, outstanding in quality, but their presence indicates that aging is gaining acceptance, if not appreciation, in public and commercial consciousness. Clint Eastwood, for example, produced Gran Torino (Eastwood, 2008) with himself in the leading role as a crotchety elder thrown into a begrudging relationship with a vulnerable teen-aged neighbor. Away From Her (Polley, 2006) was an attempt (unevenly achieved) at exploring the complexity of the impact of dementia on the intimacy of a long married couple. The Savages (Jenkins, 2007) looked at how two estranged siblings must reconnect when they need to provide care for a father with dementia. Is Anybody There? (Crowley, 2008) is a charming look at the importance of an older man’s friendship with a young boy adrift in the throes of his parents’ rocky relationship. In Get Low (Schneider, 2009), veteran actor Robert Duval’s backwoods Tennessee character purposefully redeems himself in the eyes of the community he has shunned for most of his life. The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (Madden, 2012) shows us a group of older adults who have taken up new lives in India and play off one another’s pessimisms and optimisms. A wonderful film from Iran, A Separation (Farhadi, 2011), illuminates the complexities of cultural and class values when a family must care for a father with Alzheimer’s disease. And, finally, one of my favorites from the past few years, Young at Heart (Walker, 2008), a wonderfully engaging feature-length documentary about an older adult chorus that sings vibrant rock songs and wonderfully dispels the myth that old age equals staid. Clearly, the cinema is reflecting themes that a “coming of older age” population is now facing!

Are the attitudes and perceptions about aging in these and other recent films different from those in films produced 20–30 years ago? This question, and many others like it, is what we hope to explore in forthcoming reviews of films that deal with aging-related issues, while also looking at the implications these films have for teaching, research, policy, and practice in a society being jostled by extreme shifts in both demographics and technology.

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“TIS A FAR BETTER THING”: DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN GERONTOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Academic Rewind

In the late 1970s, I entered a Kansas State University (KSU) classroom to teach my first course on adult development and aging. Fresh from the USC Andrus Gerontology Center, I was hired by KSU to handle the last two thirds of the human life span—
from young adulthood through late adulthood. Most of my colleagues viewed postadolescence as "left-over life," agreeing with Freud’s position that “the child is the father of the man.” Not surprisingly, many students also shared this view; when I arrived at the classroom, it was empty. No one had signed up for the course. It was an elective. Why, after all, according to the reasoning, should a college senior voluntarily take a course about aging and its four Ds: deterioration, dependency, depression, and death? This view was reinforced by academic context. My campus, like so many others around the nation, lacked a core of faculty devoted to aging. Our new Center on Aging was really just an idea contained in a brochure distributed by a small committee of interested faculty bucking campus-wide barriers. At an organizational meeting, a new faculty member from Arts and Sciences said, “If my department head finds out I’m over here talking to you people, I’ll be in trouble.” But the wheel turned. Over the next few years, we required the course, and the classroom filled up. Students were exposed to a surprising amount of theory and research on life span human development, particularly about the aging process.

**A Personal Frame**

As a life-long film devotee, I am struck by the power of the image to educate, to advocate, and to alter lives. (Interestingly, little formal research targets the large and small influences of film itself on life course trajectories.) In those early days, my department owned just one film related to aging, *The Development of the Adult*, focusing on the foundational work of Bernice Neugarten, David Gutmann, Roger Gould, and Daniel Levinson. After several showings, this 16-mm reel-to-reel film literally wore out. A few educational films on aging existed but they were expensive by our budget standards. Given the lack of options, I developed a course called *Aging in the Cinema*, using full-length motion pictures as “fictional or dramatized case studies” to illustrate aging-related topics that already had a well-established base of empirical research and scholarship. Ingmar Bergman’s *Wild Strawberries*, for instance, when combined with Erik Erikson’s treatise about the meaning of the film for early and late life development (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986), illuminates both Bergman’s film and Erikson’s developmental theory in a way one cannot appreciate from viewing either one alone. I used such films at some risk due to copyright laws. Legally speaking, showing these “Hollywood” films in a university classroom was considered a grey area. Our attorney advised: “Go ahead and show them, but try not to be the test case.”

**Fast Forward**

In the past few years, digital technology has logarithmically enhanced our access to and transmission of information relevant to training, research, practice, and policy in gerontology. Consider a few options available to me now. YouTube, once primarily a venue for popular culture posts (“Charlie bit my finger”) has become a rather serious repository of age-related information. My random search of YouTube materials related to aging and aged produced nearly 2,000 hits. Individuals, universities, organizations, and commercial companies contribute material on topics such as elder abuse, sexuality and aging, age discrimination, social policy and aging, successful aging, caregivers, dementia, longevity, first-person views on aging, top 50 blog lists on aging, distinguished speaker series, and age-related humor—to name but a few. As with any pop culture source, consumers—especially students—should approach this content cautiously, given its lack of peer review and often limited shelf life. In recent years, the problem has changed from “lack of available materials” to “too much information.” Improved access makes it possible to download materials and readily insert them into PowerPoint presentations. Teachers can capture (e.g., aTube catcher), convert, and upload materials into the online course environment. (In a future review, we will give more careful consideration to what YouTube has to offer.) Multiple use licenses and more flexible use clauses within copyright laws make it easier to digitize and upload film and video materials of other types, as well. Narrative as well as briefer documentaries are frequently cleared for digital transfer to online environments. Although legal constraints and rights remain multilayered and complex, even full-length motion pictures may often be used for educational purposes in face-to-face as well as distance education courses. Today, I no longer have to require students to subscribe to Netflix to complete viewing assignments for my Aging in the Cinema distant education course.

Though we still have no national repository or clearing house containing a list of documentaries dealing with aging and age-related themes, a few Web sites offer more age-related videos today than
was the case even a few years ago. An excellent and worthy example is *The Alzheimer’s Project* (2012), a presentation of HBO Documentary films and the National Institute on Aging (NIA), in association with the Alzheimer’s Association, Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund, and the Geoffrey Beene Gives Back Alzheimer’s Initiative. The Project contains four high-quality documentaries that shine multiple lights on the disease; it is appropriate for educators, family members (particularly caregivers), and policy advocates, alike. It also includes a number of class-convenient, bite-size supplementary videos updating research progress on causes and treatments of Alzheimer’s disease.

Today, a number of Federal sites offer Alzheimer’s videos that are immediately available to tech-ready classes. For example, 2010 Alzheimer’s disease progress report videos are available at the Web site of the NIA (http://www.nia.nih.gov). Clicking on “Images and Video” at Quick Links in the Newsroom at this Web site allows access to video interviews with leading researchers at NIA. I have always found materials from the hearings of the U.S. Special Committee on Aging useful for training purposes, especially for seeing what’s hot and what’s not in the eyes of the Feds. Now, policy makers and advocates for aging can click “Forum” on the Web site for the Committee to access video presentations of the hearings of the 112th Congress extending from March 2, 2011 through March 3, 2012. Publications are digitally available also, of course.

Most recently, digital technology has offered venues with tremendous potential for use by gerontologists, though these are still underutilized. The past 5 years have seen the rise of alternative broadcasting formats, including lifecasting (actually begun in the early 1990s), where personal experiences can be captured on an everyday basis using continuous broadcasting, often via wearable technology. Ustream, established in 2007, one of several live video sites, uses both lifecasting and video streaming of events online. The potential of these sites for live, online discussions of aging-related issues and goals has yet to be tapped. They require desktop broadband connectivity but can reach audiences around the world. Recent rapid advances in video technology have expanded the potential for amateur and professional videography, as individuals produce, tape, edit, and store their own videos—a “click and go” enterprise. And consider the “mash-up” culture, “where new developments in technology have made sampling and cutting-and-pasting easy enough for any amateur to do, and the Web is full of mash-ups, remixes, homages, parodies, fan-edits and even customizable videos” (Kakutani, 2010).

Digital technology has led to the development of new specialties in some disciplines. For example, it has spawned a new field in anthropology—digital ethnography—that explores the impact of new media on society and culture. The award-winning developer of this discipline, Dr. Michael Wesch of KSU, explores digital media not only for their data-gathering potential, but also for their innovative applications in the classroom. As an environmental gerontologist, I am excited about what digital technology offers not only for data gathering, but also for the creation and use of new environments by older adults, for example, virtual worlds such as *Second Life* (Boellstorff, 2008).

Unlike Dorothy, I cannot say that I am “not in Kansas anymore,” but I am a long way from sitting with that lone film on adult development.

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