

Grace and Frankie: who's afraid and who laughs with these two not-poor-and-even-less-old-ladies

Ana Catarina Pereira* & Begoña Gutiérrez San Miguel**

Abstract

This article presents a narrative analysis of the series Grace and Frankie, produced and broadcast by the streaming channel Netflix, which was premiered in 2015, and awaits a new season for 2020. Featuring Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin, the series balances humorous moments and dramatic scenes in short episodes of about 30 minutes. In our analysis, we use different feminist film studies to identify the main mechanisms of deconstructing stereotypes related to femininity, gender, beauty and age, as well as their potential as far as the effects in the broad audiences reached are concerned.

Keywords: Sorority, feminism, series, stereotype, universality

The American series *Grace and Frankie* was created by Marta Kauffman (co-producer of *Friends*) and Howard J. Morris (*Home Improvement*) for Netflix. It premiered in May of 2015. Grace (Jane Fonda, retired cosmetics mogul) and Frankie (Lily Tomlin, a hippy artist) are the protagonists around which the narrative actions revolve, along five seasons in which gender, aging and sexuality issues are addressed in the main plots. The actresses represent two septuagenarian friends who get together after their husbands – Robert and Sol (Martin Sheen and Sam Waterson, partners in a prestigious divorce law firm) – announce they are leaving them to marry one another, having kept their love relation secret for twenty years.

Presented as a sitcom, as both comedy and drama for television, the series mixes references to various television genres, balancing a dramatic component of themes with the sense of humour of almost all characters. The plot starts with two frustrated relationships, from which the female characters come out the worst off. Shocked with the disclosure, grieving together, the two women end up cohabiting in the same beach house that had been purchased by the two heterosexual couples, now separated. From the point of view we will seek to analyse more thoroughly in this article, it is from the harsh coexistence of the two female characters that common stereotypes regarding older women will be dismantled. Two strong women will stand out of the process of

separation and disbelief, to be able to cope with their new family situation.

Devoid of great prejudices, the series presents smart scripts, tackling totally innovative and previously unthinkable themes in the traditional social structures: throughout the chapters these never slide into cynicism, and the seasons are able to surprise with unexpected twists in the main or in the secondary plots, even when the end seemed near. Each episode has an average 30 minutes length, with a linear narrative: it usually starts at Grace and Frankie's beach house, or in some other space familiar to the series, with the emergence of a problem or unresolved issue; the outcome is often punctuated by moments of humour. The scenes are normally short, focused on quick dialogues, without much room for contemplation on more open plans, or pauses in the narrative.

In the first two seasons, the action revolves around Sol and Robert's gay love with, we believe, credible performances, without overacting and steering away from stereotypes. When, at times, these are revisited it is either through humour (e.g., the gay elements in the bachelor's party episode – ep.12, season 1 –, through some tics and add-ons in supporting characters), or to have them questioned (as when Sol questions himself about monogamy and the freedom to be gay, in ep. 11, season 1). In the subsequent seasons, the different chapters detail real life's problems associated with coexistence and the way to move forward, sometimes going to measures too

* University of Beira Interior, Portugal

** University of Salamanca, Spain

extravagant for what one might expect of two older ladies. In this sense, we propose to analyse the narrative of the 65 episodes already broadcast (13 for each season) from a gender perspective, addressing the manner in which the two central relationships are approached: Grace and Frankie's friendship and the love relation between Robert and Sol.

Materials and Methods

The theoretical references for the definition of the analysis method we choose are diverse, but the study of Hans Gumbrecht – historian and literary theorist and critic, that reflects and underlines some Heideggerian principles – constitutes one among our main motivations. According to his perspective, the Cartesian heritage of Modernity will have led, one should remember, to a metaphysical spirituality and to a “loss of the world” (Gumbrecht: 2010, p. 43). Therefore, the author seeks to enunciate epistemological alternatives to what he considers to be the unjustified domain of Hermeneutics (as both interpretation and quest for meaning) in the Social and Human Sciences. In Gumbrecht's perspective, the concept of “presence” refers to what lies in front of us, what takes up space, that which is tangible to bodies and not only apprehended in and through a relation of meaning. Bringing his concept of presence close to Heidegger's concept of Being, Gumbrecht does not see humans as agents of transformation, located apart from the world, but rather as beings that, in the Heideggerian Serenity, will be capable of getting back in touch with everything in a purer, if not less complex manner.

In *Against interpretation* and in *The limits of Interpretation*, Susan Sontag (1966) and Umberto Eco (2004), respectively, had already outlined the pre-eminence of the quest for meaning in the analysis of works of art, anticipating the necessity of more direct contact and look over the objects. In *Being and Time* (originally published in 1927), Heidegger had replaced the subject/object paradigm with the concept of *dasein*¹, reaffirming the corporeal substantiality and spatial dimensions of human existence. In a culture of meaning, Gumbrecht reminds us, the predominant human self-reference is thought or consciousness, while in a culture of presence it is the material body that assumes domination. Knowledge is revealed (and not so much

uncovered or interpreted), giving way to “moments of intensity” or epiphanies (with preference given to the idea of “aesthetic experience”), which dictate the ephemerality of the revelation. These moments acquire the status of an event since, according to the author, we ignore the time in which they will occur and the intensity they will provoke, disintegrating with the same spontaneity with which they have emerged.

As an historian and literary critic, Gumbrecht does not frequently extend his reflection to film or television studies. An attempt to adapt Gumbrecht's and Heidegger's ideas to this area of studies would necessarily involve considering the films or television series as engaging in and an constituting part of the *Being*, through a reactivation of the corporeal and spatial dimension of existence – such is what we will seek to accomplish here.

Results and Discussion

Entangled stories

Although our study does not focus on the reception of *Grace and Frankie*, a quick analysis at websites where countless followers can vote gives us a comprehensive idea about it. On IMDB, for instance, more than 29600 people already made their quantitative assessment of the series, their votes making up a respectful average of 8.3 stars out of 10; moreover, 34 per cent of those users attributed the maximum score to the series.² It is also quite curious to realize that the same website distinguishes between “female votes” and “male votes”, the series being rated higher by women than men, that difference further widening among the audiences from the age of 30 onwards, as can be verified on the same webpage.

The site *Rotten Tomatoes* assigned a slightly higher vote than IMDB, with the series reaching an average of 89 percent (8.9/10) among its users. Please note that these are, according to the site's notice, certified critics, entitled critics from other sites or social media. The Brazilian site *Adoro Cinema* also attributes a respectable score of 4.5 stars rating, out of 5 (227 notes and 21 reviews) – in this case, just like on IMDB, one needs only to be a registered user to vote.

The high acceptance of the series has recently translated into the public announcement

¹ *Dasein* is a Heideggerian concept that stands for *being-in-the-world*

² https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3609352/ratings?ref_tt_ov_rt

by the Netflix streaming platform of its renewal for a sixth season, premiering in 2020. In terms of actor's performances, Frankie's role has gained innumerable fans; Lily Tomlin has received four Emmy nominations for her role on the show, while Fonda has been nominated for one. Tomlin also received a Golden Globe nomination in 2016 for the category of best actress in a comedy series³. Besides the series, both actresses are widely awarded and recognized, by both the public and the critics, having worked together previously in 1980 when they starred in the comedy *9 to 5*, alongside Dolly Parton. In the film, directed by Colin Higgins, three female employees of a sexist, egotistical, lying, hypocritical bigot find a way to turn the tables on him.

Jane Fonda also won Best Actress Oscars. Lily Tomlin has won five Emmys and a Golden Globe, besides an Oscar nomination. Sam Waterston (who plays Sol) has also been nominated by the Academy and adds a Golden Globe and an Emmy to his curriculum. Martin Sheen has been nominated eight times for the Golden Globe (and won a statuette) and nine times for the Emmy (which he also won only once).⁴

Let us then begin with characterizing the main roles, disclosing archetypes possibly identifiable by the viewers:

Grace is the successful businesswoman who sustained a four-decade marriage, going through severe crises and countless moments of distance. During her marriage she knew something closer to the feeling of love when she met Phil (played by Sam Elliott), whom she reencounters later, even if their times always seem to be mismatched. Phil is married, and his wife has Alzheimer. Grace's professional career, just like her personal life, has always been based on her image: she reached the age of 70 (and even 80) with a blameless figure, corresponding to the strict norms and aesthetical patterns of a standardized society. With Robert, she is the mother of two daughters: Brianna and Mallory.

Frankie represents the female opposite of Grace. She is the family's caretaker, albeit in an untraditional sense. A lover of the arts, she is a painter, combining her talent in the series' first season with classes of plastic

expression to prisoners, as a form of social reintegration. The foster mother of two (Coyote and Nwabudike), she has been a constant presence in their lives in unconventional ways, since Frankie acts accordingly with her Buddhist principles of respect for all life forms, keeps on using drugs and presents an attire that is in accordance with her habits. Of the four elements, Frankie is the one that reveals the greatest initial difficulties in overcoming the loss of the man she loves and who is simultaneously her best friend. To her, and to her family, the spiritual is more important than the material.

Robert was Grace's husband, who concealed his homosexuality for at least two decades, after he got involved with Sol. Robert and Grace were the typical bourgeois couple, distant from one another and solely concerned with their own image. In the first season, in the episode of his bachelor party (12), Robert is accused by a friend of never having paid due attention to his beautiful wife, and of always having failed in attempting to hide his homosexuality. He represents the lawyer who will do anything for his lover and he is the owner of an undisputed reason. He will use this period in his life to retire and to foster his artistic side, as a singer and an actor.

Sol was Frankie's life companion. Together they raised a united family, though he also hid his true love, which is now willing to live on. In the first season, when Frankie (the most surprised and hurt of the ex-wives) demands an explanation from him, Sol underlines the importance family ties always had for him. When he feels forced to retire (season 3), he will show his claiming gay militant side by participating in various LGBT rallies.

Brianna, Grace's daughter, is the one that mostly resembles her mother's highly professional and relentless character. She is a beautiful woman: although outside of the rigid standards of excessive thinness, she is blonde and is always highly dressed up. Throughout the series she claims to be reasonably satisfied with her life, not

³ <https://variety.com/2019/tv/news/grace-and-frankie-renewed-season-6-1203108807/>

⁴ <https://mdemulher.abril.com.br/famosos-e-tv/11-curiosidades-sobre-grace-and-frankie-para-virar-fa-de-vez/>

intending to have children (or even wanting to approach her nephews) and having some unstable love relationships. At first, she had great difficulties getting emotionally involved.

Mallory is Grace's youngest daughter; she is the family mother, Coyote's former girlfriend and the love of his life. Less present in the first seasons, in which she only appears linked to the first two and later four kids, she will return after a divorce and with several existential conflicts related to her skepticism about love. The two sisters are opposed in personality and in ambition, but they get along well and value the new paths chosen by their mother and father.

Coyote is the least successful and most disorganized of the hippy couple's children. He has overcome a treatment for his drug addiction and struggles to maintain his balance by trying to live up to the few expectations the family has in him. His character is mainly relevant for the affection he shows, essentially directed at his mother.

Nwabudike is the most successful of the two brothers, with a brilliant lawyer career ahead. For his balanced personality, he is often the confidant of his brother and of the rest of the family.

It is also curious to note how these ties arouse moments of nostalgia and of longing in the series, especially in Sol and Robert during the first season. At a mutual friend's funeral (ep. 4, season 1), Robert regrets Sol's hippy attire and his poise at the expense of Grace's always charming and unquestionable presence, who shows up dazzling for the wake. Sol, on the other hand, has a relapse for Frankie only a few days from his marriage, as they both relive family moments together in their old home. They end up sleeping together and having to face the consequences of this unfaithfulness.

Of the four children of the two couples, those who are most saddened by their parents' separation are Coyote and Nwabudike (the adoptive children of the hippy couple), because they come from a more structured family in which ties were stronger. The bourgeois couple, represented by Grace and Robert, do not surprise in their separation (but rather in its motivation), since they have been apart and unloving for many years. The daughters react with surprise to the paternal homosexuality, but not to the marriage's

ending. Both sons and daughters acquire an important centrality throughout the narrative, representing less a burden than a support for both mothers. They will not always be present in their lives (even because the women will be able to compose themselves emotionally) but will keep on showing concern and care for Grace and Frankie.

In this sense, the treatment of age issues is introduced with clarity and sophistication: both women refuse to be regarded as dependent and elderly, or in need of special care. In episode 3 of season 1, Grace and Frankie go to a convenience store and are confronted with their own invisibility in the face of a younger woman who gets the employee's full attention. Frankie ends up carrying less legitimately the tobacco they intended to have bought:

Frankie: [Lighting cigarette] It's okay. I learned something. We've got a superpower.

Grace: [Referring to cigarettes] You stole those?

Frankie: You can't see me, you can't stop me.

Throughout the series, the two women will face a variety of situations that will put them to the test, such as the assisted suicide of a friend their age (which broadens the debate on a controversial issue), Grace's arthritis, or Frankie's stroke. Perhaps for this very reason, the two characters insist on creating their own business, which could give them back the status of independent women, dedicated to the manufacture and sale of vibrators for women with any type of motor difficulty. In previous episodes, the relationship between old age and poor vaginal lubrication had already been effectively solved by Frankie with a homemade yam lubricant that she will try to market in Brianna's company. The failure of this attempt eventually leads to the creation of Grace and Frankie's new company, especially aimed at women of their age group. Like all of Grace's previous businesses, the company will have good acceptance and market outreach.

With sexuality approached so naturally it is however useful to underline the moderation with which images are shown. Even when Grace rediscovers the love of her life (Phil) and, for a few days, is happy by his side, we only see scenes of covered bodies in the hotel room and kisses cut short. In Grace's next love affair with Nick, the same precaution is used, though initially justified

by the age difference, which seems to disturb no one but her.

With Robert and Sol, we also see a love story that is finally assumed after several years but with shy kisses and discrete love scenes in bed, where the couple is always shown dressed. The award to the best kiss might be handed out in the first season to Grace, who kisses a former convict in the beach house kitchen. The contrast is greater if we think about how openly Grace and Frankie talk about their needs, their desires and personal tastes. The American moral decency commands the display of these themes, more spoken through words than essentially shown in nonverbal images. One might think that being a family series would restrict the exhibition of such images. On the section of the website dedicated to parental guide, IMDB states that in some European countries the series is suitable for ages 12 or 13 (Netherlands, France, Germany, Norway, Spain, United Kingdom)⁵. However, the themes are addressed and hardly seen with children, namely the establishment of a vibrator sales company or even the regular consumption of weed by Frankie and by characters around her.

To contrast with this moderation in the choice of images, Frankie's character is presented as the one most expectedly controversial, for the traits already stated (her hippy attire and philosophy, the fact that she is a weed smoker and a follower of alternative medicines). Nevertheless, it is also against her that some of the easily recognizable stereotypes in other American television products are countered: it is curious to see how it is Frankie that misses her ex-husband and well-structured family the most, just as it will be curious to note that it will be Frankie who will dissuade Grace from having a relationship with Phil on the grounds that he is married. In episode 9 of season 2, Frankie gives her (requested) opinion to Grace about her love story. Knowing that Phil is married to an Alzheimer's patient, and recognizing the sensibility of the situation, it is Frankie who reminds Grace of the marriage vows: "in sickness and in health."

In episode 5 of season 3, Frankie is shown to be totally against gun possession: her statement arises following a beach house robbery, after Grace is revealed to own a weapon that Frankie

did not know about. The two will only resume their friendship after the hippy painter's initial shock, and when Grace accepts to get rid of the gun. Furthermore, it will be Frankie who will refuse an offer from a company interested in purchasing and marketing their vibrator, when she is confronted with extremely stylized posters of both (ep. 8, season 3). The company believes that the image of the owners should be that of Grace and Frankie, but with heavy editing work to remove wrinkles and white hair, and to slim both women. Frankie insists on the social responsibility of her products, which should address "real women".

Sorority and belonging

Compromise on both their parts, originated in the daily life and their coexistence, will help consolidate Grace and Frankie's: the series can therefore be seen as an archetype of sorority. Together after the failure of both their marriages, the two confront gigantic differences in habits and personalities, overcoming their own prejudices towards one another: Grace is forced to stop considering Frankie an irresponsible, while Frankie takes the opposite route recognizing her friend's human side. In an analysis of the same series, Karina Gomes Barbosa considers that:

At the beginning of the show, the two are fighting a silent dispute for space, which they want only for themselves. Gradually, they realize that it is the affection built by their contradictory dwelling together that builds space as belonging, as interior worlds (Lopes, 1999). It is in this new home that they will reconfigure their sentimental lives: this is where Grace has sex with Guy, this is where Frankie takes her first steps toward redefining herself as a woman. (Gomes Barbosa, 2017, online version)⁶

At this point, we recall Martin Heidegger's (2001) existential analytical question, which is precisely the *being-there*, the *being-in-the-world*, or the way we inhabit it. For the German philosopher, there are clear distinctions between "being in a house" and, in fact, "inhabiting it". In the German language, the verb forms "ich bin" ("I am"), and "du bist" ("you are") can also be

⁵ https://imdb.com/title/tt3609352/parentalguide?ref_=tt_qL_stry_5

⁶ Our translation. The original: "No início do seriado, as duas travam uma disputa silenciosa pelo espaço, que desejam somente para si. Aos poucos, percebem que é o afeto construído pela habitação

contraditória delas, juntas, que constrói o espaço como pertencimento, como mundos interiores (Lopes, 1999). É nessa nova casa que irão reconfigurar suas vidas sentimentais: é onde Grace faz sexo com Guy, é onde Frankie dá os primeiros passos em busca de redefinir-se como mulher."

translated as “I inhabit”, “you inhabit”, establishing parallels between the two actions.

For Heidegger, human existence – life happening, life *being-in-the-world* – corresponds essentially to the act of inhabiting. Not feeling that one belongs in a certain place, even if transitorily, causes discomfort and uneasiness. Le Corbusier emphasizes these consequences by stating: “Taking possession of space is the first gesture of living beings, humans and animals, plants and clouds, the fundamental manifestation of balance and solidity. The first proof of existence is the occupation of space” (Le Corbusier: 1945)⁷. This is conveyed by Grace and Frankie's required habituation period during the first season, or by other less central narratives in the series. Note that it is not until the end of season one that Sol and Frankie finally leave the house where they lived for 40 years (and where they experience a surge of nostalgia that shakes Frankie psychologically). Other episodes will focus on Coyote's difficulty in getting a house and having his independence, freeing the space claimed by his brother; while yet others highlight the memories that Robert's mansion (where he lived with Grace for four decades) spark in the homosexual couple. In the third season, they hire a real estate agent and move to another house, which will correspond to restarting a life together, after Sol's betrayal.

Thus, in a series based on dialogue and on bonding between people, the potential for empathy with those characters increases, especially if we consider the issue from a feminist point of view. In this sense, we recall that, as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, the philosopher Edith Stein, following the model of Edmund Husserl, theoretically confronted the phenomenological tradition, seeking to describe the essence of empathy and reiterating the importance of its experience as a constituent element of the uniqueness of human beings. Whereas for Husserl (very synthetically), empathy consents reaching the knowledge of the objective world, even though through an intersubjective transcendental relationship, Stein sustains that empathy allows the knowledge of the consciousness of others, or the personal otherness: “In my non-primordial experience I

feel, as-it-were, led by a primordial one not experienced by me but still there, manifesting itself in my nonprimordial experience. Thus, empathy is a kind of act of perceiving [*eine Art erfahrender Akte*] *sui generis*.” (Stein, 1989, p. 9).

In Stein's description, parallel to the emergence of an *alter ego*, is drawn the living experience of the *other* like *me*. Since the act distinguishes itself from mere imagination, intuition or perception, an exchange of experiences is enabled in borrowed bodies that are confounded, and the perception of the living experience of the *other* can be understood as one's own by the subject of empathy. This, moreover, is a match with one of the contemporary goals for the acceptance and universalization of different feminist proposals. Confronted with numerous difficulties of arrival and inclusion by members of different races, ethnicities, ages, origins and social classes, different voices of feminist movements still struggle nowadays with the polysemy of the concept of “woman”. Addressing this issue, the political scientist Iris Young reiterates that the affirmation of a human being as a woman does not necessarily make the woman a member of a social group; instead, it assigns her the status of belonging to a series – a Sartrean concept she elects and in which the possibility of exchanging positions with other elements stands out. The author exemplifies:

I read in the newspaper about a woman who was raped, and I empathized with her because I recognize that in my serialized experience, I am violable, I am a potential object of male appropriation. But this consciousness *depersonalizes me*, builds me as an Other for her and as Other for myself in a serial exchange, instead of defining my sense of identity. (Young, 2003, p. 131)⁸

Through the combination of concurring approaches, the concept of experience has been progressively incorporated into feminist studies, since it synthesizes more than the repeated experience of similar events, and involves subjectivity, sexuality, body, education and politics. Overcoming the ambiguity of a sixth sense or an archetypal feminine sensibility, the

⁷ Our translation. The original: “Prendre possession de l'espace est le geste premier des vivants, des hommes et des bêtes, des plantes et des nuages, manifestation fondamentale d'équilibre et de durée. La preuve première d'existence, c'est d'occuper l'espace.”

⁸ Our translation. The original: “Li no jornal sobre uma mulher que foi violada e empatizei com ela porque reconheço que na minha experiência serializada eu sou violável, sou um objecto potencial de apropriação masculina. Mas esta consciência *despersonaliza-me*, constrói-me como Outra para ela e como Outra para mim própria numa troca serial, em vez de definir o meu sentido de identidade.”

experience implies, according to Teresa de Lauretis, "... by one's personal, subjective, engagement in the practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning, and affect) to the events of the world" (Lauretis, 1982, p. 159), not demanding the sharing of ideas, values or material causes, which coincides with the personal growth of the two women in the series under analysis. Sharing the same ending of their 40-year-old marriages, initially the two women could not be situated in more distinct poles: artist vs. manager, sensitive vs. cold, hippy vs. bourgeois. The first and second seasons thus address the assumption of the homosexual relationship of Sol and Robert (its construction, obstacles and achievements), but also the creation of the aforementioned bonds of sorority that will make these women complete and respect each other as the *yin* and the *yang* of oriental philosophy that Frankie surely knows about.

Later on, the fourth season will start precisely with their separation (Frankie will move to Santa Fe with her new companion, Jacob, played by Ernie Hudson) and with the longing they both feel for their coexistence. At this point, and in the following episodes, once more reunited, Grace will show an easiness and familiarity towards Frankie that she cannot establish with her new boyfriend a few years younger – Nick / Peter Gallagher (ep. 4, season 4).

In addition to the empathy provoked by the example of sorority, *Grace and Frankie* also has the immense potential for addressing seniority issues. On this topic, Guita Grin Debert argues that old age, like the stereotypes of femininity, is a historical and social construct, particularly harmful, once again, to women. Varying according to the cultural context, the category has nonetheless known distinct transformations and valuations, to which the author understands that Hollywood cinematography has not been particularly sensitive. According to the author, the changes produced in Modernity, especially in Western societies, with the valorisation of the labour market and the mastery of technologies, have led to a certain standardization of age groups, solidifying patterns and stereotypes of childhood, adulthood and old age. On the other hand, there are economic reasons that justify that

seniority does not appear too much in contemporary Hollywood cinema of commercial type. This is because producers have detected that adolescents are great consumer of cinema (Deleyto, 2003) and show some degree of gerontophobia (Genovard and Casulleras, 2005, p. 11). Hence, it seems that traditionally American series barely incorporate older people among their characters and, if they do it, they tend to be in supporting roles (examples can be found in series like *Grey's Anatomy*, *Friends*, *Criminal Minds*, or *The Big Bang Theory*).

Still in the words of Guita Grin Debert, approaching old age in contemporary experience should imply an exercise in the construction of images that lead "not necessarily to a more tolerant attitude towards the old, but, above all, to a commitment with a certain type of positive aging" (Debert, 1999, p. 72)⁹. This goal should be achieved, in Debert's opinion, by understanding age as a privileged factor in the creation of political actors and in the definition of consumer markets. Mimicking an oriental culture that promotes respect for elders, Yasujirô Ozu's cinema will be paradigmatic to reinforce Debert's assumptions, including a strong representation of female characters. In his filmography, old age problems (female above all) are associated with loneliness and time running out (examples: *Equinox Flower*, 1958, and *Late Spring*, 1949), but countered against wisdom and serenity only attainable at that moment, and enriching for everyone around.

Beyond this view, Debert understands that it is still necessary to "pay attention to how the dissociation between youth and a specific age group is operated, as well as to the transformation of youth into an asset, a value that can be conquered at any stage of life through the adoption of appropriate forms of consumption and lifestyles" (*idem, ibidem*)¹⁰. The simultaneity of the factors suggested by Debert (respect for what is achieved in old age, associated with a quality of life enhanced by a healthy lifestyle) seems to us to work equally well in *Grace and Frankie*, for the reasons hitherto pointed out.

The significance of the body as a means to understanding the complex relationships between nature, culture and society in cinema is also pointed out by Robert Francès (1979),

⁹ Our translation. The original: "não necessariamente a uma atitude mais tolerante com os velhos, mas sim, e antes de tudo, a um compromisso com um tipo determinado de envelhecimento positivo."

¹⁰ Our translation. The original: "atentar para o modo como se opera uma dissociação entre a juventude e uma faixa etária específica e a transformação da juventude em um bem, um valor que pode ser conquistado em qualquer etapa da vida, através da adoção de formas de consumo e estilos de vida adequados."

especially from two standpoints: a perceptive potential of the body and the body's cognitive treatment. On the other hand, the processes of invisibility of women are felt more strongly the older those women are, not only in cinema, but throughout all media.

In the history of cinema, in general, the female corporeality reproduces the classical female role model as the submissive object of the 'voyeuristic' male gaze, the one that desires a young female body and disdains the old for it has little 'to offer'. Thus, the old female bodies must be practically invisible in cinema. And so it is that the representation of female sexuality in old ages literally disappears: if it depended on cinema, we would believe that, at certain ages, women have no desire, or no sexual life. (Genovard and Casulleras, 2005, p. 15)¹¹

The image of old age, therefore, is usually treated in a stereotyped manner, presented along homogeneous standards when one takes into account that it is a fairly heterogeneous collective, deprived of opportunities to contribute to society (Bozon, 2004). The treatment that is usually given to sexuality in elderly characters was already referenced by Giddens in the nineteen-nineties:

Intimacy implies an absolute democratization of the interpersonal domain, in a way that is all homologated with democracy in the public sphere. Today, there are even more implications. The transformation of intimacy can have a subversive influence on modern institutions considered as a whole. The social sphere, in which emotional realization replaces the goal of economic growth, would be very different from those we have known so far. The changes that now affect sexuality are

revolutionary, not on the surface but in depth. (Giddens, 1992, p. 4)¹²

Contrariwise, in *Grace and Frankie* sexuality issues are treated from a realistic point of view and are respectful of female idiosyncrasy (Lusvarghi and Góis Dantas, 2018; Genovard and Casulleras, 2005). But in spite of these advances, the portrayals have obvious limitations. In its analysis of the series, Karina Gomes Barbosa delimits these poignantly:

Grace and Frankie is also limited in what they let us see: what it shows is female seniority. Of white, upper class, educated, successful, straight, Anglo-Saxon women (Frankie is Jewish). They have iPhones, cars, computers and two houses. Ex-wives to successful lawyers, they will receive allowances that will help them maintain their life standards. This representation excludes a significant portion of old aged women, which takes into account race, colour, social class and sexual orientation, but also as far as family is concerned. There is no room in the show for the representation of old women alone, without children and without family. (Gomes Barbosa, 2017, online version)¹³

Focusing mainly on the model created by Grace/Jane Fonda, we cannot but agree with the author's analysis, which does not annul any of the reasons for viewing the series. On the other hand, we consider that the rupture of stereotypes can, and should, begin precisely within the conventional narrative structures, directed at heterogeneous and massive audiences, which may thus question the prevailing values. On this aspect, let us recall the view of Christine Gledhill, specialist in genre and film studies, from the University of Sunderland – England, for whom the convergence of psychoanalysis and film has been problematic for feminism(s) because it has been theorized largely from the perspective of masculinity and its constructions. In cinema, in

¹¹ Our translation. The original: "En la historia del cine, en general, la corporeidad femenina reproduce el modelo de rol femenino clásico como objeto sumiso y de goce 'voyeurista' de la mirada masculina, la cual desea un cuerpo femenino joven y desdeña al viejo al tener 'poco que ofrecerle'. Así, los cuerpos femeninos viejos devienen prácticamente invisibles en el cine. Con ello, la representación de la sexualidad femenina en la vejez, literalmente, desaparece: si por el cine fuera, creeríamos que, a ciertas edades, las mujeres no tienen ni desean vida sexual."

¹² Our translation. The original: "La intimidad implica una absoluta democratización del dominio interpersonal, en una forma en todo homologable con la democracia en la esfera pública. Hay todavía más implicaciones. La transformación de la intimidad puede tener una influencia subversiva sobre las instituciones modernas consideradas como un todo. La esfera social, en la que la realización emocional

sustituye a la meta del crecimiento económico, sería muy diferente de los que hemos conocido hasta el presente. Los cambios que afectan ahora a la sexualidad son revolucionarios, no en la superficie sino en profundidad."

¹³ Our translation. The original: "*Grace and Frankie* também é limitado no que nos deixa ver: o que visibiliza é uma velhice feminina. De mulheres brancas, de classe alta, educadas, bem-sucedidas, heterossexuais, anglo-saxãs (Frankie é judia). Elas têm iphone, carros, computadores e duas casas. Ex-mulheres de advogados de sucesso, receberão pensões que ajudam a manter esse padrão. Essa representação exclui uma parcela significativa da velhice feminina, tanto no que diz respeito à raça, cor, classe e orientação sexual, mas também no que diz respeito à família. Não há espaço, no sistema de representação do seriado, para mulheres velhas sozinhas, sem filhos e sem família."

this author's view, the idealistic, fetishist, or voyeuristic situations in which women are usually placed have reinforced the theory that female images do not represent women, but rather the patriarchal unconscious and, in particular, the gaze behind the camera. According to psychoanalytic film theories, the classical narrative reproduces these psycholinguistic and ideological structures, offering an illusion of unity, fullness and identity, which the viewer must assume in order to participate in the pleasures and in the meaning of the text.

In Gledhill's opinion, the synthesized arguments attracted feminists for their power to explain alternate misogyny and the idealization of female representations in film, but they also provided very negative characterizations of women as spectators, suggesting colonized, alienated or masochistic positions of identification. The fact that concepts such as "cinematic voyeurism" and "fetishism" serve as the norm for the analysis of the narrative of classical cinema would have also hindered the fulfilment of a psychoanalytic film theory about the feminine that could overcome the notions of "lack," "absence" and "other."

The psycholinguistic location of the feminine within the repressed process of signification has led to the defence of avant-garde movements and deconstructivist texts as a means of contesting the patriarchal system and exposing the mechanisms of the mainstream narrative. By refusing stable identification points, the spectator is invited to interact in language, form and identity. However, Christine Gledhill argues, along with Teresa de Lauretis, that these processes do not counteract positioning problems:

While the political avant-garde audience deconstructs the pleasures and identities offered by the mainstream text, it participates in the comforting identity of critic or *cognoscente*, positioned in the sphere of the 'ideologically correct' and the 'radical' – a position which is defined by its difference from the ideological mystification attributed to the audiences of the mass media. This suggests that the political problem is not positioning as such, but which positions are put on offer, or audiences enter into. (Gledhill, 1988, p. 66)

According to Christine Gledhill, creating an avant-garde alternative implies restricting

feminist cinema to a niche market in which only representatives of an intellectual elite circulate, while ignoring the desirable possibilities of resistant reading within the dominant structures themselves. In this perspective, meanings are not entirely fixed and transmitted by the will of the communicator; they also result from textual interactions formed by a series of economic, aesthetic and ideological factors often unconscious, unpredictable and difficult to control.

For this author, languages and cultural forms are universes in which countless subjectivities are connected, which in turn impose, challenge, negotiate or displace identities. The figure of the woman, the gaze of the camera, the gestures, and the signs of human interaction are not finally given once and for all to a particular ideology – the unconscious or any other: "They are cultural signs and therefore sites of struggle; struggle between male and female voices, between class voices, ethnic voices, and so on." (Gledhill, 1988, p. 70). Given the existence of various social groups that seek their own identity, contrary to the dominant representations (women, blacks, homosexuals or elements of the working classes), the need for negotiation of articulated, recognizable and respectful self-images arises:

To adopt a political position is of necessity to assume for the moment a consistent and answerable identity. The object of attack should not be identity as such but its dominant construction as total, non-contradictory and unchanging. We need representations that take account of identities – representations that work with a degree of fluidity and contradiction – and we need to forge different identities – ones that help us to make productive use of the contradictions of our lives. (*Idem, ibidem*)

For Christine Gledhill, as well as for us, being a spectator does not correspond to the contact with a cultural or media product and its subsequent linear absorption. Reception suggests discontinuity, flow, and an immense variety of identification positions within the same text, which – we understand – is enhanced in *Grace and Frankie*.

Iconicity and Symbolism

In line with what is proposed by Hans Gumbrecht, in relation to the production of presence or *what meaning cannot convey*, we will

briefly analyse the formal aspects that reinforce the concept of comedy in the series, and which are dominated by the use of light colours, and pastel shades. The type of lighting throughout almost the whole five seasons is done by masses, even in moments of nocturnality – both at the beach when the two protagonists release the tension that corrodes them around a bonfire and taking peyote until they lose consciousness –, the semi gloom reflects reality with a slight change, turning towards the tonal zones (photo 1).¹⁴

It must be clear that, since this is a television series, although it is separated from the format, the construction schemes are not very different from those used in traditional television series, whose constructions always have similar settings (photo 2).¹⁵

The scenes are framed around well-defined settings – the family houses of both couples, at the beginning, the beach house, Robert and Sol's house. All of them describe the personalities of the protagonists; Grace has a completely ostentatious house, with luxury tableware, classical decoration and the placement of all elements entirely equidistant. The living room, for example, is framed in a balanced composition. This can be seen in one of the first scenes, when both she and Robert are sitting in the dining room waiting for their daughters, where the characteristics of their personalities are enhanced.

Frankie's house likewise evokes her way of life. A militant of the hippie movement during her youth, she maintains a vital approach nurtured on those principles. Full of ornaments of alternative and exotic cultures – from the standpoint of American society –, of clear Mexican influence, with representations of male organs boldly displayed, as well as pre-Hispanic masks, Inca tapestries, and statues of other rituals.

On few occasions, open and general plans are used – almost exclusively for the presentation of the beach house by the sea. Angulations and viewpoints are often used descriptively and not dramatically.

The editing is narrative, and alternative when two settings are represented at the same time, and the analytical rhythm is agile, giving the scenes tempo so that the dramatization comes from inside the frame, that is, from the

interpretation and not from the formal elements. On the other hand, the opening credits of each episode already symbolically indicate the progression of events: the marriage of the two couples at the base of the wedding cake, the children on the second layer, the joint life of both couples, Grace with a picture of economic charts of her company, Frankie working on one of her paintings and the men playing golf; the dissolution of their marriages and the wedding of Robert and Sol on the upper layer of the cake, and finally the horizon scanned from the beach, while the cake breaks into a thousand pieces¹⁶.

In the series, the new romantic couple and the two women friends take over their own sexuality at an age when taboos multiply. Thus, they all participate in the revolution of desire, representing a world in which they can take whatever they want, say whatever they want to say, and express desire without fear for their physical safety or reputation. What feminism claims is precisely that: to be free to choose and to construct one's own self in all aspects. The characters in *Grace and Frankie*, therefore, promote healthy relationships, even if not idyllic, while freeing themselves from the myth of romantic love.

Final considerations

This series shows the problems that mature women face in a world in which youth and superficiality have become the dominant doctrine. This rupture allows for the exploration and deepening of new territories, marginal in most North American television representations, in which women become aware of the world they live in and decide to find their own voice in it. However, this requires deciding the potential of their age: where are their bodies at this point, where are their minds and what does that imply? That level of self-awareness allows them to build a vision of themselves as women, which leads them to break some of the dominant gender roles and prejudices. That perception of their own uniqueness allows them to judge less and to empathize more; in short, they get freer.

Having said that, the construction of one's identity is generated thanks to the blossoming of the friendship between Grace and Frankie, and it

¹⁴ Grace and Frankie at the beach (season 1, episode 1). Consulted in: <https://cinebee.in/search?query=grace+and+franckie> (17/12/2019)

¹⁵ Beach house S5/1. Source: <http://www.aescotilha.com.br/cinema-tv/olhar-em-serie/grace-and-frankie-quinta-temporada-resenha/> (consulted on 17/12/2019)

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=172YPvsA3Rg>

is this process precisely that dismantles the patriarchal discourse from at least two viewpoints: the ideal of beauty as framed by the limits of a woman's age. On the one hand, as we have seen, they rebel against the ideal of beauty imposed by traditional patriarchal narratives. On the other hand, despite the fact that both the physical condition and memory deteriorate as a consequence of age, both characters maintain an overflowing enthusiasm, which in no way corresponds to the dominant patriarchal stereotypes. Finally, as we have shown, something similar happens with the conception of sexuality: the series breaks the dominant model once again. Desire is no longer an obstacle to reputation; now the authenticity of the individual prevails over social prejudices.

However, the relation of friendship around which the entire series is articulated, from a narrative standpoint, does not run on the affinities of both women, since they are completely different. Tremendous differences separate them, but something greater unites them: their status as women. This message is displayed, as we have seen, in a commercial series that reaches out to different audiences and thus presents a considerable potential for reproducing feminist models. The balance achieved between dramatic and humorous moments, as well as the linearity of their narratives, makes this message as bound to be universally accepted.

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Biographical notes

Ana Catarina Pereira is Assistant Professor at the University of Beira Interior and PhD in Communication Sciences (Cinema and Multimedia) from the same university. She was Director of the Bachelor of Science in Culture (2017 – 2109) and member of the *Comissão para a Igualdade* at this University. Researcher at the LabCom.IFP Centre, she has a degree in Communication Sciences from the Nova University of Lisbon and a Diploma in Advanced Studies in Human Rights from the University of Salamanca. She is also the coordinator of the SOPCOM Film Studies Work Group.

She has worked for several years as a journalist and has collaborated with *Notícias Magazine* (*Diário de Notícias*), the *I* newspaper, *Focus*, *Up* (TAP group), *Saber Viver* or *Happy Woman* magazines, among others. She was the co-founder and director of the online *Magnética Magazine*. She is the author of the books “A Mulher-Cineasta: Da arte pela arte a uma estética da diferenciação” [The Woman-Filmmaker: From art for art’s sake into an aesthetic of differentiation] (2016) and the “Estudo do Tecido Operário Têxtil da Cova da Beira” [Study on Cova da Beira Textile Workers] (2007). Co-organizer of “UBICinema 2007/2017” (2017); “Geração Invisível; Os novos cineastas portugueses” (2013), [Invisible generation; The new Portuguese filmmakers], among others. She is the author of several scientific articles published in national and international journals. She has presented papers at several conferences, training workshops, and master classes in Brazil, Spain, England and Sweden, among other countries. Her research lines focus on feminist, film studies and cultural studies, pedagogy of the arts, Portuguese cinema and other minority cinematographies.

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4066-7486>

Begoña Gutiérrez San Miguel is University Professor at the Sociology and Communication Department of the University of Salamanca (Spain)

The research lines revolve around topics related to the audiovisual narrative language, with gender and cinematography issues. She has several publications on the aforementioned research topics in book format, articles and digital support. She has been part of the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of Salamanca (CEMUSA) for more than a decade; Member of the Association The Association GENET / Centre for Human, Social and Legal Sciences (CCHS, CSIC), of Gender Studies (Madrid-Spain). She lectures, among others, at the Master's Degree and in the Interdisciplinary Gender Doctorate at the University of Salamanca (Spain), at the University of Experience, with gender issues, and also in the Radiotelevisión Española Institute (IORTVE, 2006- 2009). She is also a documentary filmmaker, and her most recent work is “Inés Luna Terrero, vida y legado” [Inés Luna Terrero, life and legacy] (2018).

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1254-258X>