

# Creating a patchwork of unruliness: The grumpy old woman as affect alien

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## Abstract

Narratives on ageing are deeply entangled with discourses on happiness. This article draws on Sara Ahmed's critique on the disciplinary dynamics of the promise of happiness to explore how happiness scripts make certain 'happy objects' such as beauty aspirations, sexual desires, and life choices seen as 'right' for older women and others as 'wrong'. My aim is to contribute to new feminist theorisations of women's ageing by exploring the unhappy archives of older women and looking for ways in which normative happiness scripts are challenged, destabilised and rewritten. Articulations of resistance are found through interpretative engagement with representations of older women who feel alienated by the 'right' happy objects, deliberately make 'wrong' object choices or turn the 'right' happy objects into tools to dismantle ageist, sexist and heteronormative structures. These resistance strategies come together in my theorising of the grumpy old woman as affect alien and a patchwork of unruliness.

## Keywords

happiness, later-in-life sexuality, media representation, unruliness, women's ageing

## Introduction

Discourses on ageing and old age are deeply entangled with discourses on happiness. Although views on how happiness evolves throughout the life course differ, they are often expressed in clear-cut mathematical models and graphs that visualise the relationship between age and happiness. Previous predictions commonly resulted in a slippery slope in which ageing is – especially for women – seen as a linear and irreversible trajectory to decay, loss of sexual desire, and unhappiness (Greer, 2018 [1993]; Gullette, 2004). However, in the last few decades, this narrative of decline is giving way to an alternatively formed and more rosy picture of later life. In his book, *The Happiness Curve*, Jonathan Rauch (2018) proposes a U-shaped model of happiness – that fittingly resembles a smile – to explain why life gets better after 50. After life satisfaction starts to decrease in people's 20s and 30s, and hits rock bottom in the midlife, it rises again until their 80s because of less pressure to reach competitive goals and more time to value simple things, such as spending time with grandchildren, hobbies or volunteer work. These assumptions seem to be in line with the narrative of successful ageing that is increasingly articulated in media, academic and biomedical discourse, and associates old age with an active and fulfilling social and sexual life (Depp and Jeste, 2006; Neugarten et al., 1961; Rowe and Kahn, 1997). Even if there is nothing wrong with wishing for a healthy and happy old age, the road to this haven is overflowing with tips on how to discover the secret of eternal youth and scholars have highlighted that the upswing of the curve is reserved for a privileged group of people (Katz, 2001; Sandberg, 2013).

Amidst all these models that tell us how happiness can and should be reached, Sara Ahmed (2010) introduces a more critical formula in her book *The Promise of Happiness* – one that pins down the disciplinary aspects of the cultural imperative to be happy. According to her, the promise of happiness takes the form of a simple conditional statement: 'if you have this or have that, or if you do this or do that, then happiness is what follows' (2010: 29). Happiness is often presented as a destination, but not

all paths arrive at this endpoint. It is here that exclusionary mechanisms come into play. Ahmed explains that reaching this state has a lot to do with being oriented and close to the 'right' happy objects. Objects can be 'physical or material things', but also 'values, practices, styles, as well as aspirations' (2010: 29). While some of these will lead to happiness, others will end up in unhappiness. In this way, the imperative to be happy is based on 'ideas of who is worthy as well as capable of being happy "in the right way"' (2010: 13). Happiness creates scripts for how to live well. These scripts are often gendered, heteronormative and provide a set of instructions for what women and men must do in order to be happy. Although Ahmed mainly focuses on happiness scripts in relation to gender, sexuality and ethnicity, in this article, I would like to bring attention to the age dimension of happy objects that is intersectionally connected to gender and sexuality. Previously scholars have noted how scenarios for happy ageing make certain ways of ageing valuable and others not (Sandberg, 2008). The 'right' happy objects usually fit in a framework of 'anti-ageing' (Katz, 2001), 'non-ageing' or 'agelessness' (Sandberg, 2013) based on a neoliberal consumerist ethos. This narrative turns non-ageing and staying healthy into an individual responsibility or moral duty. Neoliberal governments conveniently use it to cut social benefits, dismantle support systems and scale down protective measures for older citizens who are not considered 'productive' anymore. The disciplinary logic especially targets women and values an idealised heterosexual form of youthful femininity (Chivers, 2011). The happy ageing woman is constructed as a woman who does not show any visible signs of ageing (Fairclough, 2012; Twigg, 2004). Happiness is found in pots of anti-ageing cream and other cosmetic products that conceal, counter or prevent wrinkles and other physical signs of ageing. Some of them even promise that the skin does not have to 'pay the price' of being happy by erasing wrinkles that can appear after the repeated action of smiling (Adamiyatt, 2021). In this way, joy can be expressed even more joyfully. What is more, happy objects seen as appropriate for women change with age. This involves normative beliefs on whether older women should still have sex, the types of sex and sexual desires valued, and how their life paths should unfold (Katz and Marshall, 2004). Those who are queer, disabled, or cannot keep up with the demands of anti-ageing are considered bad, abject, failed, or unsuccessful (Sandberg, 2008) and portrayed in media as unhappy, depressed and miserable (Krainitzki, 2015, 2016).

My research starts with an exploration of these unhappy archives of older women. With Ahmed's (2010) recognition of the revolutionary potential that can be found in feelings of alienation by the promise of happiness in mind, I believe this is an ideal point of departure to look for older women who subvert dominant happiness scripts. These unhappy archives contain discourses that challenge social norms on ageing, gender and sexuality and are spread over different media types such as films, television series, cartoons, digital platforms, photography and embroidery. My analysis is based on critical, contextualised readings of a selection of representations that will function as 'companion texts' (Ahmed, 2017: 16) that enable us to 'proceed to a path less trodden'. By doing so, I aim to contribute to changes in feminist theorisations of gender, sexual desire and ageing. I do this, first, by picking up where most studies on the representation of older women in media leave off, which is the conclusion that older women are typically portrayed as unhappy and this is something to be avoided, and adding extra layers of depth to older women's expressions of unhappiness. And, second, I highlight the value of affect theory and, in particular, Sara Ahmed's ideas on the promise of happiness, to gain more nuanced understandings of the representation of older women's affect and possibilities for resistance.

The article is structured as follows. After examining the unhappy archives of older women, I will discuss strategies of resistance that start from feelings of alienation and not fitting in the dominant happiness scripts. I will then move on to older women rebelling against narrow happiness scripts by deliberately making bad object choices and having joy in doing so (without worrying about newly formed wrinkles). Finally, I will share examples of older women turning the 'right' happy objects into tools to dismantle

the system and to create disturbances. These resistance strategies will come together in the final part of the article in a patchwork of unruliness and a revolution of grumpy old women.

### **An archive of unhappy older women**

After discussing the coercive aspects of happiness, Ahmed (2010: 17) wonders: 'Can we rewrite the history of happiness from the point of view of the wretch?' The assumption behind this question is that those who are excluded from or feel alienated by the promise of happiness and who 'enter this history only as troublemakers, dissenters, killers of joy' can 'provide an alternative history of happiness'. All these considerations come together in her concept of the affect alien. The affect alien is defined as someone who feels out of place because the 'right' happy objects do not bring them happiness or who feels happy about objects which are seen as 'wrong'. By doing so, the affect alien can even prevent the happiness or spoil the joy of others. After defining the affect alien, Ahmed (2010) exemplifies its application in the figure of the feminist killjoy, the unhappy queer and the melancholic migrant. I want to add a fourth group to this collective of affect aliens: the grumpy old woman. Let us delve into the archive of unhappy older women to explore how grumpiness can be a form of unruliness.

Older women are frequently represented as unhappy, sad or depressed in the media (Dolan and Tincknell, 2012; Hant, 2007; Segal, 2014). However, it is remarkable that this is predominantly depicted as an affective response towards their own bodies and appearance (Bouson, 2016; Segal, 2013; Vares, 2009). A common way in which this is portrayed is by using the technique of mirror shots, in which an older woman becomes deeply sad when seeing her reflection and feels alienated by her older body that does not correspond with her younger self-image. Chivers (2011) refers to an example of an iconic scene in the film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962, dir. Robert Aldrich) in which Jane, an ageing former actress, accidentally meets herself in the mirror and responds with shock, horror and deep sadness. Dolan (2020) adds that costumes and make-up highlight women's cognitive and physical decline even more by showing them as not able to take care of themselves, whereas older men are presented as intelligent, experienced, charming and well-dressed. Furthermore, Montemurro and Chewning (2018) note that women are shown as sad and lonely because they do not have friends, partner(s) or sexual contacts, which reinforces the idea that they are not sexually desiring and desirable.

Although it is important to uncover how repetitions in representations of unhappiness, decline and loneliness construct a limited view of women's ageing, research usually stops at this conclusion. I believe, however, that the unhappy archives of older women are more complex and also contain the seeds for resistance. Ahmed (2010) draws on Marylin Frye (1983: 2) to explain how 'rebellion can be enacted' in expressions of sadness because 'oppression involves the requirement that you show signs of being happy with the situation in which you find yourself'. These expressions can be found in representations of older women whose feelings of alienation are not oriented towards their own bodies but rather towards ageist, sexist and heteronormative structures and norms regulating how they should look, love, and live their life.

Negative affect, feelings of dissatisfaction or unhappiness expressed by older women are often categorised as 'grumpiness'. Media representations of older women who are bitter, mean, complaining, grumpy, whiny are seen as demeaning, insulting and stereotypical (Lemish and Muhlbauer, 2012). In several ways, ageing women are warned about the danger of becoming a grumpy old woman and encouraged to avoid this at all costs. An article in the Belgian weekly lifestyle magazine *Knack Weekend* (2013) proposed '10 tips for preventing wrinkles' and made a connection between 'grumpiness' and 'ugliness' by stating that looking angry and frowning will create two wrinkles

between the eyebrows that can be warded off by not having these facial expressions. Advertisements for Botox treatments promise to soften a frown or an angry appearance when prevention is no longer an option (Potomac Plastic Surgery, 2015). And AfterFiftyLiving (2018) published an article for women with 'a few ideas to help protect your retirement years from being tarnished by grumpiness'. Besides keeping a youthful attitude and other tips, older women were encouraged to 'leave criticism to others' because 'real happiness' can only be achieved 'by keeping a positive attitude'. Messages like these are perhaps a reason for frown lines between the eyebrows and grumpiness in older women who feel alienated by normative ideals that conflate beauty with youthfulness, health and life satisfaction. In the next section, I will further develop my argument that, instead of something to be avoided at an older age, grumpiness can be embraced in a strategy of resistance against dominant happiness scripts.

### **The grumpy old woman as affect alien**

How can we recognise the grumpy old woman as an affect alien? Grumpy older women are often presented as being negative and expressing this through whining, complaining, grumbling and killing the joy of others in this process. In her blog post about 'Feminist complaint', Ahmed (2014b) explains how 'anti-feminism is a structure of hearing, a way feminists are eliminated from a conversation; a way certain forms of critique are dismissed in advanced of being made'. In a similar way, I believe ageism functions as 'a structure of hearing' that eliminates older women from the conversation and discourages them from making critical points. By positioning their complaints as a side effect of the ageing process, it becomes legitimate not to listen to them and to remain ignorant to the core of their critiques, which touch on structural injustices at the intersection of age, gender and sexuality.

However, the grumpy old woman as an affect alien, does not care about these reactions and even experiences a sense of pleasure in going against the flow. In this way, grumpiness can be a form of unruliness. The concept of the unruly has been used by several scholars to refer to the disciplining working of power that constructs particular desires, sexualities and life paths as valid, normal and accepted, and others as marginal, unruly and inappropriate, as well as to highlight the potential of resistance in unruliness (Bracke et al., 2017; Gopinath, 2018; Halberstam, 2011; Rowe, 1995). Unruly women disrupt norms, rebel against restrictions, stubbornly go against the grain and do not follow the beaten path. Grumpiness is a feeling that emerges from older women's repeated experiences of norms regulating their sexuality and sexual desirability, and the constant pressure to be happy in 'the right way' later in life. It becomes directed outward and used as an active form of subversion and a means of refusing their subordinate place in society in several ways.

Besides vocally expressing disapproval and dissatisfaction in the form of complaining and speaking up about sexism, ageism and other inequalities, there are nonverbal signs, subversive gestures and affective dispositions such as eye-rolling, frowning the eyebrows, and sighing to articulate feelings of grumpiness. Ahmed (2017) describes how eye-rolling can be a way to show disagreement with unfair situations and mark boundaries that should not be crossed. Even if rolling the eyes can be done without speaking a word, it can turn into a language that those experiencing similar feelings of oppression can speak to each other and a way that the body copes with mistreatment (Hajjar, 2019). With this in mind, I started my search for representations of older women who are perceived by others as just very grumpy and almost not listened to, but who are rolling their eyes at oppressive structures around them and frowning their eyebrows at restrictive rules regulating their lives. This is the archive of older women who feel out of place with what is supposed to make them happy and propose ways of dismantling the current happiness scripts.

## Not feeling happy about the 'right' happy objects

In the film *Hannah Free* (2009, dir. Wendy Jo Carlton), we follow the experiences Hannah, a woman in her seventies, in a nursing home in Michigan. Hannah's lifelong partner Rachel is staying in the same retirement home, but she is in a coma and Hannah is not allowed to see her. There are flashbacks of their love affair that started when they were little. While Rachel followed a life path in line with social and heteronormative expectations and married a man, raised twins and kept her love for women a secret, Hannah had a more queer life path of travelling the world and openly having affairs with multiple women. The discrepancy between their 'happy objects' created tensions in their relationship. In moments of quarrelling, we see that Rachel is sad because Hannah does not stay with her, while the idea of staying in one place makes Hannah deeply unhappy. In one of her letters to Rachel, Hannah asks: 'What's so wrong with wanting to see the world? I can't spend my life just looking out one window.'

However, now that Hannah is in the retirement home, the only thing that brings her joy is having at least a window with a view over a parking lot. Since she is not mobile anymore, she is stuck to her bed between the four walls of her room. Several people visit Hannah to make judgements about the kind of emotions she should experience. For example, Rachel's daughter prohibits her from seeing Rachel because she would upset her. The staff also refuse this because they think it would upset them both. The nurses try to 'do good' things to cheer her up, such as reading her letters out loud (even when she is capable of reading) and bringing her orange juice (but she is allergic to it). A religious woman wants to save her by convincing her to get on the right path to Jesus. When Hannah responds to all these gestures with eye-rolling, frowning brows, sarcasm and grumpiness, these are seen as inappropriate reactions that are out of tune, ungrateful and ruin the positive atmosphere. One of the nurses even threatens to bring her emotions back in tune with medication: 'Don't get yourself all ruffled, or I will have to give you something.' Hannah's grumpiness is explained by factors that are within her control: because she does not want to get dressed and join the other people, does not sleep well and refuses to grab the hand of salvation and know Jesus. Hannah becomes an affect alien. The happy objects in the nursing home that bring joy to the other residents, such as playing board games, doing puzzles, painting still lives, praying and breathing exercises, do not give her pleasure. Since being with her female partner is not recognised as an appropriate happy object, her grumpiness is not recognised as a legitimate emotion: 'They think I'm just flapping my gums to stir up a breeze'.

In her book, *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed (2017: 135) describes how the 'hardenings of histories' can become 'barriers in the present' or 'brick walls'. For example, for those who are not straight, heteronormativity can be experienced as a wall: something solid that stops you from getting through. In retirement homes, these walls can become actual physical walls again. In Hannah's case, heteronormativity, ageism and sexism all come together in the four walls of her room, separating her from her lifelong partner. Ahmed (2017) makes an analogy between a norm and a room or a dwelling because it gives residence to bodies. Those who inhabit the norm feel comfortable and at home because surfaces have already taken the shape of their bodies. Hannah does not inhabit the norms of the heteronormative retirement home. Her queer body does not sink softly into the bed in which she is lying, it is uncomfortable and feels out of place, awkward, unsettled.

These feelings of alienation are frequently articulated in studies and documentaries on the experiences of older queer women in retirement homes (Furlotte et al., 2016; Godemont and Dewaele, 2004; Hovey, 2009; Hughes, 2007; White and Gendron, 2016). In the documentary, *Dus ik zweeg* (So I was Silent, 2016, dir. Leen De Wispelaere), older lesbian, bisexual and trans women share their experiences with care homes and the misrecognition of their desires and relationships. For example, a female

partner who visits a female resident is confused for a sister or not informed about the death of her lifelong partner, and there are homophobic reactions from care workers or heterosexual inhabitants. In retirement homes, there are restricted ideas about what are appropriate happy objects and what is out of place. And although recently there has been increased recognition of sexuality as an important element in the happiness of older people in care homes, in media representations of later-in-life love, brochures and posters, we typically see only heterosexual monogamous couples (Het Journaal, 2019; Van Gils en Gasten, 2018; Woonzorgweb, 2015).

In *Hannah Free*, this misrecognition ends up in resistance. At the end of the film, Hannah gets help from Rachel's granddaughter to revolt against the walls of her room and bring her to Rachel's room. She is the only one who understands Hannah's unhappiness and empathises with it because she is not allowed to bring her lesbian partner home to dinner. They find solidarity and a queer kinship in their feelings of unhappiness and alienation from the promise of happiness. This forms a 'connecting tissue' (Ahmed, 2017: 79) that results in disobedience and rebellion against restrictions and creates 'wiggle room' (2017: 173) for Hannah to say goodbye to Rachel. While in most films, older queer women are presented as unhappy, sad and lonely because they did not follow the 'right' path that will end up in happiness, *Hannah Free* is different in the sense that it shows how unequal structures are leading to feelings of alienation and unhappiness in older queer women.

There are also older women who deviate from the path of making others happy by consciously causing trouble and disturbance. In the film *Grandma* (2015, dir. Paul Weitz), we follow feminist poet and academic Elle on a road trip through Los Angeles to get her granddaughter Sage the money for an abortion. She has no patience for bullshit. On their road to collect the money, Elle kills the joy of several people who are standing in the way of helping them. When she is asked to leave a coffee shop because of talking loudly about abortion and disturbing the peace of a heterosexual couple at another table, Elle decides to speak even louder about the abortion clinic that used to be in the building. After that, she kills the joy of the boy who made her granddaughter pregnant because he does not want to pay. She is constantly rolling her eyes at unfair systems that keep women suppressed and is proud of her 'bad' attitude:

Sage: Mom says that you have trouble with people sometimes ever since grandma Violet died. She says that you are philanthropic

Elle: Philanthropic, what?

Sage: No, no wait . . . misanthropic.

Elle: Misanthropic, well, that's an understatement. [grins]

In these representations in the unhappy archives, we find older women who question the promise of happiness, for whom the 'right' happy objects do not bring the warm, fuzzy feeling of contentment and for whom 'don't worry, be happy' is not an option because of an awareness of unequal structures of privilege and oppression. These dynamics result in feelings of alienation, unhappiness and grumpiness, which can be a ground for resistance.

### **The pleasure of making bad object choices**

Although it is important to explore the unhappy archives, there are traces of unruliness to be found in feelings of pleasure and joy as well (Ahmed, 2017). Joy is not the privilege of those who stay within the existing frameworks. In analogy with her discussion of happiness, Ahmed (2014a: 146) argues that

pleasure has a similar imperative aspect as ‘an incentive and reward for good conduct’. This involves moral judgements about ‘good’ or ‘right’ versus ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’ kinds of pleasure. She exemplifies this point by referring to sexual pleasure, which is typically only considered ‘good’ if it is ‘bound up with heterosexuality’ and ‘the fantasy of being reproductive’. And even within this category, as we recall from Gayle Rubin’s (1984) charmed circle, there are kinds of sex that are considered normal (married, in private, monogamous, same generation, bodies only, . . .) and types that are considered not normal (alone or in groups, promiscuous, in public, cross-generational, with manufactured objects, . . .). Ahmed (2010: 222) combines Elizabeth Freeman’s (2010) notion of queer pleasure with Lauren Berlant’s (1997: 12) reflections on the counter-politics of the silly object, to conclude that we have to pay attention to ‘silliness and other inappropriately positive affects’ since ‘the freedom to be unhappy [. . .] would thus include the freedom to be happy in inappropriate ways’.

What counts as the ‘right’ types of pleasure changes according to age and gender. Especially in terms of sexual pleasure, it is a popular assumption that older adults do not or should not have sex anymore (Gewirtz-Meydan and Ayalon, 2017). Older women are considered more likely to lose interest in sex than men, a difference that is typically attributed to hormonal and physiological changes in menopause (DeLamater and Koepsel, 2015). And even in views in which older people still can have sexual interests, there is a very restricted idea of what good/normal sex later in life that is limited to heterosexual functionality and penetrative sex between a man and a woman in a monogamous relationship (Katz and Marshall, 2004). The following examples illustrate the potential for resistance and unruliness in older women who deliberately want happy objects that are not deemed appropriate for them or that they were supposed to give up and have pleasure in making these ‘bad’ object choices.

In 2012, the public service broadcaster for the Flemish Community of Belgium, VRT, aired the TV comedy television programme *Loslopend Wild* (Wild Game, 2014, dir. Charlotte Vanhecke and Pietje Horsten) that consists of various sketches in which different generations of women try to get through everyday life. One of the fragments starts with two older women sitting on the terrace of a tea room having a glass of liqueur. Besides the drinks, they also share experiences from the past:

Woman 1: This reminds me of that time that we came home with one bike . . . in the rain!

Woman 2: Haha, yes, those are such beautiful memories. [wipes away a tear from laughing]

Woman 1: I’m singing in the rain . . . [sings and makes gestures to imitate biking] And didn’t we fall with the bike?

Woman 2: Yes! And wasn’t it that time that Gerard got in your pants? Woman 1: And not only Gerard! [makes a proud expression with the face] Woman 2: Oh, we laughed so much. And you were so drunk!

Woman 1: Me? Completely wasted! But there is one thing that I regret . . . [turns head and shows a bald spot in her hair with a giant tattoo of a penis and the word ‘horny’]

Woman 2: Don’t worry, it will grow back. That is only from yesterday! And wasn’t it fun?

Both: Yes! [start laughing out loud]

This sketch confronts us with our expectations about the ‘right’ happy objects for older women. By drawing on normative ideas that associate partying, getting drunk, and having multiple sexual contacts in the same evening with youth and the assumption that older women would not participate in these activities, we situate these women’s experiences as memories of a nostalgic past. The humorous discharge is based on our discovery that these events ‘only happened yesterday’ which makes us laugh

– slightly uncomfortably – because we were misled by our own stereotypes about older women's happy objects. However, these women would probably not care about what we think about them. Central to the sketch is their unapologetic pleasure in being unruly and having no regrets because they had a lot of fun.

When older women make inappropriate object choices for their own pleasure, their environment often responds with feelings of unease and discomfort. In the documentary *69: Liefde, Seks, Senior* (69: Love, Sex, Senior, 2013, dir. Menna Laura Meijer), eight Dutch men and women over 65 talk about their later-in-life sex lives. In one scene, we follow Jeanne (84), who visits a sex shop searching for the perfect sex toy to add to her collection. In a follow-up interview with the film director, she explains how she enjoys masturbating and having sexual fantasies. When asked if she talks about this topic with female friends, Jeanne explains that her attempts often result in uncomfortable silences and awkward reactions. Many of her female friends believe they cannot have sex anymore because their husband passed away. When she tries to inform them that they do not need a man to have sex because they have two hands, dildos and vibrators that can be used for that, they tell her that this is not 'real' sex. Jeanne disagrees, since she has the most intense orgasms when using a vibrator. Although her friends seem to stick to the happiness track, in which later in life it is only appropriate to value heteronormative sex within marriage, Jeanne writes her own alternative script in which she makes a direct connection between her unruly sexual pleasure and her happiness. When asked how she would define the importance of sexuality, she replies: 'It makes me feel happy, releases tensions, and for this reason, I can have a relaxed life.'

Acting in ways that are considered not age-appropriate can not only result in discomfort of other people but also ridicule, laughter and mockery (Russo, 1999). Older heterosexual women who are upfront about sexual desires or being attracted to younger men become a laughing stock in media representations or are seen as predatory cougars who want to take advantage of younger men (Alarie and Carmichael, 2015; Traies, 2009; Wohlmann and Reichenpfader, 2016). Sandberg (2008) adds that heterosexual women who do not adjust their clothing to age norms by dressing in overtly sexual ways risk being called mutton dressed as lamb. *Outrageous Agers*, a collaboration between artists Kay Goodridge and Rosy Martin, turn this stereotype which is a reason for ridicule and disdain, into a source of play, pleasure and laughter. In one of their performances, *Trying it On*, they walked into Top Shop, a clothing store in the United Kingdom mostly aimed at women under the age of 30 and performed the stereotype 'mutton dressed as lamb' by trying on trendy, colourful clubwear, lycra-stretched sequins, leopard-skin print dresses and shiny skinny leather pants. When looking at themselves in the mirror and taking pictures, they were 'celebrating the carnivalesque fun and ambiguity of the images' (Martin, 2019: 207). These examples show how not following rigid happiness scripts and not choosing the right happy objects does not always have to end in unhappiness. These women are writing their own alternative happiness scripts, find joy in being rebellious, and do not let uncomfortable or negative reactions from their environment spoil the fun but instead, use them to amplify it.

### **Turning the 'right' happy objects into tools to dismantle the system**

Besides creating alternative happiness scripts outside of normative conceptions of old age, sexuality and gender, there are older women who tinker with dominant happiness scripts to change them from the inside out and give subversive meanings to the 'right' happy objects. For the eye that does not look with close attention – which is typical of the way the gaze of neoliberal capitalism and patriarchy glances over older women – it appears that these women are staying on the dominant happiness track while they are actually reworking and rewriting it. They are a thorn in the side of the ageist, capitalist



neoliberal structures and use the dynamics of ageism and sexism that make them invisible in the society and the media against the system. For these older women, invisibility is a revolutionary possibility and an opportunity to create chaos, mess, disturb the peace and joy of those in privileged positions.

There are examples of activist groups for older women where stereotypes about older women in society are used in protest strategies. For instance, Dana Sawchuk (2009) interviewed members of the Raging Grannies, an activist group of primarily older women in their 60s, 70s and beyond that focuses on a variety of peace, environmental, feminist, and social justice issues. They explained how they are aware of the fact that police are reluctant to arrest and drag away older women in protest because it would look very bad in the media. They used this to avoid police interventions in their protest and as a protective function for themselves and others by locking arms and forming a circle around fellow protesters. Omas gegen Rechts is similar group that operates in Germany and Austria. In videos on YouTube, they are shown as dancing and singing in public squares while holding slogans against capitalism, racism, misogyny, fascism and inequality. Although dancing might look in the first instance as a harmless expression of joy, Ahmed (2017: 247) reminds us that dancing bodies are 'bodies that matter' (in Judith Butler's [1993] sense) and 'bodies that have to wiggle about to create space' and form an essential part of feminist liberation.

Also, older women take what are considered the 'right' happy objects and turn them into tools to dismantle the system. They do so by giving the 'right' happy objects a purpose that is very different from that which was originally intended. These 'queer uses' (Ahmed, 2019) blur the boundaries between the 'right', 'good' or 'appropriate' and the 'wrong', 'bad' or 'inappropriate' happy objects for older women. This thin line is articulated in another scene of the documentary 69: Love, Sex, Senior. It starts with a long shot of two groups of women sitting at a table in what looks like the recreational room of a retirement home. At the table in the front, four women are stitching and embroidering. There is a walker next to the table. The audio lets us listen in on the conversation they are having about the people who are sitting in the back:

Woman 1: Oh, they are playing cards. Woman 2: Huh?

Woman 1: The people behind us are playing cards.

Woman 2: Yes . . .

Woman 1: Horrible!

Woman 2: Every Thursday . . .

Woman 1: Yuck! I don't like card games.

After that moment, the camera zooms in on the table. A close-up shows the hands, needle, thread and pillow that the first woman is sewing. Instead of a typical floral pattern or a motif with colourful birds in nature, we see an image that looks like a shot from an erotic film in which a man is standing behind a woman, penetrating her while she is leaning on an ironing board. Both of them have their eyes closed with an expression of joy on their face.

It looks in the first instance as if the woman is contradicting herself by criticising playing cards, a type of activity that is considered appropriate for older people when she is also engaging in one (embroidery is an activity that would be regarded as a suitable pastime for older women). But this is only what is happening on the surface. When taking a closer look, it becomes clear that she is changing the meaning of embroidery from docile to unruly. On photo-sharing platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest, we

find more examples that alter the original use of embroidery as a genteel pastime for women to entirely different purposes, such as expressions of sexual desire, eroticism or emotions such as anger and disappointment. For example, the Profanity Embroidery Group from Whitstable in the United Kingdom makes patterns with words such as 'cunts' and 'fuck off', images of breasts and vaginas or caricatures of political leaders. In their book called *F\*ck Off, I'm Sewing!*, they describe the start of the group as follows: 'a bunch of (mostly) novice embroiderers but accomplished swearers came together to sew, drink and swear. And amidst all the stitching and laughing, friendships flourished and beautiful, irreverent pieces of art were created' (P.E.G., 2020).

It is remarkable in their description that embroidering is explicitly referred to as 'art'. In the book *The Subversive Stitch*, Rozsika Parker (1989) delves into the history of embroidery and refers to the hierarchical division between art that is typically seen as a prestigious, important male activity, and embroidery that is seen as a craft and an expression of femininity that is 'mindless, decorative and delicate' (1989: 6). For this reason, it is often seen as 'devoid of significant content' (1989: 6), and the meanings that are created are 'often entirely overlooked' (1989: 6). Because of its association with docility, love of home, piety, and obedience, it is seen as 'a highly acceptable activity for ladies' (1989: 21). Parker (1989) argues that embroidery is art because it is a cultural practice involving iconography, style, and a social function. She sheds light on how it is used by women to negotiate and escape the constraints of femininity and split the structures that control our society. When bringing this back to the woman in the documentary, it can be a way to express sexual desires in an environment that does not tolerate this, and to disrupt the association of embroidery with the suppression of women's sexual desires by sewing representations of explicit nudes and erotic encounters.

### **From grumpiness to a patchwork of unruliness**

In this article, I explored representations of older women going against power structures to find wiggle room in contexts that are governed by prevailing norms about desires they should or should not have, types of feelings they should experience, and how they should be happy in a way that is appropriate for their age and gender. How can we sew all these different elements together in a patchwork of unruliness?

To start, you will need the following items: a common thread, a pair of sharp scissors and a large fabric of choice. Grumpiness will function as the common thread that keeps the patchwork together. There can be solidarity in eye-rolling and complaining, and a feeling of recognition when others are grumpy about the subtle and often invisible ways in which norms of gender, age and sexuality are controlling their lives. Rather than a stereotype to be challenged or avoided – as it is usually regarded in studies on the depiction of older women in the media (Lemish and Muhlbauer, 2012; White, 2014) – I believe there is subversive power in feelings of grumpiness. In a context in which anti-wrinkle creams, happy heterosexual love and looking young are presented as keys to later-in-life happiness, representations of older women who feel alienated by these narrow happiness scripts and instead find joy in overthrowing oppressive systems are highly necessary. We need more representations of older women who are 'feeling at odds with the world, or feel that the world is odd' (Ahmed, 2010: 168). Ahmed (2010) notes that recognising feelings of alienation in others can contribute to developing revolutionary consciousness. In this sense, it can encourage older women who are feeling as if there is something 'wrong' with them because they do not feel happy about the 'right' happy objects, to see that there is actually something wrong with the norms that decide what should make them happy and what should not.

There is potential for resistance to these norms in older women who are embracing their grumpiness to complain about the unfair systems that decide what and whom they should desire and how they should express intimacy and sexuality – especially older queer women, whose love, in general, tends to be desexualised and who do not fit the idealised heterosexual form of youthful femininity (Chivers, 2011). Just as the words ‘wilful’ and ‘queer’, which were used as pejorative terms to dismiss people who were questioning norms in society, were reclaimed, it can be a political act for older women to retool the negative term ‘grumpiness’, claim it with pride, and use it to question and destabilise ageist, sexist and heteronormative structures. Or in the words of Maxine, a cartoon character of an older woman who is known to speak her mind and for her humorous observations on life created by John Wagner (1993): ‘Don’t worry, be crabby.’ Maxine is known for her grumpy insights on things that annoy her about work, dieting, household tasks, shopping, and retirement while sipping coffee from a mug that says, ‘I love my attitude problem.’

Although articulations of grumpiness are required to loosen the tight knots of structures that shape older women’s sexuality, at some point, it is necessary to cut with sharp scissors threads entangled with normative ideas on beauty, gender, and sexuality that are pulling older women back. Ahmed (2017: 200) highlights the importance of these ‘breaking points’ or ‘moments of snap’ which are the result of ‘not as a single moment of one woman experiencing something as too much, but as a series of accumulated gestures that connect women over time and space’. In this regard, I think it is relevant to explore further the relationship between grumpiness and other affects such as rage and anger that can be associated with these moments of snap. Some authors have already pointed out the revolutionary potential of rage and fury in older women, especially related to menopause, to rebel against oppressive structures (Campioni, 1997; Wassenaar, 2018). Does grumpiness turn into rage at some point? Is there a last straw that leads to a moment of snap? Does rage without any change of the status quo lead to more grumpiness?

The patchwork will be larger than the sum of its parts. Acts of resistance can be as small as a single stitch, but every individual stitch counts. Stitches will turn into patterns. Patterns will transform into a patchwork for which a large fabric of choice will be the base. Ahmed (2017) highlights the importance of small actions that can turn into collective resistance and that ‘moments can become movements’ (2017: 217). Individual moments of grumpiness can be a foundation for collectives. Forms of collective protest can be seen in groups such as Omas gegen Rechts and the Raging Grannies, in which older women’s bodies are moving against the flow and becoming barriers to stop something from moving. The patchwork will serve as a beautiful banner in their protests and the revolution of grumpy old women.

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