



“Blind people don't run”: Escaping the “nursing home specter” in *Children of Nature* and *Cloudburst*



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 January 2015

Received in revised form 1 June 2015

Accepted 1 June 2015

Available online 20 June 2015

Keywords:

Film

Nursing home

Escape

Choice

Desire

Long-term residential care

ABSTRACT

The paper compares two films, *Children of Nature* (Börn náttúrunnar, Iceland, Friðrik Þór Friðriksson, 1991) and *Cloudburst* (Canada, Thom Fitzgerald, 2010), which share remarkable similarities, despite their difference in historical and geographical origin. In focusing on these two examples, the paper shows the extent to which a widespread fear of long-term residential care evident in popular discourse motivates larger commentaries about growing old. Each narrative presents a romance catalyzed by the threat of long-term residential care. In both stories, the couples are depicted as fugitives from the law, escaping what is perceived as a fate worse than death in order to pursue death on their own terms. The paper explores the structure and significance of how they leave and what they accomplish while they are away. The films offer examples of a broader cultural discourse that is damaging, while they are also heartening in their satisfying representation of the possibility of escape. Through that, they indicate the importance of choice and desire to transforming residential care in a manner that could also transform popular understandings of the “nursing home.”

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Aging in place is a prominent policy focus that reverberates through the popular press as an almost moral imperative, and family caregivers make remarkable efforts to keep loved ones in need of care at home. Nonetheless, long-term care residences are a permanent and critical point on the care continuum. Moving into care can offer new opportunities for social activity, improved health, and quality of life to both those in need of care and their family caregivers, especially with relatively recent developments in culture change, including the Eden Alternative® and Green House models for care (Kane, 2010; Tavormina, 1999). However, though long-term care residences often provide good care and excellent alternatives to care in the community, they appear in popular culture and in scholarship as though they represent a failure to age well (Armstrong & Banerjee, 2009; Vladeck, 2011; Weicht, 2013 p. 195). In the 1990s, Betty Friedan named this the “nursing home specter”, referencing homogeneity and sedation as negative features of institutional care in the late 20th century US (as cited in Sherman, 2002, p. 150) and referring to nursing

homes explicitly as “death sentences, the final interment from which there is no exit but death” (Friedan, 1993, p. 510), despite also describing alternative modes of institutional care that transcended the doom implied by her motif of haunting (Friedan, 1993, p. 521). Towards the turn of the 20th century, Gubrium and Holstein (1999, p. 521) explained that the nursing home works as a membership categorization device for discussions of the aging body in that, even before a frail elderly person moves into it, the nursing home “[casts] an interpretive shadow on meaning” in part because it “serves as a source of anxiety because of what is said to be known about ‘those places’, allegedly turning frailty into a ‘bunch of bones’”. To date, the figure of the “nursing home”, typically as a symbol of cultural failure and a fate worse than death, still haunts representations of older adults across the popular culture spectrum, in television, magazines, cinema and newspaper coverage (Chivers, 2003, p. 57–58; Krainitzki, 2014, p. 38; Lagacé, Tanguay, Lavallée, Laplante, & Robichaud, 2012, p. 336; Rozanova, 2010). Though alternative examples are available, the popular press focuses on nursing homes as contemporary “gulags”, sites of increasing use of chemical restraints, places of

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abuse and violence, and locations of tragedies that reveal high levels of neglect (Bernier, 2004; Eagle, 2013; Johnson, 2003; Lloyd, Banerjee, Harrington, Jacobsen, & Szebehely, 2014).

As Biggs, Bernard, Kingston, and Nettleton (2001)¹ point out, moving into a nursing home is frequently thought of as tantamount to giving up on existence as an independent moral, emotional or physical being. In their research on Retirement Communities (an alternative to the “nursing home”), Biggs et al. (2001, p. 660) found that “Nursing Homes were rarely described [by focus group members] in detail. They were, rather, places associated with physical and mental incapacity, that did not allow the autonomy and maintenance of wellbeing afforded by the [Retirement Community]”. Myriam Ryvicker (2009, p. 12) expresses this perceived shortcoming even more starkly when she declares, “In public discourse, nursing homes symbolize the ultimate loss of identity and autonomy for older adults with chronic illness and disability”. Quite apart from the actual care and life offered, the nursing home becomes a repository for cultural fears of what might be lost in late life: the dominant fear is of the loss of self and autonomy as well as physical and cognitive abilities. As Martine Lagacé et al. (2012, p. 336) explain, “the nursing home echoes, to a certain extent, broader social representations, images, and views of aging”. They point out that stereotypes prevail even in the face of increased life expectancy, particularly those that “depict elders as incapable and childlike, weak and unhappy, depressed, and self-centred” (p. 336). Added to these negative connotations, people fear becoming grotesque figures upon entry into institutional care. Gilleard and Higgs (2011, p. 138) attribute part of the negative social imaginary of what they call the fourth age to “the abjection and otherness observed particularly in institutional settings”, citing Beth Baker’s *Old Age in a New Age* which articulates “the horror and abjection emerging from this ‘densification’ of agedness within the nursing home setting”. They refer here to the way in which the nursing home gathers older adults in need of care into close quarters in which there is a higher percentage of fourth agers living together. Speaking of the decline that people associate with old age and that often leads to the need for nursing home care, Margaret Morganroth Gullette (2011, p. 24) says, “People see ahead of them, in grim and shadowy forms, the prospective life-course narrative that the dominant culture provides – an unlivable mind and unrecognizable body, mountainous expense”.

While there is great potential for the nursing home as a setting for contemporary narratives, most often creative works pick up on the nursing home specter and depict these facilities as places to die rather than as places in which to live or work, with brief exceptions in which they are depicted as offering respite to residents’ loved ones. As a trope within literature and film, the nursing home most often offers a setting devoid of life and possibility, teeming with animosity, torpor, and disgust.²

¹ Focus group members resided in a self-defined retirement community in the West Midlands of the UK, with a mean age of 82.8 years.

² Prominent examples include May Sarton’s *As We Are Now* (1973), Edna Alford’s *A Sleep Full of Dreams* (1982), Richard Barth’s *Deadly Climate* (1993), “Home” in Alice Elliott Dark’s *In the Gloaming* (2000), Elizabeth Taylor’s *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* (2011), Robert Campbell *Nibbled to Death by Ducks* (1989), David Lodge *Paradise News* (2012), and Tamara Jenkins’ *The Savages* (2007). Notable exceptions in which there is a glimmer of hope or at least ongoing life in the “nursing home” include *Away from Her* (2007), *Quartet* (2012), and the television series *Waiting for God* (1990–1994).

Reinforcing this view, in a set of intriguing instances, nursing homes are depicted as places from which to escape, into the past, into fantasy, into death, and into the surrounding community. Each type of escape results in a different type of story. The 2013 Taco Bell Superbowl commercial, “Live Young”, and the satirical nursing home escape sequence in one of the multiple narratives of the film version of *Cloud Atlas* (Hill & Arndt, 2012) feature comical and fantastical escapes into fun and high jinx that imply that outside the nursing home is the only place for such endeavors. Similarly, in the film adaptations *The 100-Year-Old Man Who Climbed out the Window and Disappeared* (Herngren, 2013) and *Water for Elephants* (Netter & Stoff, 2011), the central characters escape partly into present day adventures and partly into narration of an equally fantastical past. The escape into death often occurs at the end of narrative films that feature efforts to keep characters out of residential care, such as *Iris* (Fox et al, 2001) and *The Savages* (Jenkins, 2007). The novel *As We Are Now* (Sarton, 1973) features a main character who burns down the appalling facility where she lives, killing herself and all residents in the process. The forms of escape dictate and are dictated by the structure of the films and novels, so that characters seek to flee but often come up against perceptions of aging as comically incongruous, a time of boredom, or replete with ill health and abandonment. The at times circular structure of these narratives – the “Live Young” seniors return to the residence after their escapade, the novel *The 100 Year Old Man* ends exactly as it begins – emphasizes that the escapes are at best ambivalent successes. But collectively these works illustrate a cultural desire to escape the nursing home specter with all its discursive power to transform the ageing body into a “bunch of bones”.

Zeilig (2012, p. 10) explains that, “The popularity of narrative for gerontology may be because the concept opens up a critical space between what is and what is possible”. Focusing on narrative offers a distinct way to “[provoke] critical thought about ageing” that imagines the larger issues while allowing consideration of the individual (p. 19). While literary and film scholars readily accept the power of narrative forms, there is a value to being explicit about their role in relation to aging for scholars working outside the fields. As Kathleen Woodward (2012, p. 4) puts it, “Telling stories...exemplifies the narrative turn in gerontological studies, one that pushes beyond the framework of gerontology itself to embrace the question of caregiving across generations and in the context of globalization”. In this paper, I explore narratives in two films *Children of Nature* (Börn náttúrunnar, Iceland, Friðriksson et al., 1991) and *Cloudburst* (Canada, Fitzgerald et al., 2011) that each depict characters escaping from nursing homes into the community, if only temporarily, in order to pursue their late-life desires. In each case, exploits on the road and motivations for the journey are guided by the deep fear of both the symbolic resonances and material realities of the long-term residential care the characters have experienced. That fear motivates larger commentaries about growing old, particularly choice. Richards, Warren, and Gott (2012, p. 66) explain recent scholarship that

[deconstructs] images of old age [seeking] to show that despite their material nature, none of these images should be treated as faithful representations of the inevitable physical changes that accompany aging, but rather as a product of the beliefs and attitudes of their makers.

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