Understanding the heterogeneity of ageing through cinema

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Heterogeneity is often quoted as a key hallmark of ageing but rarely spelled out in terms of implications for clinicians and trainees in geriatric medicine. In addition, an emphasis sometimes on the positive aspects of ageing can divert us from the fact that older people can bring lifespan vices as well as virtues in later life, from racism to misanthropy. Equally, we may not avert to the opportunities of later life to find salvation and redemption from earlier unappealing character traits.

This is strikingly demonstrated in Clint Eastwood's late films, *The Mule* and *Gran Torino*. Eastwood produced, directed and played the leading role in both films in his eighth and ninth decades, a further testament to what we have gained from the longevity dividend.

The Mule is a 2018 American Crime drama, based on the 2014 *New York Times* article "The Sinaloa Cartel's 90-Year-Old Drug Mule" by Sam Dolnick recounting the exploits of Leo Sharp, a World War II veteran who became a drug courier for the Sinaloa Cartel in the 1980s. His persona is ascribed as Earl Stone, an award-winning but curmudgeonly horticulturist and war veteran in his 80 s. Estranged from his family, as he persistently prioritised his work over his family throughout his career, this neglect culminates in Earl missing his daughter's wedding to attend a horticulture awards event.

When competition from the internet undermines his horticulture business, Earl faces financial ruin. Desperate for money, he takes up an offer from a guest at his granddaughter's engagement party and ends up running cocaine for a Mexican drug cartel. He evades suspicion from the authorities given his advanced age, race, clean driving licence and lack of criminal history. Paid in large amounts of cash, he uses the money to settle his debts, buy a new truck, renovate

his local Veterans of Foreign War centre and pay for his granddaughter's wedding.

As Earl is trusted with larger and larger shipments, the cartel's route comes under the scrutiny of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Earl becomes known affectionately as 'Tata,' meaning grandfather, by cartel members. In the middle of a \$12 million cocaine shipment, Earl receives news that Mary, his ex-wife, is dying, and he postpones the drug delivery to be with her. They make peace and Earl stays by her side until she passes away days later. After attending the funeral and reconciling with his family, Earl resumes the delivery as both the DEA and the cartel close in on him. Earl continues towards the drop point, but the DEA agents finally catch up with him and arrest him.

In court, Earl pleads guilty to all charges and is sent to federal prison where he returns to horticulture and has finally regained the support of his family. *The Mule* does not attempt to portray the theme of ageing through rose-tinted glasses, Earl is unashamedly or obliviously racist and sexist as demonstrated by his interaction with a black family at the side of the road and his encounter with a lesbian bike gang.

There are many similarities between *The Mule* and Eastwood's earlier, *Gran Torino*. This 2008 American drama film depicts Walt Kowalski as a cantankerous, Korean War veteran, who has recently been widowed after 50 years of marriage. His neighbourhood in Detroit, previously populated by working-class white families, is now home to Asian immigrants largely from the Hmong community. Walt is socially isolated from his neighbours and family: when he begins coughing up blood, he conceals it from his family.

A Hmong family live next door to Walt. Thao, a shy, teenage boy who is a member of the family is bullied by his cousin's gang and is forced into attempting to steal Walt's Ford Gran Torino. When Thao fails in his attempt, the gang attack him but are thwarted by Walt who confronts them with a rifle. In an attempt to show their gratitude to Walt, the Hmong community bring Walt endless trays of home-cooked, traditional meals while Thao's mother insists that he works for Walt to pay off his debt.

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Over time, Walt and Thao grow to respect each other and become great friends. Walt gives Thao relationship advice and helps him to get a job. Meanwhile, Thao's sister Sue befriends Walt and encourages him to join their large family gathering, introducing him to Hmong culture. Thao is attacked yet again by his cousin's gang. In retaliation, Walt attacks one of the gang members at their house and warns them to stay away from Thao. The gang attacks the Hmong home in response with a drive-by shooting and they kidnap and rape Sue.

With witnesses afraid to testify against the gang Walt decides it's time to take matters into his own hands. He locks Thao in his basement for his own protection as he too is eager for revenge. On arrival at the gangs' house, Walt intentionally draws the attention of the neighbours by shouting at and berating the gang members. He then puts a cigarette in his mouth, asks for a light, and puts his hand in his jacket to give the appearance that he is holding a gun. In response, the gang members shoot and kill him in full view of the neighbourhood. The gang members are arrested and the surrounding neighbours come forward as witnesses.

Walt's funeral mass is attended by his family and many members of the Hmong community, following the mass his will is read. Walt leaves his house to the church as per his wife's wishes and leaves his cherished *Gran Torino* to Thao, much to the disappointment of his family.

Both *The Mule* and *Gran Torino* give an honest depiction of ageing, portraying both the positive and negative aspects of older life. In each film, Eastwood's characters are cantankerous, racist and insensitive while both try to redeem themselves in later life, highlighting the reflective nature of ageing. We can draw parallels between both characters and the various social theories of ageing.

We can apply Carstensen's theory of socio-emotional selectivity to Walt's prioritisation of his relationship with Thao, Sue and the Hmong family over that with his own children [1]. He invests more in his meaningful relationships and seeks out positive emotional experiences. In *The Mule* we can see Butler's theory of life course review at play with Earl taking stock and recognising his neglect of his family during his working life [2]. When the opportunity to redeem himself arises, Earl analyses past events and eventually makes the decision to be with his ex-wife Mary in her time of need.

Tornstam's theory of gerotranscendence is demonstrated in both films [3]. In *Gran Torino* it is portrayed with Walt embracing new relationships in later life, he draws on the

wisdom that he has gained from previous life experiences to achieve the best possible outcome for Thao and his family. In *The Mule* Earl demonstrates maturity in his efforts to rectify his previous mistakes albeit in an unconventional way.

Furthermore, these films are a celebration of later life creativity with Eastwood producing, directing and acting in *Gran Torino* and *The Mule* at the age of 78 and 88 respectively. Both films are a testament to the creative gains of later life [4] and possibilities for authenticity and redemption. This is particularly true in 'The Mule,' where Eastwood casts his own daughter as his on-screen daughter making it difficult to avoid drawing parallels with Eastwood's own life.

Earl and Walt's ability to adapt to change throughout their later years is refreshing and is a positive depiction of ageing. However, some things do remain out of reach but the response typifies that of later life: for example, when Earl is asked by the cartel if he knows how to text, he replies only with a cocked eyebrow.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent For this type of study formal consent is not required.

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