

Anxiety in defining the older woman in contemporary British television drama: *Gold Digger* (BBC One, 2019—) and *Flesh and Blood* (ITV, 2020—)

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### **Abstract**

This article draws on two recent British television dramas, *Gold Digger* (BBC One, 2019—) and *Flesh and Blood* (ITV, 2020—), to examine how female lead characters pursue fulfilment in later life. We have chosen these series because they are written and directed by women and feature older women as the central characters – in both the older woman could be seen to typify the “successful ager”. At the point we meet her, she has grown-up children, is wealthy, healthy, and is embarking on a romantic/sexual relationship. We are interested in what her privileged position brings to the narrative in terms of the power that she enjoys. Is she crafted into a sexually desiring and desirable woman, or does she self-actualise in other ways? And how does her own fulfilment conflict with her role as mother? While both series could be considered family dramas, we argue that the form of domestic noir, which is a recent re-iteration of the psychological thriller, is adapted to subtly reinforce key ageist narratives around the role of mother. This paper makes an original contribution to the literature by noting how both series use genre to unwittingly generate anxiety around the role of the older woman. We argue that in order to rupture the set script of the older woman, lead female characters need to be allowed to actively reject romance as the fulfilment of desires in later life.

### **Introduction**

This article draws on two recent British television dramas, *Gold Digger* (BBC One, 2019—) and *Flesh and Blood* (ITV, 2020—) to explore the way in which the genre of the psychological thriller and the recent iteration of domestic noir articulate the potential jeopardy the older woman faces in contemporary television drama. It draws attention to the anxiety that is generated as the lead female character is caught between moving away from her role as mother and fulfilling her own desires. Both women in the series are affluent older

women, who could be seen to exemplify the “successful ager”. The successful ageing narrative, according to John Rowe and Robert Louis Kahn (1997), promotes a physically and mentally active lifestyle, in which the older body is a subject to be worked on. Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs observe that 'personal fitness and individual viability have become lifestyle commodities' in old age (Gilleard and Higgs 2005;99), with a notable growth in wealth and consumerism amongst older people (David Metz and Michael Underwood, 2005). Metz and Underwood (2005) describe the current demographic of those aged over 60 as the ‘first generation of the age of affluence, who have come to expect individual wants and needs to be satisfied and have been encouraged to define themselves by personal choices' (p.43). Not only does the older person work on the ‘project of the self’ (Gilleard and Higgs, 2010), but identities and the body are seen as lifestyle choices that the affluent can buy. Indeed, Gilleard and Higgs (2005) place consumerism at the centre of lifestyle and identity construction. The ability to invest in lifestyle has created a tension between bodily changes, changing expectations of ‘growing older’ and shifting social identities (Mike Hepworth, 2003). The hegemony of ‘successful ageing’ for women in particular creates intense pressures to retain youthful attractiveness which not all can achieve.

Anxieties about ageing and identity are presented as bound up with women’s complex emotional attachments to the family home in both series. The plot pivots around the children’s concerns over losing this substantial financial inheritance. We consider how discourses of care and self-care articulate the bind that the lead characters find themselves in when they are caught between looking after their children’s interests and pursuing their own desires for fulfilment. Also, the centrality of property ownership in such articulations – being a successfully ageing woman now also means successfully participating in late capitalism’s fetishisation of property ownership. This article questions the decision made to imbue the

lead female character with youthful qualities through the romance trope instead of fully exploring what fulfilment might look like. It examines the tensions that are created when older women are expected to find self-actualisation through sexual relationships alone. Exploring these interconnected themes is key in revealing the anxiety around the role of the older woman in television.

*Flesh and Blood* and *Gold Digger* centre around similar conflicts between the lead characters' sexual desire and their roles as mothers. In *Flesh and Blood*, the two lead characters, Vivienne (Francesca Annis) and Mary (Julie Walters), are women in their seventies who live next door to each other in beach front houses near Dover, UK. The houses in question are located in a visibly desirable, upmarket area – something which is integral to this style of glossy thriller. Vivienne, is glamorous, athletic and attractive, but perceives herself as older now that her kids have lives of their own. After being widowed for eighteen months, she meets a new partner, Mark (Stephen Rea). Suspicious of Mark's motives, her children, who are experiencing their own career and relationship difficulties, go behind her back to unearth damning evidence about his past in the hope of undermining his relationship with their mother. The climax is a family celebration in which an argument develops, and Mark is pushed over the balcony by Vivienne's son, Jake.

*Gold Digger* focuses on Julia (Julia Ormond), a divorced mother of three grown-up children, who has just turned 60. On her way from the family home in Devon to London, Julia is stood up for a birthday meal by her children. Instead of returning home, she takes a trip to the British Museum, where she had previously worked as a conservator. It is here, while looking at one of her favourite objects, that Benjamin (Ben Barnes), a mid-thirty-something, flirts with her. They subsequently go for drinks before returning to her luxury hotel suite to have sex. Julia returns to Devon the next day, but Benjamin is keen to see her again, and she

promptly returns to London where they pursue their romance. At this juncture they establish a sexual relationship within the cocoon of Julia's luxury hotel suite, a safe space Benjamin is keen not to leave. In a similar narrative to *Flesh and Blood*, the drama pivots around her grown-up children's suspicions about the new relationship and their ensuing attempts to undermine it.

## **Discussion**

### ***Anxiety and ageing women – psychological thriller and domestic noir***

Both series are framed as psychological thrillers or, more specifically, the recent iteration of domestic noir, designed to cause the audience to experience anxiety (Charles Derry, 2010). The psychological thriller – aimed at a predominantly older female audience – has come to dominate much mainstream TV drama (and fiction) (Tania Modleski 1982; Deborah Philips 2021). Contemporary female-led psychological thrillers can be seen to conform to the traditions of the female gothic, which combines romance and suspense with marital anxiety. The emphasis on disrupted family life and secrets, mystery identities and (un)trustworthy children or partners is characteristic of the genre and a crucial factor in the way older women are positioned by these two series. As with the female gothic in the 1970s and 1980s (Modleski, 1982), the psychological thriller has become the place to stage and resolve contemporary anxieties about femininity and gender relations, including the persistent threat of male violence, which we go on to argue, include anxieties about ageing and identity. And these are both at play within the characterisation of the female lead and in the viewers' imagination. As Modleski notes: "In Gothics, on the other hand, [the viewer] shares some of the heroines' uncertainty about what is going on and what the lover/husband is up to" (1982, 60).

In *Gold Digger* and *Flesh and Blood*, the thriller and domestic noir genres emphasise the danger that is perceived by others when older women step outside of the expectations placed on them to claim their independence and sense of self. In thriller literature, Susan Pickard (2022) has argued that female sexual agency carries danger in later life, with affairs presented as transgressive and destructive for the female character. Recent theory has argued for a re-imagining of the thriller genre in television, which is a modernisation of a much older anti-feminist trope in which the older woman seeks to destroy the more desirable younger woman. For example, in the contemporary detective thrillers of Steig Larsson, Gillian Flynn and Oyinkan Braithwaite (Alyson Miller, Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton, 2020). Lucía Tello Díaz (2021) explains how during COVID-19 lockdown in Spain, the thriller was the most prevalent genre featuring women in the lead role, asserting the idea of the assertive female protagonist. Díaz argues that rather than the traditional damsel in distress role playing on viewers' fears, broadcasting scheduling may have been attempting to empower women viewers during uncertainty presented by the global pandemic (2021).

Philips describes the growth of a new genre of psychological thriller, 'domestic noir', appearing in the 2000s. The tropes associated with this genre include the suspiciously charming man, the claustrophobic domestic setting and the terrorized woman (ibid. 2021). Philips describes how the narrative revolves around the gas lighting of the central female character, with the growing realisation that it is not the woman who is mad and unstable, but the man who is untrustworthy. Philips (2021) finds that the genre articulated psychological abuse of women before coercive control became a criminal offence. She argues that new iterations of the genre such as *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn (2012) and Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train* (2015) have been re-imagined as the female protagonists are allowed to exact a brutal retribution on their male partners (ibid. 2021). We argue that this genre has a

lot in common with, and derives from, the psychological thriller, with Danny Arter (2016) defining domestic noir as “more often than not female-led with a psychological and/or emotion-led hook, often revolving around a crime and [...] not unlike a thriller” (para. 3). However, with an emphasis on gas lighting, we feel that domestic noir as a genre brings something additional to the depiction of the older woman.

Both series emphasise anxiety as a key affective response to ageing women on screen. They create a sense of unease, confusion and suspense which holds the viewer in a state of unknowing and apprehension. For instance, the opening of the first episode of *Flesh and Blood* begins with a crime scene at night—the viewer is confronted with the blue flashing lights of the police cars and two people dressed in forensic clothes carrying a body that has been covered and strapped to a gurney. A voiceover, who we later learn belongs to Mary (Imelda Staunton), the neighbour who the police are questioning, explains:

“Of course, I’ve known the family for years. I’ve watched the children grow up. And I can honestly say they’ve been the perfect neighbours—they’ve been, no trouble at all. So, I can’t believe things like this could happen right on our doorstep. Listen they’ve had their ups and downs, who hasn’t? But I never ever dreamt it would end like this.”

To heighten the sense of anxiety, the lead characters in both series are put on trial. This clever juxtaposition in *Flesh and Blood* – the crime being seen through the eyes of the frumpy, nosy neighbour – bridges the family drama to the domestic noir, both grounding the sinister in the mundane and making the dramatic plausible. This set-up helps to put the lead, Vivienne, on trial, both by the police but more significantly by notions of what society (the curtain-twitching neighbour) deems as acceptable. Following on from the narration above, we hear Mary’s unsolicited analysis that it was ‘the first time she’d [Vivienne] missed the family Sunday dinner when things started to go wrong.’ The use of a voiceover or first-person narrative is a standard convention in psychological thrillers since it presents a restricted

perspective, thus intensifying tension and anxiety. In *Gold Digger*, Julia is also put on trial, but in this case, by the structure of the series. Each episode is told from one character's point of view to get their perspective on the romance. This structure invites viewers to decide who they align themselves with and become the judge as to whether Julia is in the right.

In both series, the children raise suspicion about their mother's new partner from the beginning. Vivienne collapses unexpectedly and is taken to hospital. Mark then offers to stay with her to which her son, Jake, objects to because they do not know him. As viewers, we are invited to question whether Mark, a retired doctor, is poisoning Vivienne. In one scene he furiously rifles through her drawers, creating the possibility from him to have planted something, but then later we are reassured that he was in search of her passport so that he could take her away for a surprise trip. The possibility that Mark is poisoning Vivienne is a key plotline in relation to the female gothic or domestic noir where a husband's possibly murderous intentions are a central trope (Philips 2021). This possibility reiterates the idea that she should not be hoping for romance at her age and is being punished for pursuing her desires.

Indeed, by the end of the first series, we know that Mark is in hospital in a critical condition after a fall from the balcony, but we do not know why a body is removed from the premises in the opening scene. It cannot be Mark's body as we see him connected to life support in his hospital bed. The implication is that the accident unearths a body that has been buried on the property and one might assume this is Vivienne's or Mary's husband, but nothing about the series confirms this. So, as viewers, we are no closer to knowing the truth of the anxiety that is raised within the series than when it begins. Unlike many thrillers, there is no resolution or 'return to status quo' that would help to alleviate the anxiety the series provokes from its opening montage. This lack of resolution raises anxiety in the audience without alleviating it.

In *Gold Digger*, the children object to the new man in their mother's life and the time she is spending with him, despite the fact that they were all too busy to meet with her for her birthday. Having the children raise suspicion positions viewers to ask themselves whether it is right for these older mothers to risk their safety by having a lover. In *Gold Digger*, Benjamin's past surfaces and cast suspicions over his motives – he tells Julia on their first drink that he is being open with her, yet he tells her family he grew up in a village in Kent, a very large, albeit understandable lie. Benjamin's poor background and the fact he took the blame for his brother's crime is not revealed until the finale – this leaves us until the last moment incredibly suspicious of his motives.

In *Gold Digger*, tension is created through flashbacks involving ambulance lights and Julia's then young children cowering in a corner. The flashback is a common device used in the thriller genre, as it helps establish uncertainty over the truthfulness of the storyteller and/or memories. The flashbacks become more fleshed out as the series develops until we see that the children have blood on their clothes, Julia has blood on her, and that it is Julia's ex-husband in the ambulance. As each episode is told from the perspective of each child, we see their version of the flashback – for the oldest son this is triggered by going to get wine out of the garage. The contrast between his memory of huddling frightened as a child in the same spot as where he is now fetching expensive wine makes the tension all the more disconcerting – it feels as though the crime scene has been sanitised. Viewers are led to understand that Julia's husband has attempted suicide after beating her, although this is not made clear. It is Julia who has bruises and blood on her, but her husband in the ambulance. The final play of the flashback involves the ex-husband transforming into Benjamin and calling out to her. Despite Julia being the person who is the victim of domestic abuse, she is still expected to be



the carer. The ambiguity and elliptical presentation of the domestic abuse adds to our feelings of uncertainty. Her ex-husband has not been held to account and Julia cannot gain justice or closure. The ambiguous narrative also serves to gaslight the audience (Philips 2021).

In an excessively symbolic scene, Julia leaves the morning of her wedding day in her very large white wedding dress. She first confronts her ex-husband in the woods near his home. Standing in a full wedding dress in the middle of the woods, Julia appears as a kind of contemporary Miss Havisham—stuck in the past and unable to move on. Julia then drives to the cliff edge, looking out into the sea and contemplating her future. In her study of young women on the cliff edge, referring specifically to paintings of Cornwall by the artist Laura Knight, Rachel Moseley (2013), suggests that the ‘dominant aesthetic affect is [...] the sense of danger and uncertainty which awaits the modern young women’ (652). She goes on to point out that ‘our lack of access to their full facial expressions contributes to this feeling of anxiety; these images bespeak a culture troubled by changing ideas around young womanhood, freedom, sexual morality’ (653). Moseley argues that: ‘these images pose a threat to traditions of representation and relations to social space, and speak powerfully of a moment of transition’ (653). Her analysis of young women on the cliff edge can be applied to how we can read the image of Julia at the cliff edge. No longer a young woman, she still presents us with an image of a troubled and anxious figure and in fact, our lack of access to her facial expression works on two levels: both in terms of the anxiety that Moseley suggests but also in terms of allowing the viewer to forget her age. The image gestures towards what Moseley refers to as a ‘moment of transition’ but in this case between the loneliness and servitude Julia is expected to offer her children and the chance of a new relationship. Here, unlike in other contemporary thrillers (Diaz 2021; Miller et al. 2020), the genre does not reimagine the older woman or empower her. Nor do we get the satisfaction of watching her

exact a brutal retribution on her partner as in current domestic noir iterations (Philips 2021). Instead, we see her trapped by her family home, to which the paper now turns.

### *Matriarchal power and the gothic home*

The domestic noir is extended with anxieties about ageing and identity being presented as bound up with the women's complex emotional attachments to their family home. The gothic house, a source of both pleasure and anxiety, and the locus of buried secrets, is a "character" within such narratives (Holly Blackford 2005). The house is also central to the visual pleasure offered by the TV version of the genre, which foregrounds attractive locations and a glossy visual style. Furthermore, the notion of "successful ageing", which the lead characters exemplify, brings the expectation of an affluent, bourgeois lifestyle. This cultural phenomenon can help explain the prevalence of property "porn" in contemporary feminine culture.

Both lead characters fit the stereotype of the successful ager and the affluent background setting has a strong element of lifestyle aspiration. In both series, the house is not a home or an asset to be enjoyed, but instead a symbol in the women's inability to claim independence and sense of self. It should follow that as successful agers, their wealth affords them power and the opportunity to self-actualise and give them choices. What is novel about both dramas is the way the mother is framed as a woman in possession of a substantial fortune and how this role is played out in terms of power. Both sets of children are concerned that the new partner will usurp them and get the family home. Therefore, the storylines construct a conflict between what the mother desires for herself and what her children want her to do for them, namely, to ensure their interests are secured through inheriting the family home.

Both houses are visually stunning and aspirational: a grand home with sprawling gardens and a pool in *Gold Digger* and a beachfront house in *Flesh and Blood*. Both women cannot escape their own homes, let alone their position as mother. Rather than being cosy homes, both houses are “mausoleums” to be protected. Julia’s house seems to entomb her – it is a dark, austere house with heavy William Morris wallpaper. Frequent tracking shots of the house reiterate the care and labour that has gone into the house and yet it is also this investment that keeps Julia from wanting to leave. As the narrative unfolds, viewers learn that the house was the site of traumatic domestic abuse. On what should be a celebration – viewers are continually shown slow motion tracking shots of the house decked out for the wedding with a garland of white balloons with streamers rustling in the wind and we are led through a fairy light lit tunnel. However, rather than a cheerful mood being anticipated, an ominous tone is set. As Modleski suggests: “In many of [Gothic films/television], the house seems to be alive with menace” (1982, 21).

In both series, the family home becomes something that buries the women because it has witnessed domestic trauma and yet the children are adamant that it cannot be sold. In *Flesh and Blood*, Vivienne lives in a desirable beachfront house with a large terrace balcony. In contrast to Julia’s house, hers is a comfortable family home, filled with light. However, Vivienne’s house also limits her – she is watched over by Mary, the nosy neighbour – so nosy in fact that she intercepts Vivienne’s post. It is the ‘for sale’ sign going up that marks the beginning of trouble. Also, the house becomes the scene of the crime as Vivienne’s lover is pushed over the balcony by her son. Vivienne’s children are concerned about Mark’s motivations which they suspect are financial. He is a retired doctor so his need for money seems implausible. However, these motives are not resolved by the text. Vivienne’s son Jake,

himself under financial strain, is particularly concerned about losing his inheritance. He calls a meeting in a pub with his sisters to discuss their mother's financial position and he worries that her lack of knowledge of passwords and stocks means that she will unknowingly leave her money to him and not them. However, we know that Vivienne has owned her own hair salon and was a successful businesswoman – she is perfectly competent to run her own affairs. Her competency stands in contrast to her children, who are all struggling with life – her son has financial worries to the extent that he earns money as a gigolo to an older woman; her middle daughter's career is under threat whilst her house is in the middle of being renovated; her youngest daughter is engaged in an affair with her older boss.

There is a slightly different dynamic in *Gold Digger* as Julia's three children express their anxieties over the way in which Julia pays for everything – the first time they meet the younger Benjamin, her son reluctantly picks up the tab for an expensive dinner in a restaurant. In the toilets of the restaurant, the youngest son Leo, himself wanting his mother to invest in his start-up company, exclaims, "That's my inheritance!" Viewers are wrong-footed, watching early on how Benjamin gleefully expresses amazement as he discovers the house, its swimming pool, extensive glasshouse, and the fact that Julia has a second home. The lovers discuss her second home in France and Julia almost ashamedly tells Ben that she is a wealthy woman. We see her wealth later contrasted with Benjamin's own upbringing in care in the council housing and tower blocks of the post-industrial city Sunderland. Their anxiety initially extends to Julia, and she rejects Benjamin, believing that he really might just want her for her money. Ultimately, however, she risks the possibility that he might be after her fortune so that she can be with him.

In summary, as guardian of the family home, the matriarch should be in the position of power. But unlike a male counterpart, her children do not respect her in this role. Instead, they see the inheritance of the family home as their right and they exert control over their

mother in the name of “care”. The mother has a duty and responsibility bound up in this, but no freedom or respect. Both series reveal the home as a space of conflict over inheritance. In each series, the matriarch is firmly rooted in the home until the death of or divorce from her husband. At this point she is freed from her position and yet all her forays into the outside world are seen as inappropriate by her children. The grand mausoleums come to trap the lead characters. Vivienne wants freedom to travel but her dreams are halted. Julia’s ex-husband and best friend are on her doorstep, whilst her youngest son holds her to ransom through his inability to grow up. The affluent older woman is bound up with the responsibility of passing on inheritance, yet they are not given the respect from others that should come with this power.

### ***Ageing Women and fulfillment – self-care or sexual romance?***

This article has focused its attention on the ways in which the ageing woman is presented in contemporary British television drama as a character who is given the responsibility to care for both the next generation and the family home. Yet her role is imbued with anxiety, not power. There is a sense therefore that her ability to care, while expected and even demanded, is not entirely trusted, or guaranteed. Any attempts she makes to have someone to care for her are questioned and, in the case of these series, undermined. So how does the ageing woman care for herself?

Self-care is a concept we have chosen to apply to our older women characters because of its close relationship to care. Care is strongly gendered in terms of women being both professional and family care givers (Susan Himmelweit and Ania Plomien, 2014). Self-care is a term which has different disciplinary definitions, encompassing the broad notion of taking time to improve your physical and mental health (NIMH 2024) to incorporating a sense of

“awareness, self-control and self-reliance” (Nicole Martínez, Cynthia Connelly, Alexa Perez, Patricia Calero, 2021, 418). With the concept used widely by the wellbeing industry, the term has become absorbed into consumer culture (Katherine Rowland 2023). Also, there has been a normalisation of these concepts within the culture of femininity, especially as articulated in women’s media such as magazines, daytime TV, online blogs etc. Their appearance in fictional genres aimed at women further naturalise the connection between “self-care,” consumer culture and “successful ageing.”

The experience of ageing has been argued to have changed by Gilleard and Higgs (2000) amongst others (see also Hepworth, 2003; Metz and Underwood, 2005), with older individuals expressing more agency and identity through their leisure and lifestyle choices. In *Gold Digger*, self-care is positioned as something that Julia does by staying at fancy hotels, getting room service, and applying expensive face creams. She buys herself and Benjamin things and experiences that he could not afford. In *Flesh and Blood*, Vivienne jogs in contemporary high-end lycra sportswear and spontaneously gets taken in a private small plane across the Channel by Mark. The depiction of an upper middle class (Julia) and middle class (Vivienne) woman is interesting in terms of both characters inability to indulge in self-care. This leads us to the question of the depiction of the older successful woman.

Instead of enabling older women lead characters to find fulfilment in a broad range of possibilities, the hegemonic representation of ageing women continues to figure them through a variant of the romance trope (Aagje Swinnen 2015). These narratives reflect uncertainties about the status of ageing women within contemporary culture. Rather than emphasise the qualities and attributes that come with the experience of age, they tend to make the characters appear younger, in other words, “girl” these older women through the romance trope. The

two series we discuss rely on familiar representational tropes of older women and their final stage of life by defining them in terms of their love life and relationships with their adult children.

Vivienne's calendar revolves around family gatherings in which the children act out their established roles and disordered patterns of behaviour. In seemingly celebratory speeches, both children and mother unwittingly emphasise their co-dependence:

Helen: "You are a really amazing mum. You gave us the best possible start in life – a happy, secure loving family, a great place to grow up. Even now we're still not grown up you're still here for us whatever messes we get ourselves into."

Vivienne: "You three are the loves of my life and my greatest achievement and I'd like to say thank you to Mark for taking me on."

Even in Helen's acknowledgment of her mother's amazing skills, there is also a clear reminder of the mother's place in the home—to create an environment that generates happiness and a sense of security. There is also an expectation that even though they have now outgrown the family home, they want to know that she is still there for them "whatever messes we get ourselves into." This expectation makes it very difficult for the mother to fully embrace a new life or new direction—it fixes her into a place where she can always be ready to clean up the "mess" and attend to their needs. It is also worth noting the way in which Vivienne thanks Mark for "taking her on", as if she comes with significant challenges.

Despite her attempts to move on, Vivienne's children often express their anxiety about her desires to be with another man, and ultimately to shift her focus from them to him, as the following dialogue reveals:

Vivienne: "I've met a new friend...a man."

Helen: "As in boyfriend?"

Vivienne: "Well yes."

Natalie: "Bloody hell, Mum, you dark horse."

Helen: "Why didn't you tell us?"

Natalie: “So you’re in love?”

Helen: “Nat, for god’s sake.”

Jake: “Who is this person? What is his name? Dad’s only been gone a year.”

Nat: “It’s 18 months. Is she meant to sit around moping for the rest of her life? We just want her to be happy.”

Jake: “We only scattered his ashes in March.”

The dialogue reflects the ways in which her children consider her desires to move on. Natalie is supportive of her mother and offers a romantic perspective whereas Jake is protective of his late father’s claim on his mother. Vivienne is repeatedly interrupted and what comes through is the need the children have to insert themselves into her life. Jake’s line of questioning exposes the anxiety that comes with the notion that she might no longer be there for their “messes” as another person will become the focus of her care and attention.

Both series imagine the lead women within a heteronormative romance narrative (Stephen Katz and Barbara Marshall 2003, Swinnen 2015) which frames the desires of these women instead of other lifestyle choices that might better reflect what older women want from the latter stages of their lives. Both narratives continue to imagine that older women want what their younger counterparts aspire to have, reaffirming what Iolanda Tortajada, Frederik Dhaenens and Cilia Willem refer to as “the dominant cultural imperative for women... to ‘stay young’ for as long as possible” (2018, 2). The romance trope can be read as means of extending desirability and the unpredictability of “new/young love” as opposed to narratives of women in long-term marriages which could be perceived as dull and determined.

The casting of Francesca Annis and Julia Ormond is itself interesting in the light of the romance trope. Both women are recognisable actors and have played the romantic lead in several films – Annis in *The Pleasure Girls* (1965) and *Dune* (1984), and Ormond in *First Knight* (1995), and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008). Ormond was being groomed as a Hollywood star at one point (including reprising Audrey Hepburn’s iconic role



in the 1995 remake of *Sabrina*, she was positioned as a non-threatening Hepburn-style ingenue and therefore already girlish), but never quite made it. Annis has mainly made her name in UK productions but has played mature and renowned “beauties” such as Lillie Langtry). The audience’s identification with both actresses as romantic leads locks them within this expectation from the offset. It is important, therefore, to consider how they play the lead love interest as older women and whether they set new precedents in the process.

Within the romantic set-up, there is some resistance shown by the lead characters. In *Flesh and Blood* Vivienne initially resists Mark’s proposal of marriage, telling him, “I’ve been looking after people for years. I like the independence that I have now.” She wants more than a sexual partner, her desire to travel around India representing a way for her to “find herself” and escape responsibility, having sacrificed her youth to family life. The way Vivienne perceives her relationship is articulated by the terms she uses to justify it to her children: “I would like to have some purely selfish pleasure.” Gratification for Vivienne is found in the hedonistic, not a platonic companion or the pecuniary pragmatics of securing a widow’s pension. The relationship is shown to have emotional depth, however, with Mark reassuring her after a health scare that if the diagnosis is bad, he will not be abandoning the relationship. Attraction goes beyond the physical for Mark, him describing her as “thoughtful, generous” as well as “gorgeous”.

In *Gold Digger*, everyone underestimates Julia’s interests and desires. On not being able to contact her whilst she was having sex with Benjamin, her daughter makes an assumptive and dismissive assertion: “Where have you been? How many galleries can one woman consume?” To which Julia wryly replies, “You’d be surprised”. However, Julia is constantly shown as being uncomfortable with being old. She tries to look more youthful by wearing lip

gloss and the associations of her virginal white wedding dress cannot have been lost on her. Julia realises what she is attempting to do when she sees herself in her white gown, looking in the mirror and chastising herself: “You old fool”. Julia is constantly caught in this tension. When she meets Benjamin in the British Museum there is a key dialogue in which she devalues the wisdom that she possesses as an experienced older woman. The exhibit she comes to seek out, a warrior woman from 520BC, acts as a touchstone for her. She draws from her knowledge as a former conservator there, informing Benjamin that for her the figurine represents “strength, capability the amount she’d had to put up with”. Her role as a conservator involved, “doing the impossible – halting the march of time”. Like a slightly cheeky schoolboy, Benjamin thanks her for her expertise which Julia sees as a criticism, “You make me sound like I’m 100”. At the close of the drama, for the wedding reception, Julia replaces the white wedding dress for a short red one. The symbolism is stark. The virginal innocence has been rejected in lieu of passion and danger. A fully mature depiction of Julia would have seen her choosing adventure beyond the romance.

While the ‘girling’ of older women (Deborah Jermyn, 2012) involves being sexually attractive and active, being sexually active is also a key characteristic of a successful ageing process (Katz and Marshall 2003). Aagje Swinnen follows on from Jermyn in her analysis of the films *Something’s Gotta Give* (dir. Meyers, 2003) and *The Mother* (dir. Michell, 2003) (Swinnen 2015). While Swinnen finds the older woman’s body has been rehabilitated into visibility and sexual activity, she asserts that the audience is presented with mixed messages and unconvincing endings. In *Something’s Gotta Give*, for example, Erica (Diane Keaton) gives up a fulfilling relationship with a younger man in order to help Harry (Jack Nicholson) become respectable. In *The Mother* Darren (Daniel Craig) turns out to be a drug addict taking advantage of an older woman. Swinnen argues that the storylines break away from the

stereotype of the ‘withered’ menopausal woman, but still ultimately reflect ageist politics that limit the possibilities for leading females (2015, 70).

Furthermore, the way sexual intercourse is shown is tied into genre which is problematic. Margaret Cruickshank (2003) called for increased exposure to “saggy breasts” if we are to embrace the sexually liberated older woman. However, *Gold Digger* and *Flesh and Blood* are not social realist texts; therefore, “saggy breasts” would be both gratuitous and a generic solecism. The fantasy aspects are central to the way both shows deal with ageing female bodies by, on the one hand, acknowledging the anxieties which older women feel, while also glamorising their stars’ beauty. Julia, unconfident in her body, turns off the light the first time she has sex with the much younger, Benjamin. Although sex is important to the relationship between Julia and Benjamin – we see them having sex behind a steamed-up window in the shower and in her outdoor pool—flesh is covered by duvets, water and steam. The allusion to sexual intimacy in *Flesh and Blood* is less explicit. Vivienne is shown at several points in a silk negligee, and we see Mark’s dismay when he finds out that he has run out of Viagra. So while both series refuse to reproduce the negative narrative of older post-menopausal woman as asexual and withered, this is done without fully celebrating the older female body.

In *Flesh and Blood* the problem is accentuated through the role of “old” Mary who serves as a counterpoint to the sexually active and desirable Vivienne. Mary is condemned and queered for this as she has no place for her desires to go other than Vivienne. She turns up to Vivienne’s birthday party wearing a dress of Vivienne’s she had found in a bag of clothes intended for the charity shop. Mary also intercepts post intended for Vivienne - a gift of a silk dressing gown from Mark which we later see her wearing as she eats her dinner from a tray in front of the television. In a comedic juxtaposition, she accidentally spills some gravy on to

the gown and later removes the stain and returns the gown to Vivienne without her knowing that her friend had been the first to take illicit pleasure in it.

Mary may care for others but she is not valued for this quality and is seen as frumpy and as a failure. Her character not only serves as a foil to the successful and younger looking Vivienne but also as a the Other who we are suspicious of—within the thriller genre we see her as a potential danger as framed through Vivienne’s boyfriend’s appraisal of her—his watchful eyes on her looking at them with binoculars. She is a character who viewers are invited neither to trust nor to aspire towards. Indeed, Vivienne tells her children, and we are supposed tacitly to agree, that she “does not want to be like Mary.”

Nevertheless, as viewers, we can also recognise that Mary happily goes about her own life, taking pleasure in gardening, cooking and, most of all, in caring for another family who do not value her. Her acts of care are devalued for us insofar as they do not make her seem younger or appealing to those around her. Mary can also be read as someone who judges Vivienne for not caring enough about her children. A woman who lost her own child, Mary has dedicated herself to another woman’s children and to raising them as though they were her own. She hugs Vivienne’s son and allows him to keep his belongings in her house, and makes a blanket for her out of their old clothes (returning these objects to Vivienne in a way that serves as barrier to her letting go of her caring responsibilities to her children). The two dominant versions of the “older woman” are set against each other to great effect: the desirable and youthful “successful ager” vs the embittered spinster figure. However, whilst Mary is queered, she ultimately holds the power as she is the one recounting Vivienne’s story to the police detective.

*Flesh and Blood* makes a further and effective mirroring regarding the sexually-active older woman through the character of Vivienne’s son Jake’s landlord, Stella (Sharon Small). Jake,

a personal trainer in financial difficulty, has transactional sex with one of his clients, who happens to be a landlord, in lieu of rent. Stella owns a block of modern luxury flats and keeps herself in good shape, again, exemplifying the successful ager. She is seemingly in control of this professional relationship, initiating it and helping Jake write messages of reconciliation to his ex-partner. Unlike the lack of respect he shows to his own mother, Jake uses and values the older woman's expertise in this matter. However, Stella develops feelings for Jake, visibly faltering when she realises his dismay at his ex-wife discovering the arrangement. Ultimately, like Vivienne, she is also seeking emotional attachment through a romantic relationship. This relationship also helps us frame Jake's own perception of his mother's new relationship – he represents dismissive attitudes around the older woman as romantic and sexual partner.

## **Conclusion**

There is a difficult tension involved in centralising the importance of romance to the older women. On the one hand, the older woman has as much right to enjoy a flourishing sexual relationship as a younger woman and this can be seen as a way of empowering her. On the other, the romance trope is there to make the lead characters feel younger to viewers and hence fails to respect the older woman's experience and attributes that she has earned as an older person. A limiting narrative is set in which the older woman can only find fulfilment through a sexual partner. Secondly, by not making the ageing body explicit in the sexual encounter, both narratives perpetuate the "girling" of older women. Ultimately both series fail to progress discourse around sexuality or ageing and instead reiterate ageist norms, both in terms of the visibility of the older body and in terms of the heterosexual romance, from which asexual and barren Mary is excluded.

The romance trope, girling, care and self-care are all caught up in the psychological thriller and domestic noir genres which expose the anxiety over whether these narratives can even work. Both Mark and Benjamin are fantasy figures (also typical of the female gothic) and therefore “too good to be true.” The audience is thus invited to share the suspicions of the children concerning their motives. Can an ageing woman be a viable romance character and do the audience care about her sex/love life if not to know whether it is sustainable? We also need to consider how the series holds the whole project of romance at old age in anxiety—what will happen? Will they make it—will the kids ruin in? The tension is there as part of the genre, but ultimately also as part of wondering what is possible for women at this point in their lives.

In moving older women to the centre as lead characters, both *Flesh and Blood* and *Gold Digger* go some way towards challenging ageist stereotypes. However, both series struggle to find a place for the older affluent woman in contemporary times – the domestic noir heightens anxiety around her attempts to find fulfilment. Both series potentially imbue the mother figure with patriarchal/matriarchal power in showing her guarding and protecting the family legacy. However, they pull back from giving her power as the women are shown no respect for their role of looking after the family fortune. The gothic house traps her and remains a space of domestic abuse and violence. The plots still feature a romance narrative which does not allow for moments of self-care or alternative modes of self-happiness to emerge. The focus on lifestyle and consumption indicated by the genre’s aspirational aspects in these series means that self-care conflates emotional wellbeing for older women with the purchase of expensive luxuries. The aspirational pleasures of these thrillers fuelling the fantasy ownership of “desirable” property (cf. property porn) by wealthy older women is

juxtaposed alongside the real fears about economic and physical vulnerability for older women these stories help to articulate.

Although Julia and Benjamin are portrayed as happy in the final party scene, the audience may be sceptical about whether the relationship will prove fulfilling or endure. And Vivienne in *Flesh and Blood* is punished by the narrative for following her sexual desires. It is in crafting the female leads into sexually desirable and desiring women, that the dramas ultimately let audiences down. The older woman is neither allowed sexual fulfilment and a new relationship, but nor is she allowed to be like Mary, the asexual woman who is busy gardening and baking – women in this position are meddling busybodies who live vicariously through others with families. Indeed, Mary is a “Mrs Danvers” (from *Rebecca*) figure, obsessed with a desire for (and even a wish to consume) her beautiful neighbour through whom she lives vicariously. To rupture the set script of the older woman, lead female characters need to be allowed to actively reject romance as the fulfilment of desires in later life. In this sense, the series are constrained by their formats and the need to hook audiences for a second series.

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