Beyond the Horror of the Aging Female

Decay, Regeneration and *Relic* (Natalie Erika James, 2020)

Laura Hubner[1]

The focus of this chapter is the contemporary horror film *Relic* (the debut feature made by Japanese-Australian writer and director Natalie Erika James, in 2020). A devastatingly moving film, it confronts dementia,[2] (mental and some physical) decline, decay, and loss with original sensitivity, while still drawing on conventional horror tropes. Described as both "genuinely terrifying" and equally "heart-breaking", *Relic* stands out as a horror genre movie that is as emotionally relentless and resoundingly personal as it is "spine-tingling" (Kermode 2020). The film pivots around the elderly and widowed Edna (Robyn Nevin), mother to Kay (Emily Mortimer) and grandmother to Sam, Kay's daughter (Bella Heathcote). The opening drama is triggered as Edna goes curiously missing, bringing Kay and Sam back to the deteriorating family home, nestled in the vast woodlands of Creswick (Victoria, Australia), to look for her. When Edna inexplicably reappears a few days later, barefoot and bedraggled from a few days in the woods, she is unable to recount where she has been, leaving Kay and Sam increasingly tormented by the problem of how to deal with Edna's faltering memory, her fear of intruders and her volatile, sometimes violent, actions. However, if the

1 University of Winchester.

2 While not a term used directly in the movie, "dementia" is referred to in some of the film's descriptions and marketing, such as the International Movie Database (IMDB) entry https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9072352/.

focus of the problem seems to be upon Edna alone, I suggest the film's unique and complex manipulations of time and space, playing with long traditions of fairytale, gothic and abject horror, ensure that any sense of "othering" the aging female, or of "othering" Edna's aging state, is radically shattered as the forces of the decaying and morphing house (increasingly a metaphor or vision of the human condition) seep outwards to affect the next generations. Edna's condition becomes theirs and ours – in a way that is immediately refreshing for a horror film. The broad stimulus here for my chapter is *women* and aging in horror movies, which traditionally has not been at all progressive. Aging women do not generally fare well in the horror film (conveyed as ugly, evil, lecherous, and ravenous). Therefore, I will begin with a glimpse at horror cinema's predominantly problematic approaches to female aging.

Gothic texts are rife with hauntings by a crazy, and often sexually experienced or dangerous, older woman, inhabiting a remote house or locked away in the attic, othered and contained from society. Connections can be made with folkloric traditions, as Sue Matheson (2019: 85) expounds: "Generally malevolent, the hags of folklore are vicious (and often malicious) embodiments of death that represent the dissolution of the body, the destructive, devouring nature of time, and the mindless persistence of the past." Conventions of presenting women as monstrous in nature (*naturally* wild, possessed, non-human or untamed), are well-documented. Barbara Creed writes of the "monstrous feminine" of more graphic or abject horror – monstrous in relation to specifically female, reproductive functions – "the archaic mother, the monstrous womb, the witch, the vampire, and the possessed woman" (Creed 1993: 73). She suggests this is connected to a fear of the female's generative power, passing from mother to daughter, relating her to the animal world in a "great cycle of birth, decay and death" (Creed 1993: 43). In fairytale horror, the evil witch, hag or crone is synonymous with physical signs of female aging: a bent frame; a raspy cackle; wispy, unmanaged gray hair; facial whiskers and bumps that denote a manipulating, hungry or interfering character living alone in the woods, sporting a broomstick. As Lynne Segal argues, with respect to the "terrifying images" of "the hag, harridan, gorgon, witch or Medusa" that myth and folktale feed to us from birth: "Such

frightening figures are not incidentally female, they are quintessentially female, seen as monstrous because of the combination of age and gender." (2014: 13)[3] This reaches back to a sense of the aging female being surplus to culture, or existing on the margins of society.[4]

I raise all this because there are hints at many of these traditions in *Relic* – sometimes no more than a knowing wink, while at other points a direct confrontation or dialogue with them. However, I suggest the film is refreshingly progressive in many ways. While not unequivocally progressive, it does shake expectations, ultimately, by encouraging contemplation, empathy (rather than difference) or self-reflection, and by avoiding some of the jump scares traditionally associated with rapid female aging and decay.

The manipulation of time has played a significant role in perpetuating traditionally disturbing female old age, where sudden female aging is the focus for the terrifying. In *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), for example, on entering the forbidden Room 237 and embracing his fantasy, the dream turns to nightmare for Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson), as he witnesses the young woman (object of male fantasy) becoming horrifyingly old. He catches sight of their reflection in the bathroom mirror. It is the aging process itself, and the rapidly decomposing body, visually sped up, that is the producer of horror – the visual jump scare. As Jack quickly exits the room, she staggers forwards towards him – hands reaching out to try to catch him, as he locks her back in the room. 15 years before *The Shining*, The Hammer Film *She* (Robert Day, 1965) made rapid female aging its final jump scare. Ayesha (Ursula Andress) – who throughout the film has used the magic of the blue flame to sustain eternal youth (and power) – finds this magic reversed at the end – leaving her a tragic, but mostly repulsive, figure. The young male lover recoils in horror, as the

3 We might note *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (Robert Aldrich, 1962) as an example of the close pairing between aging woman and horror.

4 Lynne Segal (2014: 43) discusses the economic burdens traditionally associated with the folkloric witch (constituting the older woman living alone) and moreover Hollywood's punishment of female characters who have gained power through independence.

rotting corpse leans towards him and collapses to the floor. The familiar horrific transformation frequently associated with vampires, werewolves and zombies here applies to witnessing a woman growing old and decaying.

I suggest that such othering by jump-scare tactics is refuted in *Relic*. While the film does have its suspense and scares (for example uncertainties lie under the bed and behind clothes in the closet) and growing images of monstrous decomposition that take over towards the end, by conveying subjects slowly, with a brooding suspense, much of the film reaches out to provoke contemplation and empathy. The first sight of Edna in *Relic* is of her stood naked in the hallway of her home with her back to us in the dimness of the night looking towards the Christmas tree fairy lights glowing on and off in the living room. The shot is poignant rather than shocking. The pool of water at her feet subtly evokes loss, growing from the slow drip from the bathroom upstairs, in a style reminiscent of Hideo Nakata's Japanese film *Honogurai mizu no soko kara* / Dark Water (2002). It suggests perhaps she forgot to turn the taps off – something the film will return to later with the discovery of her many post-it note reminders around the large house, one reading (notably written in capitals) "TURN OFF TAP" discovered by Sam when she gets into the bath. The Christmas tree provokes a sense of foreboding, like a heart pulsating, and gains significance later when Sam finds hordes of old Christmas decorations stuffed floor to ceiling in a locked room (Christmas being a time often associated with ritual, togetherness and making memories). Thus, the scene has quite the opposite effect of the naked female in *The Shining* as Edna turns her face around to the left slightly. There is no horror in her naked body or face. The moment is slow, and contemplative – with a menacing soundtrack, and rising breaths, conveying Edna's fear.

Indeed, time is key to the slow, brooding atmosphere of horror created. When Kay and Sam first enter the house to look for Edna, a bowl of decaying fruit comes into view, caught in close-up by the itinerant camera. Most immediately, it indicates Edna's withdrawal and disappearance, but the camera's static attention to the fruit and the surrounding domestic objects, and the way the items are framed, allows for a focus

on stillness and time for contemplation. In this sense, the shot functions like a *vanitas*: still-life artworks popular in the 16th and 17th centuries of symbolic objects designed to get the viewer to reflect on mortality and transience, emphasising the vanity or emptiness of earthly or individual achievements. It provides a refocusing on what is important – a theme I will return to at the end of this chapter. In terms of time, broadly speaking, much of the film's events are plausible, albeit with a continual pulsating groaning soundtrack, occasional lapses into uncertain visions (of a figure in the corner and expanding rot), and interludes of nightmare visions, provoking fear, suspense, and uncertainty. But time and space break down completely in the final 20 minutes of the film, as the house stretches and shrinks, and as the mould (or bruising) grows across the building and Edna's body.

However, even in the earlier stages, time is unsettled. The past and future echo in the present. For instance, the conversation from the past of the policeman telling Kay her mother is missing plays on the soundtrack as a voice-over when Kay and Sam drive to Edna's house, and in turn when Kay travels to be interviewed further, her future conversation with the police officer is projected onto the present via voice-over as she drives. These out-of-time devices saturate the film. The policeman's words "we need a timeline" – as he tries to piece together Edna's movements before going missing – express the search for a rational, linear explanation of life, which acts as a striking contrast to the way the film itself works. Relics of Edna's previous affluent, active life are evident in the sagging tennis court net and the shot of what seems to be an old swimming pool. Their current state of disrepair is a moving reminder of a past life we can but imagine. The stained-glass window in the front door of Edna's house is a relic from the old cabin where Kay's great grandfather lived out his days by himself on this land. When looking at Edna's old beautiful drawings of woodland, Kay finds Edna's sketches of how the windows would be removed and implanted in the new building. But Kay tells Sam that apparently the old man's "mind wasn't all there in the end", and nobody had realised how bad it was. The thought of this still plagues Kay in nightmares of her great grandfather dying alone in the cabin, his rotting body falling off the bed. As the film progresses Kay's nightmare

images of her great grandfather are overtaken by similar visions of her mother. Thus, the family "curse" of past abandonment is kept alive in the relic of the stained-glass window, now embedded in the house's main door, and in the film's haunting repetition of shots of stained-glass windows.

Further to this, point-of-view and close-up shots aid the subtle shift of focus from a sense of rational explanation towards experiencing and feeling Kay's concerns first-hand. For example, a shot from Kay's viewpoint when she has spotted the armchair facing the wrong way (out to the window, rather than towards the television) helps convey her shock directly. As we later find out, her mother had phoned her saying things had moved and changed, including the armchair facing out to the window. While Kay passes this off later as her mother's own doing (saying "She's doing it – she forgets things"), it still unsettles her when she sees it. It represents an early sensation of the daughter beginning to feel the shudders directly herself. She doesn't let on to Sam. Later Kay lugs the chair back to the "right" place. An extreme close-up draws attention to the foot of the chair being returned to the deep indentation of the carpet where it stood unmoved over time. Kay is both doing this for her mother and for herself – wanting things to stay as they were, actively and very decisively returning it to how it has been.

Relic draws from and complexifies traditional fairytale relationships and spaces, focusing on the three generations of women.[5] At the start, Kay might be seen as the slightly detached working mother, who wants to move her mother to a care home in Melbourne, the city where Kay lives. Creswick is about 122 kilometres northwest of Melbourne, so a fair distance for Kay to come but driveable. But later Kay retracts from the idea, after visiting a care home, and witnessing her mother's pain, suggesting in the end she move in with her in Melbourne. Idealistic Sam on the other

5 Cp. "Little Red Riding Hood", for example. We might also recall that some fairy tales and myths revolve around a "triple goddess" formula of maiden, mother and crone. The seeming inevitability of this triad, or female trajectory through life, alludes to that which is passed down through the generations, but perpetuated by societal treatment.

hand initially wants to move in with her gran and take care of her but must face up to her grandmother's accidents – some of them hazardous to herself or dangerous to others (at one point for example her grandmother violently snatches back the ring she gave Sam, drawing blood and accusing her of being a thief).[6]

However, the narrative is shown to be more complex than simply the mother and daughter figures finding their own roles *in relation to* the elderly female. The film more importantly concerns Kay and Sam feeling and experiencing Edna's plight themselves, as part of a repeated cycle of the human condition. Increasingly we see the characters merge. When Sam breaks through a door to find a room stuffed with old treasures, including Christmas decorations, relics of Christmases past, that grow over time, but stored for the possibilities of those in the future, she finds a photograph of an idyllic, sunny moment of family togetherness – eating outside. The photograph captures the family unposed, unaware of the camera. Edna carries the food for the table. They are drinking fresh orange juice and wearing sun hats. Due to cinematography and reflections at play, we see three Sams: 1) the current Sam (the back of her head); 2) the (only very slightly younger) Sam in the photo – reminding us times change quickly – with her grandparents protectively huddled around behind her, and 3) the reflection of her looking at the photograph. These moments of stillness in the film allow time for contemplation, even time to wonder who took the photograph – or even if it was perhaps Kay who took it. The camera lens adjustment changes, so that Sam's face comes into full focus – leaving the image of the grandparents as a ghostly trace, and Sam's own image submerging her grandmother's.[7] It is a purely cinematic moment. The photograph evokes Roland Barthes' concept of

6 Incidentally, the grandmother's passing on of her wedding ring to her granddaughter Sam suggests the attempt to perpetuate age-long patriarchal traditions (Edna says that Kay – the mother – did not succeed in making "any good use" of the ring). While we know in the background that Kay's marriage did not work out, none of this plays out in the film's present.

7 A similar set up, albeit more immediately terrifying, occurs in the American film *The Visit* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2015) when the girl looks in the mirror and sees the grandmother figure behind her.

death in the photographic image, as formulated in *Camera Lucida*, as it has captured a moment, like an insect in amber, embalming time: "For the photograph's immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute the Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past ('this has been'), the photograph suggests that it is already dead." (Barthes 1982: 79) In this instance, the photograph provides a glimpse of a time when Edna's husband was still alive. And the cinematography and framing observe the sense of renewal or regeneration – a carrying down through the generations. In terms of the narrative, it encourages a time of reflection, and self-insight. We might ask ourselves why we take photographs of family gatherings.

Connections like this between Sam and the grandmother are made throughout the film, as are the everyday frictions that arise between mother and daughter, and the merging of roles women experience through a lifetime. To calm the nerves when Edna is still missing, Kay starts idly having a try at playing Beethoven's "Für Elise" on the piano but keeps getting stuck, when Sam walks by saying it is D after that bit not E: "Gran taught me". Kay's response to this – "Of course she did. I could never get the curl of the fingers right… I think she gave up on me at a certain point" – conveys the frictions that are commonplace in mother and daughter relationships. Soon after this, we witness the next generation repeating itself when Sam (while eating pizza) has a go at the candle carving her gran has been occupied with, drawing attention both to the connections between grandmother and granddaughter and continuing frictions between mother and daughter. Sam's mother, from the next room where she is washing up, and having found out Sam's gallery work didn't work out, is asking whether she will return to university. The calling from one room through to the next is indicative of the continual flow of these intergenerational relationships, as Kay says: "So, what – you just going to work in a bar for the rest of your life?" and Sam replies: "Maybe." We feel the responsibilities of Kay as mother – plagued by work phone calls and emails throughout the film. But moments later, (young

and old at the same time) doubting the way she is dealing with her mother's disappearance, she is reassured by Sam that she is doing the right thing. For this moment, Sam takes on the parental role to console her mother, mirroring Kay's role reversal with her own mother. Many of the shots in *Relic* are filmed from another room, peering through a door or archway, with parts of the room we are looking into obscured from view. This helps to emphasize stylistically the merging between the three generational roles. For instance, at one point Kay is talking to her mother, Edna (out of view), but we only discover later when the camera adjusts that Sam is there in the foreground too.

In the final 20 minutes of the film, as rational time and space collapse completely, Sam becomes lost in a labyrinth of extra corridors and dead ends belched out by the remains of the house, screaming to find her way out, calling her mum, and banging on walls. In moments of uncanny horror, she finds herself back where she was before, and then when searching for her, Kay also becomes embroiled in the mayhem. In the end, Sam finds a way to bash through from the other side of the house, and a chase ensues as Kay and Sam help each other back through to the main house, followed by Edna, in a grotesque form of rebirth – an acceptance of aging, death and decay. Kay and Sam thus experience directly the feelings of loss and confusion felt by Edna.

The repetitions through the generations of three women permeate the film. This is conveyed visually one evening when each in turn come to brush their teeth in front of the mirror. Sam initially joins Kay, then Edna appears in the adjoining mirror. The close-ups on the reflections of each face simultaneously unite and separate the three figures, reminding us of their integral connection with each other, their impermeable similarity, as well as the pain of their being at crucially different stages of life – with time dividing but inevitably joining them. We are made aware of the interchangeable relationships from the film's start with the echoing of calls "Mum" and "Gran" when Kay and Sam first arrive. Edna confuses the names Kay and Sam several times, but we as viewers get confused too – more than once there seems to be the uncanny sense initially that it is Edna (on the stairs, or in the bath) and it turns out to be Sam. Many times, there is a confusion over which of the three is pictured lying in

bed. Despite the different forms of light source each of the three women use to find their way in the darkness – a candle, a torch and a mobile phone – the *repetition* of the action (of needing to light the way) is also striking.

To explore the sense of "the Uncanny" in more depth, it is worth examining the gothic tonal qualities that surround Edna's home from the earliest stages of the film. The large haunted, possessed, or crumbling house is a staple setting for gothic literature and film, which – via transgressive possibilities and stylistic excesses – articulates the haunting return of the past seeping through the crevices into the present, or the notion that horror upsurges from within – shattering boundaries between then and now, the self and "other", internal and external or rigid concepts of "home". Sigmund Freud's essay "The Uncanny" (2003 123–162), originally published in 1919, is valuable for considering tensions between "public" and "private", or external and internal, that are central to gothic. Freud (2003: 126–134) investigates the German root of "uncanny" / "*unheimlich*" (unhomely, unfamiliar) all the way to its opposite "*heimlich*". It helps understand how the uncanny, or "unheimlich" in German, suggests a meeting between "heimlich" and "unheimlich"/ homely and unhomely / familiar and strange – meaning a place can be familiarly strange, or strange because is it unexpectedly familiar.[8] The crucial point materializes when Freud traces the numerous and complex definitions of "*heimlich*" until "*unheimlich*" surprisingly resurfaces:

> [A]mong the various shades of meaning that are recorded for the word *heimlich* there is one in which it merges with its formal antonym, *unheimlich*, so that what is called *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich*… This reminds us that this word *heimlich* is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which are not mutually contradictory, but very different from each other – the one relating to what is familiar and

8 It is worth noting at this point the significance of Edna's words to her granddaughter, Sam, which capture the paradox of holding onto a newly alienating space as seemingly familiar but increasingly strange: "Since your grandfather passed this house seems unfamiliar. Bigger somehow. This house is the only thing left."

> comfortable, the other to what is concealed and kept hidden. (Freud, 2003: 132)

The "homely" thus becomes horrifying, as a familiar domain for the dangerous and repressed, stimulating the haunting return of something that should have remained private or hidden.

The tendency of gothic horror has meant the fear of something alien coming from outside has shifted to the fear of what lies within (the home or the psyche). The doppelgänger and the split self of gothic articulate the sense of the "other" within, and repressed desire, urges and fears rising to the surface. Fear of what lies within the home (conflicts and abuses within the space that is meant to be "safe" or "homely") is clearly relevant to *Relic*. Not only do we witness Edna's violent flashes but Edna's fears of intruders coming into the home can be linked to cognitive decline, confusions over what is real, and even fear of her own family (her daughter and granddaughter) as intruders that threaten her freedom. And all three characters are violent to each other at some point. There are also the merged fears of old age that all three characters face, or will in the future face, as we do or will do, here shaped distinctively by the film's gothic tone, and by its horror genre techniques.[9]

There is in addition, though, in *Relic* a degree of developing or questioning the dualities of gothic, as it explores the shattering or blending of any clear understanding of self – of "self" and "other", of past and present. The director, James, has said that the inspiration for *Relic* came from a visit to Japan a few years before the film was made to visit her grandmother, who has Alzheimer's. And, as James expands, the first image of *Relic* grew from her grandmother's house:

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9 Indeed, genre is key to these fine-tuned effects. We might compare the television crime film *Eizabeth is Missing* (Aisling Walsh, 2019), which conveys advancing dementia in ways that disorientate and prompt the viewer with specific clues, thus using the tools of the crime genre rather than those of horror. The merging of events and layering of perspectives to some extent also recalls B.S. Johnson's experimental, and comedic, British novel, *House Mother Normal* (1971).

> A lot of the upstairs rooms at her home were full of old junk – they were in essence hoarding rooms. I had this image of a hoarding room that just keeps going on and on. I started from there. (James, cited in Bell 2020)

The hoarding itself is a source for horror in *Relic*, especially as the convoluted spread mirrors the characters' confusion. It is a further reminder of time accumulating and raises questions over the sustained meaningfulness of collecting items for building a home and a sense of self. This "other" half of the house emerges in the rooms beyond locked doors and closets that stretch to form labyrinthine corridors, particularly those faced by Sam towards the end of the film, that grow and shrink unpredictably, forging dead ends and lowered ceilings that confound clarity. The shadow self also resides in the memory of the cabin where Kay's great grandfather died alone. The shocking images of a rotting corpse slipping off the bed can be attributed to Kay's repressed childhood fear that rears in nightmares. In this light, Edna's home (a beautiful fairytale cottage in the woods people dream of) becomes also the quintessential remote, creaky house inhabited by the lonely, widowed female.

The opportunity to leave this space, with its encroaching wilderness and generations of memories, is offered when Kay manages to get out to investigate the other potential space or "home", nearly half-way into the film (30–36 mins). The "retirement home" (as Kay calls it) that Kay visits in Melbourne as an initial solution is clinically stripped of excessive decor and haunting relics, in direct opposition to the family home that Edna inhabits, and Kay grew up in. However, hopes of escaping the haunted family home for a day are soon dampened on the journey there, as grey clouds hang heavily, and murmuring notes continue relentlessly on the soundtrack, approaching the urban sprawl of high-rises, viewed from the hermetically sealed, muted car. The voice-track precedes the arrival – "Now you mentioned your mother has some cognitive … impairment…" There is a cut to the care home chessboard on the word "impairment". As the attendant and Kay walk past individuals hunched over in their chairs in their separate rooms, autonomous but in view, they pass a solemn looking man with a walker. Within earshot of the man, but obliv-

ious of him, the attendant continues with the sales pitch, "Think of it as independent living with the edges taken off." The man stares at Kay as the woman says this and continues to watch when she turns round after they have passed. The lack of privacy and sensitivity – as residents are shown to be disconnected but not independent – speaks volumes.

Putting the film into broader context, as baby boomers (who have lived relatively independent lives) reach retirement age, there is an increased emergence of social and political concerns with how to grow old and where to live in extreme old age, or "the fourth age", as Paul Higgs and Chris Gilleard (2015) have termed the shadowy and often "othered" twilight years. While care homes have long been the locus for terror in films, novels and television dramas, the focus for that terror tends to reside in not wanting to become like the enfeebled residents. However, at this point in *Relic*, there is in addition the horror, conveyed through the combined responses of the stern male resident and the embarrassed Kay, embedded in the attendant's capitalist indifference and moral blindness – as her interest is invested solely in attaining a new resident, or recruit.

Kay is called by the woman: "Just in here." The woman, now out of focus, summons her with the big selling point: "This side of the building has ocean views." There follows the cut to the smart but most clinical looking room: the (French door style) window, and curtain, the upright blue chair, single bed, television on wall. The attendant cites the list "Handrail in every room", high toilet seat, mobility aid – which prompts Kay to praise her mother's physical abilities, "She's fit and active… not even sure she's ready for a place like this." There is a cut to close-up of Kay looking out the window, as the woman replies with a tone almost of reproach, "Well it's 5 star living". As Kay looks round then out the window, the woman's voice continues off-frame stating, "There'll be lifestyle and therapy programmes", and as she cites "disability support", there is a cut to the "sea view". We have to work to find the sea view, which is obscured by buildings, with electricity wires, cables and ugly rooves most prominently in view. The shot conveys a comedic contrast to that which is *sold*, but the moment is heart wrenching at the same time. The woman's voice continues to reel off the list of activities, but becomes faint to a distant

rumble after the words "computer classes". With the cut back to the shot of Kay stood at the window, the voice trails off, and the threatening music sounds dominate, suggesting the list of activities are too inhumanly programmatic for Kay to take in, the home's sales-pitch too unsympathetic. The experience leaves Kay in tears on the way home.

It is worth pausing at this point to reflect more broadly on care homes. One of the heart-breaking aspects of the film is seeing Edna's exquisite drawings in her old sketch book. The attention to detail and to creativity can be related to the pleasures in the present associated with Edna's candle carving, where she can be slicing out great chunks of wax flesh. Embraced by the film is the joy of spontaneity, music, and loving tenderness, such as when Edna, bare foot, teaches Sam to dance. Some of the questions that might arise are how a care home or community centre might allow for long periods of contemplative creativity, where residents can be unshackled by time, without labelling the activity reductively as prescheduled "Mindful Play" within a mindless programme – driven by an ideology of keeping "busy". It is a difficult quandary because routines can also be important factors in residential homes.

In a later scene, Kay ventures into the woods to find her mother eating the family photographs – so no one can get them. Edna's fear (of something coming into the house), is a subject previously explored in James' award-winning 2017 film short Creswick (that she also co-wrote with Christian White – who co-wrote *Relic* with her), in which a father tells his daughter: "It's like someone else is living here." When Kay stops her mother from eating the photographs, Edna bites her daughter, then proceeds to then bury them, as if returning them to the ground she lives on and calls home. Her words, "I just want to go home. I just wish I could turn around and go back", are central to the whole film. The statement raises the question of what constitutes the concept of "home". Often 'home' might feel like a place, or somewhere that people or family are, or "home" might denote a sense of self – including identities that are now in the past. And this relates to Edna's question soon after this: "Where's my… Where's everyone, where is everyone?" as well as her words: "I'm losing everything Kay." Here, the notion of "losing" might include her

loss of the visionary artist she once was, the friends and loved ones from her multiple younger lives and selves, especially as the memories are fading. Importantly, in a moment that marks a significant arc in Kay's journey, Kay invites her mother to move in with her, and they hug. It is a moment of togetherness. And it is a vital gesture. However, I suggest the film ends with no solution; there remains a degree of ambiguity over what will happen in terms of Edna's story, because how Kay would ever begin to navigate work and home pressures to accommodate caring for her mother is never finally resolved.

The film both confronts and elides the abiding issue that "care" still tends to remain in contemporary society the responsibility of the female. While it is possible with the three central protagonists being women to suggest that the film presents the issue as a specifically female one, the omission (or playing down) of male figures[10] might also remove some of the complexities that come with being female. Nevertheless, the breakdown of traditional family relationships is notable. Nuclear families are fragmented or conveyed only in the past, and the focus predominantly on women also allows for a simplicity, providing a spotlight on the film's central themes of aging and memory loss. The issues that come with the specifically older female living alone and the notion that "care" of all kinds is still positioned as "women's work" resound through the film, even if these factors are not explicitly foregrounded.

At the end of the film, the more monstrous horror movie mode takes over in scenes that might be read as metaphoric. A battle ensues, culminating with Kay violently, and cathartically, attacking her grasping, dying and decaying mother. But once free to escape, Kay is unable to leave Edna alone during the hardest part of her journey. Previously the voice of reason, querying her daughter's initial eagerness to move in with her gran, Kay's decision to stay with her mother at this point is crucial. After trying to flee, Sam also chooses to return. The growing mould and bruising bodies are grotesque and abject, representing a collapsing of "the border between inside and outside" (Kristeva 1982: 53),

10 The male appearances are brief and periphery – the law-enforcing police and the father and son next door.

rendering the film a subversive potential. Confronting the abject monstrosity of her mother's decaying body, Kay peels the hard shell of layers off, revealing a shiny breathing creature, at once hideous and beautiful. I suggest this is a subversive scene, moving beyond traditional representations of the hideous aging female, precisely because it represents a cathartic confrontation that fuses terror with emotion. As the three women lie in foetal position, the bruising mould that had been growing on Edna's body is evident and spreading on Kay, to Sam's horror. In turn it will start spreading on Sam too. The mould symbolises the threat of abandonment, as well as Edna's deterioration, so *not* leaving Edna, but being there on the journey towards and through death, even if there is the strong urge to run away, is vital to the film's end.

The reality is that the prospect of someone living alone increases with age; in Australia, over one in four people aged 65 years and over live alone (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015). There are considerably more older women living on their own compared with older men.[11] As Robin Wood (1985: 201) argues, "One might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilisation *re*presses or *op*presses". I suggest aging, and certainly loneliness in aging, is a remaining taboo, as is the proposition that certain qualities attained through advancing years might be celebrated rather than deemed signifiers of aging badly. Many of the seemingly positive discourses surrounding "aging well" amount to the denial of aging, so that "aging well" signifies steering off traits associated with aging rather than celebrating key attributes such as attaining wrinkles, slowing down, or memory loss. However, as we age, as Segal (2014: 4) argues,

11 In general, older women are more likely to live on their own than older men, particularly across Europe, North America and Oceania (de Vaus and Qu 2015). As Marissa Dickins, Georgina Johnstone, Emma Renehan, Judy Lowthian and Rajna Ogrin (2022: 850) state, "In Australia, 31 per cent of older women live alone, compared with 18 per cent of older men". Adam Smith, Fran Wasoff and Lynn Jamieson (2005) report that: "Solo living is proportionately more common amongst older people. Older women are twice as likely to live alone as older men. Young men (aged 25–44) are twice as likely to live alone as young women."

we also "retain, in one manifestation or another, traces of all the selves we have been… all ages and no ages." We are old and as a child at the same time. This amounts to "complex layerings of identity" (Segal 2014: 4) unique to aging and uniquely forged by it.

While a key part of the horror in *Relic* is that dementia can be inherited, the film to some extent also offers a move on from concepts related to "decline" and "degeneration", often associated with dementia. I use the term "regeneration" in the title of this chapter – due to a refreshing sense of understanding and confrontation the film encourages, raising questions about how quality of life can be improved in old age or how older people can feel better integrated. The film unites three generations of women whose experiences and emotions merge. It is not only about the fear of how a person feels when a loved one begins to feel losses, but also about experiencing these emotionally ourselves. James (cited in Kelley 2020) has said "if [the film] helps someone process the experience in a new way or helps them conquer that fear, that would be pretty amazing." The final scare of *Relic* is that what is afflicting some now will affect others into the future. The film encourages caring and confronting rather than retreating. It does not provide neat solutions and remains ambivalent about the processes involved in navigating work and home pressures to take care of elderly relatives, but there is plenty for contemplation and debate. It taps into the conflicting emotions that concern most families, as a daughter or son who was once cared for must reverse roles. It resonates with the worry we have about support for the elderly, the practicalities for achieving good care, and keeping well ourselves in the process – the fears of the mistakes we are bound to make, and others might in turn make with us.

The care home in *Relic* insists it allows "independence", but the film encourages us to accept *dependence* (possibly one of the hardest aspects for contemporary populations to accept) as a part of the human condition. As Sally Chivers and Ulla Kriebernegg (2017: 17) observe:

> While people adamantly desire to age well at home, without making the big move to render their latter years more manageable, and policy makers play to that desire, apparently buoyed by how it offers them

> an opportunity to download the costs of care onto the family unit, the fact remains that many contemporary senior citizens will require institutional care, and some might even choose it.

As humans age, and the future promises far less time than the past, individual successes often become less meaningful. This philosophy might act as a reminder of the *vanitas* image explored near the beginning of this chapter. Stuart Hall (cited in Segal 2014: 275) reportedly claimed that as he got older he believed "less and less in the language of the independent self, personal achievement, the autonomy of the individual", clarifying "we are never self-sustaining but constituted by others who are different from us". This emphasis on the collective locates the concept of "home" somewhere between a place called "home" and that place we feel at home – safe but attached to the world. Most of the commercially driven positivity surrounding aging is in real terms the negation of aging, but there is so much in aging that we might embrace. Timetabling tends to permeate our lives from the nursery through to the end of our working adult lives. Extreme old age can be a time to explore new selves and consciousnesses. And perhaps it is human connection (across generations), with equally the possibility of creative contemplation, laughter, music, opportunity, privacy, spontaneity, and unaudited solitude when needed, that we might try to focus on with regards to thinking meaningfully about the concept of what constitutes a good "home" and "proper care" – or what models of "better" care might consist of.

Author Bio

Professor Laura Hubner is author of the monographs *Fairytale and Gothic Horror: Uncanny Transformations in Film* and *The Films of Ingmar Bergman: Illusions of Light and Darkness*. She is editor of *Valuing Films: Shifting Perceptions of Worth*, and co-editor of *The Zombie Renaissance in Popular Culture* and *Framing Film: Cinema and the Visual Arts*. Currently Professor of Film and Media at the University of Winchester, UK, she was recently Guest Speaker for the 1000th Edition of BBC Radio 4's *In Our Time* on Bergman's

The Seventh Seal, and her next monograph on Bergman launches the book series she is editing, *Iconic Movie Images*.

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