Fantasies of Agelessness and Age Hierarchies in *Mary Poppins Returns*

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Abstract: *In my paper, I investigate how aging and the passing of time are depicted in the film Mary Poppins Returns (2018) and how they shape the narrative and give it ageist undertones. As a sequence to the 1964 Mary Poppins original film, the 2018 film hints at the passing of time which is evident in the age of the Banks children who have grown up. However, time has not passed for Mary Poppins as she is portrayed by a young actor (Emily Blunt). I explore how this casting choice affects the film and which ideas it reveals about aging, and especially, women aging in Hollywood. I also focus on Mary Poppins' role in the domestic realm organizing intergenerational relations and its effect on the film plot. Lastly, I connect the casting of Mary Poppins as a young woman to the erasure of older people in film and the childhood nostalgia promoted by Disney, the producer of the film.*

Keywords: *Agelessness; intergenerational relations; older women; Mary Poppins; age socialization*

In 2018, Disney released *Mary Poppins Returns*, a sequel to the 1964 *Mary Poppins* classic. In this return to the Mary Poppins universe, the titular nanny gains ageist implications. This is obvious considering that in the 1964 film, when Mary Poppins produces a measuring tape that provides

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insight into the characters' personalities, the tape reads "practically perfect in every way" when the nanny measures herself. This scene functions as both Mary Poppins's introduction to the Banks' home and the children she will look after, and her introduction to the film-going audience. Soon, because of her magic powers and her ability to almost effortlessly take care of the children in a fun manner, both the Banks children and film viewers are convinced that Mary Poppins is indeed nearly perfect.

The narrative of *Mary Poppins Returns* takes place during the Great Depression, about twenty years after the narrative of the original film, which was set in 1910 as George Banks emphasizes in the song "The Life I Lead." In this film, she reappears to help Michael and Jane Banks, who are in their late 20s, save their childhood home from being repossessed by the bank where Michael, a depressed, widowed, aspiring artist with three children, works part-time. To prove that Michael and Jane have enough money to pay the loan and keep their house, they need to find a certificate of shares left by their father and present it to the bank on Friday by the last stroke of midnight. Unsurprisingly, in *Mary Poppins Returns*, many, if not most, of the characters have aged accordingly. The notable exception is Mary Poppins herself who similarly to the first movie still continues to be in her mid-thirties. In the beginning of the 2018 film, Michael Banks recognizes his former nanny and says: "Good heavens, it really is you. You seem hardly to have aged at all." Mary Poppins dismisses the comment as sheer rudeness, but astute viewers should not be so quick to dismiss this fact.

Michael's comment draws attention to how out of place an unaged Mary Poppins is, especially since the narrative of *Mary Poppins Returns* heavily relies on the passing of time and the importance of adhering to age hierarchies and culturally assigned intergenerational relationships. The compulsory lack of aging ascribed to Mary Poppins points to the ageism of the film industry, a realm that often excludes older women. Moreover, as both films frame Mary Poppins as "perfect," the refusal to let her age alongside the other characters feeds into this ageism, suggesting that perfection and old age are mutually exclusive. In this chapter, I argue that *Mary Poppins Returns*, through Mary Poppins's lack of aging, coupled with the plot's focus on organizing intergenerational relationships

and framing aging as a decline, reflects the ageism of the entertainment industry. The combination of ageism within the industry and the ageism present in the plot and appearance of Mary Poppins reinforces ideas of childhood idealization and nostalgia that Disney deploys to sell films, products, and experiences. Even though my analysis is directed at 2018 film, because the Mary Poppins universe is made of self-referential parallels, I will also analyse some key scenes of the 1964 film.

An important theme of the Mary Poppins films that is often overlooked is time and its passing. There are countless examples. The film's audience and some of the characters know, for instance, that Mary Poppins's sudden departure is just a matter of time. Admiral Boom, a retired member of England's navy and a neighbor, fires a cannon twice a day from the rooftop of his house to mark the time, even if he is nearly always some minutes behind in *Mary Poppins Returns*. In this film, the plot is driven by Michael's deadline of Friday by the last stroke of midnight to produce the shares that can save his home. Time works both for and against the protagonists: Michael has not paid his loan for three months, resulting in the bank's impending repossession of his house, but in the end it is time in the form of the hidden shares that helps the Banks family save their home. These shares are, in fact, the result of a tuppence investment that was made for Michael Banks in the 1964 film. The resolution of the 2018 film is only possible as a result of the passing of time and the consequent accumulation of interest of these shares. It is only the natural progression of time that allows the Banks to save their home and guarantees a typical Disney happy ending. Finally, to ensure that the Banks will be able to meet their deadline, Mary Poppins actually turns back time as seen in the Big Ben scene.

As a sequel, *Mary Poppins Returns* also underscores that time that has passed by aging the characters the audience is familiar with, as evident in the age of the adult Banks children and the visible aging of their housekeeper and neighbors, as well as introducing new characters such as Jack, the lamplighter, and Mary Poppins's cousin Topsy Turvy that, respectively, are substitutes for two characters (Bert and Uncle Albert) from the original movie. Jack tells Mary Poppins that Bert is travelling the world, but the disappearance of Uncle Albert from the plot is left

unexplained thus also hinting at the passing at time, i.e., his possible death. And yet, while time has a crucial role in the film, in the twenty years that separate the plot of original movie from its sequel, it is only Mary Poppins who does not show any signs that time has passed: it is only she who has not aged.

Perhaps it is a bit hasty to say that Mary Poppins has not aged *at all*. Michael Bank's comment is more on point: she has *barely* aged. It is difficult to write about movies not acknowledging that casting decisions affect the film as a final product, especially when a character has the quality of perfection attached to it. *Mary Poppins Returns* was released in 2018 and Emily Blunt, the actor playing the part of Mary Poppins, would have been around 35 years old at the time. When the 1964 *Mary Poppins* was released, Julie Andrews, who played Mary Poppins in the original film, was around 29 years old. If casting decisions are observed, there was a slight increase in the actors' ages while ensuring that both remain below the forty-year-old threshold that separates women into the categories of old and young in Hollywood (Dolan 2017: 17). Yet, this small increase does not correspond to the time that has passed from the narrative of the original narrative to the sequel, and is relatively unnoticeable, especially in comparison to the aging of the other characters as outlined above.

An argument might be made that Mary Poppins's lack of aging is a result of her powers and position as the "practically perfect" equivalent of a superhero. According to Wilson Koh, the "superheroic body must remain healthy and vital. It must not be seen to age" (2014: 492). This happens because superheroes are usually caught up in what Umberto Eco calls "the illusion of a continuous present" (1979: 116) or an "oneiric climate [...] where what has happened before and what has happened after appear extremely hazy" (ibid: 114). This is the device that allows for the circulation of multiple Superman stories, some of them portraying him as a boy, others as an adult. However, this argument falls apart in the face of the importance of time and aging to the film's narrative. The universe of Mary Poppins, and especially the diegetic part of this universe, is relatively small compared to Superman. Moreover, there is a noticeable continuity from one film to the next which eliminates the possibility of being trapped in a continuous present, even if in the end of the film,

in a superhero fashion, Mary Poppins literally turns back time by moving Big Ben's hands counter-clockwise to ensure that the Banks can save their house. Eco's ideas about a continuous present cannot completely explain why Mary Poppins is the *only* character that barely ages. Additionally, the framing of Mary Poppins in the films refuses her the status of superhero by relegating her to the domestic sphere through her position as a nanny, an occupation that is often devalued and underpaid. Since her position in the domestic sphere, which is usually associated with and prescribed to women, rather than the public sphere of superheroes, usually prescribed to men, is a fundamental part of her role in the film, Mary Poppins's youthful appearance seems to point at bigger issues in the entertainment industry and the ageist exclusion of older women in lead roles.

Due to the success of the original movie and of its soundtrack, fans and producers had high expectations for the new Mary Poppins. Andrews, who played Mary Poppins in the 1964 film, was unable to reprise her role because her voice was damaged in an operation to remove a polyp from her vocal cords ("How Julie Andrews's Voice Was Stolen by a Medical Disaster"). As a result, she no longer fulfilled the musical's basic requirement as she could not sing. The decision to cast Blunt in the role indicates a very deliberate choice on the part of the film's casting directors to refuse to allow Mary Poppins to age. While Blunt does a very good job, her casting purposefully juxtaposes Mary Poppins's lack of aging with the aging experienced by all the other characters common between the two films. In essence, those in charge of the 2018 film deliberately chose an actress in a manner that excluded the representation of an older woman in the lead role.

The erasure of older women from the entertainment and film industries is notorious. In the introduction to *Women, Celebrities and Cultures of Ageing: Freeze Frame*, Deborah Jermyn and Su Holmes note that, in 2013, German supermodel Heidi Klum surprised party-goers and fans alike by attending her own, extravagant Halloween party in New York dressed up as an old woman (2017: 1). According to the authors, her "costume" is a confirmation that older people are seen as the "Other" (Jermyn and Su 2017: 2), that is, as those that do not belong in a culture so obsessed with

youth. Additionally, by choosing to dress as an old woman in a Halloween party, where costumes are supposed to be scary, Klum's choice implies that being old is frightening and not glamorous (ibid: 2). More importantly, in their analysis of Klum's "costume" choice, Jermyn and Holmes point to the perceived impossibility of conciliating being old with being a celebrity at the same time, something that Klum's choice reflects.

Through her "costume" choice, it is also likely that Klum was both being ironic and self-deprecating, thus making a statement about how women over forty, the age she had reached a few months before her Halloween party, are often excluded from celebrity culture and the entertainment industry. If this was her intention, Klum had a point: old women celebrities and women over forty in the entertainment industry are much rarer than men (Dolan 2017: 17). This rarity suggests that these industries give preference to women who display youthful and so-called perfect bodies, and the combination of gender and age-less expectations for female celebrities creates a double standard, as male actors are more likely to continue to get lead roles at older ages. In *The Double Standard of Aging*, after observing that in the cultural imagination growing old is "a moral disease, a social pathology" (2013: 746), Susan Sontag recognizes that being youthful is often equated with happiness and, in the case of women, to beauty (ibid: 747). Sontag's awareness that ageism affects women and men, even though it is much harsher to women, and her insight that beauty is equated with youth and perfection further explains the choice of casting a young actor about the same age as Mary Poppins in the first movie. But there is more to it.

While Andrews' absence from the 2018 production can be explained by her medical condition and her refusal of a cameo in order to not detract from Blunt's performance ("'Mary Poppins Returns': Why Julie Andrews Turned down a Cameo"), the decision to cast a young Mary Poppins and refuse to give visibility to an older woman is conspicuous in the face of Dick van Dyke's cameo appearance in the 2018 film and the portrayal of older men in both films. In the 1964 movie, van Dyke plays two roles: he is Bert, Mary Poppins's sidekick, a chimney sweeper and artist, and he also plays Mr. Dawes Sr., the chairman of the bank where George Banks, Jane and Michael's father, works. Van Dyke portrays Mr.

Dawes Sr. in the 1964 film as a typical "grumpy old man" in a very de-crepit and declining image of old age, especially as he is hardly able to get his message across to Michael Banks because fits of coughing con-tinually interrupt him. Suffice to say that the use of "gray face" in the portrayal of Mr. Dawes Sr. along with a characterization that is not very flattering emphasizes the undesirability of aging and old age. Likewise, in *Mary Poppins Returns*, van Dyke plays the role of Mr. Dawes Jr., the re-tired chairman of the bank. In his scene towards the end of the movie, van Dyke is exaggeratedly dressed as an old man with white hair and a long white beard, and he performs a musical number with movements and characterization that exaggerate his age and that imply that old age equals decline. Moreover, in his scene, before he starts to sing, he says: "I may be circling the drain, but I got a few steps left in me," which is then followed by the lyrics: "So when they tell you that you're finished/ And your chance to dance is done/ That's the time to stand/ To strike up the band/ And tell 'em that you just begun." While van Dyke's characteriza-tion and number echo the caricature of male old age in the 1964 film, the mere presence of his characters in the 2018 film shows a willingness to allow men to age in public and on screen; but only if they engage in what Shary and McVittie (2016) call "elder kitsch."

In *Fade to Gray: Ageing in American Cinema*, Shary and McVittie explain that starting in the 1960s, initially, older male actors and then older fe-male actors, began to appear in films commercialized to a teenage audi-ence (2016: 88). In these films, they often played stereotypical older char-acters whose purpose was to emphasize their own characters' anachro-nism (ibid: 89) in relation to the younger characters who were often more central to the plot. The inclusion of older characters in these movies was both to repurpose older stars and to capitalize on their previous public personae (ibid: 98). To do so, actors were supposed to play the roles of people looking old while, at the same time, performing so-called "youth-ful activities" (ibid: 97), which, in turn, contributed to an exacerbated representation of old age and the anachronism that their characters en-tail. Shary and McVittie call this type of performance "elder kitsch." In *Mary Poppins Returns*, van Dyke's character appears older than the actor actually is, but he can only do so in the guise of elder kitsch, as his cos-

tume and song suggest. Van Dyke's performance stands in sharp contrast to Meryl Streep's portrayal of Topsy Turvy, Mary Poppins' cousin. Unlike van Dyke, Streep's character barely has any physical signifiers of age, even though the actress was nearly seventy at the time of the filming. Of particular note is the use of cosmetics to remove the most obvious signifier of age: wrinkles. The difference in depiction of both characters reflects Sontag's double standard of aging. Additionally, while Topsy Turvy does activities that parallel van Dyke in terms of elder kitsch, i.e., so-called youthful activities such as dancing on top of a table or doing a handstand, Streep's number doesn't touch on the subject of aging at all. By diminishing Topsy Turvy's physical signifiers of age and emphasizing those signifiers on Dawes Jr., the film shows different standards of aging for men and women, coupling age diminishment and elder kitsch in van Dyke's performance to suggests that old age is an undesirable end, even if one is alive, and, as such, should be avoided at all costs.

This view of age as a decline has a particular effect on how the 2018 film represents the passage of time when it is viewed in conjunction with the 1964 film. *Mary Poppins Returns* repurposes characters and dialogue to create self-referential parallels within the Mary Poppins universe. These parallels are characteristic of the franchise. Georgia Grilli (2007), focusing on the Mary Poppins books by P.L. Travers, analyzes different themes in the Mary Poppins universe. One theme Grilli identifies is the constant repetition that structures these books (2007: 10), and which creates parallels especially in relation to the plot and characters. Even though Grilli (2007) highlights that the Mary Poppins 1964 movie is different from the books, when the 1964 and the 2018 films are compared, several parallels that buttress the filmic Mary Poppins universe surface. In addition to the reappearance of certain characters (the Banks family, Admiral Boom, etc.) and themes (political activism now in the figure of Jane Banks instead of her mother; the importance of order, and the fundamental role of fun in establishing it), new characters are included to substitute those that have disappeared from the plot (Topsy Turvy replaces Uncle Albert, Mary Poppins gains a new sidekick, who is about the same age as her previous one, in Jack). Lines from the 1964 film are also referenced ("Michael, close your mouth. We're still not a codfish" and "Practically perfect in ev-

ery way") and certain objects from the original film are shown again (the kite, the carpet bag, etc.). The genealogy connecting the two older van Dyke's characters, both of them chairmen of the bank, is also an important parallel. However, a crucial parallel that is of special interest to an Age(ing) Studies analysis of the film, is the reprisal of Mary Poppins's role in reorganizing intergenerational, familial relationships.

Before Mary Poppins's arrival in *Mary Poppins Returns*, the Banks' life is upside down. Losing their childhood home is just the biggest symptom of the chaos that has ensued. The economy is bad, and Michael Banks is depressed after the death of his wife, which prompts his two older children, John and Annabel Banks, to act as grown-ups by running errands for the family while taking care of Georgie Banks, their wild, youngest little brother. For this reason, when Mary Poppins arrives, there is not only a financial crisis in progress, but a domestic one that affects intergenerational relationships. This is a crisis that also bears relation to time, a key theme of the film, as children and adults have unknowingly reversed age roles and the responsibilities attached to them, which is dangerous as it keeps them from finding the certificate of shares.

In *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of Midlife*, Margaret Morganroth Gullette argues that Age Studies should not be conflated with gerontology and proposes that all ages be included in age theory (Gullette 1997: 207). She highlights that the full extension of the life course should be studied and emphasizes that there still are many gaps in this area (ibid: 201). Gullette is interested in how bodies are first and foremost aged by culture and believes that if scholars focus on how we learn and internalize the master narrative that aging equals decline, and how we begin to associate certain age cohorts to certain characteristics in age socialization (1998: 9), we will begin to fill in research gaps and produce meaningful research.

Mary Poppins Returns offers a good opportunity to look into age socialization and the master narrative of decline. Not only is the 2018 film a means through which viewers learn what aging can or should look like as seen in the example of a Mary Poppins, whose aging is barely noticeable, or of Mr. Dawes Jr., who looks exaggeratedly old and frail but engages in "youthful" activities, the audience also learns that different age cohorts

should behave in certain ways as represented by the construction of social relationships. As mentioned above, when Mary Poppins arrives, John and Annabel have taken on many of the household responsibilities: they take care of Georgie, go to the supermarket, and tell Ellen, the housekeeper, that they will make lunch when they get back. The film, through Mary Poppins, makes it clear that John and Annabel have taken on tasks not appropriate for their age. Instead, they are fulfilling the responsibilities of their father who, because of his depression, is unable to perform his role in the age hierarchy. This inversion is presented negatively. In fact, upon Mary Poppins's arrival, Jane asks her what brings her back, and the nanny ambiguously replies: "Same thing that brought me back the first time. I've come to look after the Banks children," while not specifying *which* Banks children she means. Mary Poppins and film viewers are aware that what can save the Banks family is not only finding the certificate of shares: there must also be a reorganization of the family according to age hierarchy and the roles associated with these ages.

The idea of chronological age and of identity connected to age is not as natural as it may seem. Quoting Bill Bytheway, Pamela Gravagne explains that "chronological age itself is a social construct, instituted in the eighteenth and nineteenth century by lawyers, bureaucrats, [...] who, in the interest of quantification, required specific numerical ages for the assignation of certain duties and rights" (2013: 27). As a result, this quantification resulted in the creation of socially and culturally reinforced age categories and identities. In *Mary Poppins Returns*, the audience is presented with a world in which these age categories have been overthrown and must be returned to expected norms. These norms include a gendered aspect. According to Cristina Pérez Valverde, it is not uncommon in children's literature to have a female character with magical powers (2009: 264). These characters, as seen in the example of Mary Poppins, are usually single women with a maternal role who "question family relationships, disclosing the gaps in the established social order inasmuch as they, as outsiders, are required to sustain that order, on the verge of collapse" (ibid: 264). In both Mary Poppins films, the nanny takes on a maternal role that rearranges familial relationships by calling into question the misaligned nature of these relationships. In the 1964 movie, Mr. and

Mrs. Banks are so busy with their own lives that they have lost touch with the children's needs. In the 2018 sequel, the death of Michael Bank's wife has affected his mental health and his ability to look after his children. In both films, Mary Poppins's maternal role is fulfilled as she reorganizes familial relations, situating the parents back into their parental roles and the children back into their, well-mannered, child roles. Although there is a temporality to Mary Poppins's role, the effects of her actions are expected to remain past her departure.

In both films, Mary Poppins effects change by reminding the family that that children are supposed to act as children and not have the responsibilities that Annabel and John Banks were burdened with in the beginning of the film. Similarly, adults finally learn to take the lead even though they are occasionally allowed to act as children, especially if it is for the sake of keeping the family together and creating stronger familial bonds. This is evident in the final scene of the movie, when the Banks family goes to a Spring Fair where they all buy balloons that take them up in the air while the cast sings "Nowhere to go but up." The person who sells them the balloons is an old woman who reminds Michael of the importance of remembering what being young feels like. In their conversation she tells him that he should be the first to pick a balloon.

> MICHAEL BANKS. Those days are long behind me. I don't think I've held a balloon since I was a child.
> BALLOON LADY. Then you've forgotten what it's like!
> MICHAEL BANKS. To hold a balloon?
> BALLOON LADY. To be a child!

As previously stated, there are not many older people in the 2018 film that *look* their age. In fact, old age is equated with decline, as seen with Admiral Boom's decreased punctuality coupled with his use of a wheelchair, and Mr. Dawes Jr.'s display of elder kitsch. The balloon lady, portrayed by Dame Angela Lansbury, also reinforces the idea that aging is a decline through the above lines that emphasize that feeling like a child, embracing youth, is important and preferred to old age. In fact, her exchange with Michael Banks and some of the lyrics of her song ("Life's a balloon/ That tumbles or rises/ Depending on what is inside/

Fill it with hope/ And playful surprises/ And oh, deary ducks/ Then you're in for a ride") echo ideas about "aging graciously" present in van Dyke's song mentioned above.

The film's choices to cast a young Mary Poppins, employ elder kitsch and anachronism through van Dyke's and Streep's performance, and centre the secondary plot around realigning intergenerational relationships in accordance with culturally reinforced norms, all point to a prizing of youth over age and suggests that age decline can be staved off by continuing to be young at heart. This messaging reflects the inherent ageism of the entertainment industry by marginalizing the true experience of age from its plots and casting. It implies that youth and youthfulness will guarantee a more pleasant experience to characters and film viewers alike. In addition, as this film is a Disney production, it is impossible to overlook that many Disney productions have a similar kind of message, either by not having many older characters[2] or by profiting on products that promote childhood idealization and nostalgia. For instance, Disney amusement parks are often advertised as a sort of fountain of youth that grownups can visit and feel young again, even if it is just for one day. In *Mary Poppins Returns*, the narrative and the titular character's mandatory youthfulness, coupled with the idealization of childhood reinforces societal and cultural age expectations that in turn fuel the Disney marketing machine, reminding viewers that childhood is the age that is desirable and even adults can experience it if they continue to consume Disney products and watch Disney productions. Finally, by casting a young actress as Mary Poppins in the 2018 film, the directors and producers not only establish and reinforce the idea that

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2   According to a study conducted by Zurcher and Robinson, Disney animated films tend to lack representations of old age. Moreover, when there is an older character in an animated film, it is more likely that it will be male (2017: 9). In comparison to a previous study, Zurcher and Robinson have noticed an overall decrease in the number of older characters with a primary role in the plot, while older characters with secondary, or smaller, roles have increased (ibid: 10). Another important finding from Zurcher and Robinson that resonates with my analysis of *Mary Poppins Returns* is that the number of older characters with physical signifiers of age (wrinkles, grey hair, etc.) has decreased (ibid: 10–11).

perfection is embodied in youthfulness, but also ensure that the Disney universe will continue to provide experiences where ordinary people can have the feeling time, and the undesirable decline of age, may be stopped by consuming Disney services and products.

Age(ing) Studies is not only concerned with representations of older people, but the way constructions of age shape and inform culture and healthcare. As a whole, *Mary Poppins Returns* engages with age and time in a way that reveals an ageist construction idealizing childhood that is inherent in the entertainment industry and fuels the marketing efforts of its main players, such as Disney. By linking Mary Poppins's mandatory youthfulness to her identity as someone "practically perfect in every way," the film demonstrates the ageism of the cultural industry that Jermyn and Holmes discuss in their book. Moreover, by complying to Sontag's double standard of aging as shown in van Dyke's and Streep's cameo, the 2018 film makes us questions why Mary Poppins is not allowed to age on screen. The absence of an older Mary Poppins and the reinforcement of socially constructed age identities demonstrate how the entertainment industry can reproduce and perpetuate ageism. As the aging population in most countries continues to grow substantially and as film sequels become a safe bet for big studios wanting to make profit, it begs the questions: Will Mary Poppins continue to be youthful in possible upcoming sequels, or will the (aging) public want to see more representations that mirror themselves and contain natural signifiers of old age?

Acknowledgments

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