Ageing and the Creative Spirit of Women in the Audiovisual Market: The Case of *Olive Kitteridge* (2014)

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Audiovisual production continues to be a challenging profession for women, especially older women. This article uses the four-episode miniseries *Olive Kitteridge* (2014), directed by Lisa Cholodenko and based on the novel of the same name by Elizabeth Strout, to explore the strategies used by women to carve a niche for themselves in a market that is so limited for them. This exploration is followed by a content analysis of the series starring and produced by Frances McDormand, which tells the story of a middle-class teacher in her senior years. Through the application of a gender perspective, contributions from ageing studies or age studies, and an examination of the professional context in which the series was made, this study offers a critical reading both of the process of portraying older women in film and television productions and of their role in the industry; this series is particularly interesting for the dialogue it establishes between the actor/producer's biography and the story of the character she portrays.

Keywords: ageism, HBO, female television, feminist television

Women are slowly breaking into the audiovisual production market, not only as actors, but also as directors, screenwriters, and producers. However, their position in the industry continues to be limited compared with that of their male counterparts, and they still suffer discrimination both behind and in front of the camera. In this article, we seek to show that despite the difficulties women face in the audiovisual industry that are due to both sexism and ageism, they can develop strategies for developing successful audiovisual projects within the mainstream market. These strategies are based mainly on mutual cooperation to optimize individual situations and to promote synergies. Moreover, given that these are

women with a feminist sensibility, for their collaborative productions, they choose narratives that deal with the lives of women and, more specifically, of older women. In this way, they give a voice to stories that are commonly ignored by the industry while exploring their own experiences as mature women. The case study chosen to test this idea was the miniseries *Olive Kitteridge*, broadcast by HBO in 2014. This project involved women with considerable professional prestige, including Frances McDormand, Lisa Cholodenko, Jane Anderson, and, indirectly, the author of the novel on which the series was based, Elizabeth Strout. The ages of these women ranged from 56 to 66 years, a piece of data considered significant both for their professional biographies and for the direction and contextual interpretation of this research.

This series is part of a growing trend in the U.S. television industry, albeit not yet a major movement, of productions written by, directed by, or focusing on women, such as *Sharp Objects* (2018), *Dietland* (2018), *Big Little Lies* (2017), *Insecure* (2016), *Queen Sugar* (2016), *Better Things* (2016), *One Mississippi* (2015), and *Transparent* (2014). Jessica Ford (2018) refers to this trend as "feminist cinematic television" (p. 16) because it involves productions with a strong auteurial vision, a clearly cinematic aesthetic, and an ideological commitment to feminism. *Olive Kitteridge* is the only one of these productions that explores the ageing process of an average woman. This feminist sensibility refers to how these kinds of series negotiate and examine feminist politics and issues beyond binary interpretations, such as profeminist/antifeminist (Sandberg, 2013). This is an important point because the gender readings made of these kinds of narratives tend to leave aesthetic analysis aside (Medina & Zecchi, 2020); they view the productions as either feminist or cinematic, but rarely as both at the same time (Ford, 2018), as if to suggest that a commitment to feminism renders the aesthetic or cinematic dimension irrelevant. This article offers an analysis of both dimensions of *Olive Kitteridge* in the context of an audiovisual industry in which women face extreme difficulties in securing the funding they need to carry out projects of their own.

Methodology

Through the application of a gender perspective and of contributions from ageing studies or age studies, this article offers a critical reading of both the processes of representation of older women in audiovisual narratives, based on the example of *Olive Kitteridge*, and their role in the industry; this series is particularly interesting for the dialogue it establishes between the actor/producer's biography and the story of the character she portrays. The definition of *older woman* is complex, because these days, old age is defined according to a constantly moving threshold that depends on the physical and mental health of the population. For many years, it was associated with the idea of retirement and therefore viewed as beginning at 65.[2] However, this chronological marker has shifted, mainly because of the rise in average life expectancy. In reality, old age is a social (Redondo, 1990) and transhistorical construction (De Beauvoir, 1970). Women of advanced age, specifically older people women who are menopausal (50 and older), are notably absent in the audiovisual industry. Female actors, in particular, as they often point out, face difficulties in finding suitable roles from around the age of 40. The idea of older women, which may include women from 50 to older than 65 years of age, is the underlying theme of this article.

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[2] A standard classification divides old age into four groups: young-old (65–74), middle-old (75–84), old-old (85–99), and centenarians (Carmona, 2012).

Following a brief outline of the theoretical framework related to ageism, the first part of this article maps out the professional context for women in the audiovisual market in the United States and Europe, noting the main problems with an industry that overwhelmingly favors the careers of White males; however, male privilege has also aided the success of other men, albeit in smaller numbers, who do not belong to this dominant ethnic group (e.g., Denzel Washington, Morgan Freeman, Benicio del Toro, and Andy García), while imposing obstacles for women, especially if they belong to ethnic minorities or are of an advanced age. The purpose of this study is to identify the strategies that these women have put in place to develop a product as successful as the series *Olive Kitteridge*, which has been welcomed positively by both audiences and critics and, from a gender perspective, tells a very unusual story of an equally unusual protagonist. The second part of the article offers a close reading of the series, treating TV series fiction as text. We consider this descriptive and qualitative methodology to be most suitable for observing how the issues in the film and television industry described in the first part of this article are reflected in a specific product, using *Olive Kitteridge* as a case study.

Theoretical Approach: Audiovisual Narratives on Female Ageing

Cultural narratives that define ageing processes as something negative have been the subject of intense revision in recent years (Gullette, 2004, 2017) in various academic disciplines. Old age is an important topic on many levels, particularly given that according to 2019 data from the World Bank, 8.9% of the current world population is over the age of 65, and of these, 64% are women (World Bank, 2019). The statistics show that we live in societies with ageing populations, and according to UN forecasts, this is a trend that will continue; it is estimated that by 2050, one of every four people living in Europe and North America will be over the age of 65 (United Nations, 2019). As a result, people in this age group and the social imaginary associated with them are increasingly the focus of marketing strategies (MacGregor, Petersen, & Parker, 2018; Petersen, 2018; Sengès, Guiot, & Chandon, 2019), while many academic research centers are exploring how to improve the lives of seniors. This kind of research is attentive to a future in which older people will play a leading role and to the potential impact of the ageing of the population.

Although many critics argue that ageing has not aroused the same degree of interest in media studies as concepts like gender or race (Port, 2018), it is clear that the literature on ageing and the media has been growing in recent years. Research by Iversen and Wilinska (2018) gives us a good idea of the huge volume of literature that has been published on the question since the year 2000. These two authors analyzed 186 research papers published between 2000 and 2015, from which they drew a series of conclusions. First, they suggested that an interdisciplinary strategy is needed to deal with the problem of how the media contributes to the construction of the social imaginary related to ageing. Second, media analysts should consider the research undertaken in the field of gerontology (Katz, 1996). And third, their research revealed that most studies recognize that ageing is a construct that results in older people being underrepresented or portrayed either too positively or too negatively (Iacub, 2008). This media depiction may have contributed to the underrepresentation of older people (Iversen, Blaakilde, & Wilinska, 2017), which has facilitated a way of thinking that takes little interest in the biological, psychological, and cultural repercussions of ageing (Woodward, 2009).

Ageism, a concept first described by Robert N. Butler (1969) and explored in depth by other authors such as Iversen, Larsen, and Solem (2009), Bytheway (2005), Cohen (2001), Butler (1975, 1980), and Butler and Lewis (1973), was a concern that made what was possibly its first appearance in academic literature in a book by Max Lerner (1957). Lerner recognized that culture had constructed an image of success reserved for the young. This concept is coupled with a "shock of aging," associated by Martin Gumpert in 1949, with the loss of attractiveness, companions, quality of life, and roles considered useful. Herein lies the difference between ageism (i.e., a social perception) and gerontophobia (i.e., a negative self-perception), explained by Palmore (1972).

Ageism is reflected in the existence of stereotypes that discriminate against people merely because they are older. This gives rise to violent behavior of varying degrees of intensity, ranging from disdain to abuse to isolation; this behavior can be classified into three categories: harmful attitudes toward aged individuals, old age, and the ageing process; discriminatory practices toward older people, especially concerning employment; and institutional policies that perpetuate stereotypes about the older population (Butler, 1980).

Ageism also intersects with other categories of discrimination, especially gender discrimination. Older women are not only more vulnerable, but also more likely to suffer violence, given that their life expectancy is longer men's (Kimmel, 1988). As Susan Sontag explained in 1978, there is a double standard for ageing based on sex: Men mature, women get old. This concept of female ageing limits the possibilities for women, especially in the emotional and/or sexual sphere (Bárcena, Iglesias, Galán, & Abella, 2009). A recent study conducted by Wharton (2018) highlighted the existence of stereotypes that continue to persist. For example, older women who had decided to take up outdoor adventuring described feeling that they were challenging gender norms and expectations about them. Ageism and gender even intersect in language because, as Nuessel (1982) has demonstrated, the ways of referring to older women are not only negative, but also constructed through the use of terms that are doubly offensive because they contain misogynist and sexist references in language that is derogatory toward females.

Hegemonic social discourses, including those of the media and cultural industries, portray the lives of older people as a "time of decline, fragility, poor health, dependency, loss of sex drive, social isolation, passivity, a lack of physical attractiveness, and unproductiveness" (Medina, 2018, p. 27). The role of the cultural industries is key because they perpetuate a negative image of ageing: "In contemporary society, characterized by the rule of the image, hedonism, narcissism, and vanity, ageing is uninteresting, even annoying," and the cultural industries fan the flames of ageism because "they extol body politics based on a stereotype of beauty in which youth is the only value possible" (Zurian, Menéndez & García-Ramos, 2019, p. 12). In the cultural industries, old age exists under a kind of self-censorship that erases a body deemed shameful and unworthy of being in public view (Sibilia, 2012; Tortajada, Dhaenens, & Willem, 2018). The media generally emerges as the main force responsible for stereotyping older women (Bai, 2014).

Consequently, cinematic and television narratives rarely feature protagonists of advanced age, and if they do, it is with recurrent ideas such as "reflection on the life they have lived, ambivalent remembrance of the past, anxiety over waning abilities, illness, the approach of death, abandonment" (Genovard & Casulleras, 2005, p. 11). In approaches like these, it is the character's lack of agency that is the main

characteristic. Also common is the use of gags based on physical and/or mental deterioration or of eccentricities or habits associated with old age (Zurian, Menéndez & García-Ramos, 2019, p. 14). Another option is to tell the story of ageing neutralized by a second youth, especially in male characters who show no signs of the passage of time and who appear on screen with roles, attitudes, and even appearances quite different from their supposed age. In other words, the discourse usually alternates between the two extremes of depicting a decrepit old age or an optimistic view that denies the ageing process.

Video Platforms and Older Women

According to various studies, women in the audiovisual sector face a hostile context all over the world (Gaines, 2018; Herbert, 2018; Mennel, 2019; Sarmet dos Santos & Cavalcanti, 2017). The causes behind this process are complex, associated with a patriarchal system that continues to dominate public life and workplaces in the cultural industry. For example, the general expectations about who can direct a film (Brannon Donoghue, 2019) and the disadvantages that women face in accessing financial resources to make films in many countries around the world (Bernárdez & Padilla, 2018; Bisschoff & Van de Peer, 2019; Loist & Prommer, 2019; Perkins, 2019) could be understood as factors behind the gender inequality that exists in the film and television world, along with the stereotyping of gender roles that reinforces an imbalanced system of representation. This situation applies to female actors, but also to female directors, screenwriters, producers, and others. What are the strategies adopted by women to succeed in this context, especially if they are older women? The idea underpinning this study is that they make a conscious choice to work together because they recognize ageism as a disadvantage. Moreover, this industry requires women to work harder and to demonstrate a higher level of achievement in the form of prestigious awards associated with the audiovisual industry and a long career in multiple sectors as producers, writers, directors, and so on.

Despite the impression that women have integrated into the audiovisual market in the last decade on an equal footing with men, the reality revealed by the statistics is disheartening. For example, according to a report conducted on popular cinema drawing on data for the period from 2007 to 2018 (Smith et al., 2019), the presence of women in the audiovisual industry continues to be marginal. Only 4.5% of all film directors, 14.4% of all writers, and 21.1% of producers are women. Moreover, in on-screen representations, women continue to be sexualized and to speak less than men in films, and there are fewer roles for women than for men. And the underrepresentation, invisibility, and objectification of women is twice as bad for women of nonnormative sexual orientations, with disabilities, or who belong to ethnic minorities. If we consider the variable of age, the data are also negative: Only 25% of female roles are for women over the age of 40.

The Women's Media Center recently published a report, *The Status of Women in the U.S. Media 2019*, which analyses the 1,200 top films from 2007 to 2018, and the results speak volumes: Over this period, men, mostly White, directed 93.4% of the films analyzed and have received most of the money spent on audiovisual production. The total number of male directors was 654, compared with 46 female directors. Of these 46, only five were Black women, three were Asian, and one was a Latina (Chancellor, Gray, Hill, & Wolfe, 2019). The data contained in the report related to age and time working between male and female directors also speak for themselves, in line with the findings of other studies (Jennings, 2017). The careers of male directors can last from the age of 20 up to 70 or 80, whereas women generally begin

around 30 and end at around 70. Moreover, women have trouble keeping their careers going over time. For example, over the 12 years covered by the Women's Media Center report (Chancellor et al., 2019), the man who directed the most films was Tyler Perry, with 17 titles; the most prolific female director was Anne Fletcher, with only four. This is because the seven media companies that distributed most of the films in this 12-year period handed the direction of their films to women in very few cases. The studio that hired the most female directors was Warner Bros., with 12, and the one that hired the fewest was Paramount, with three. Nearly 83% of the senior executives of these companies are male, and the gender imbalance is substantial in all the other important positions in the sector. The study concludes that directors are essentially White and male. Only 4% of directors of commercial films in the United States are female. Women direct more films on the alternative circuit than in the mainstream, and when they do, they hire more women to work behind the camera.

Age is another metric that reveals striking imbalances between male and female directors. The most productive age group for both men and women is the 30–40 group, but whereas men in this age group have directed a total of 868 films, women in this age group have directed only 31. On the other hand, although there are 27.8% more female filmmakers in independent cinema, there are far fewer (18.5%) among directors of TV series episodes and even fewer (4.3%) directing the biggest box office successes. The numbers are even lower for Black and Asian female directors (Chancellor et al., 2019).

The situation is similar in European cinema. In a report produced by the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film on the biggest box office successes of 2019 (Lauzen, 2020), it was found that the proportion of leading roles for women has increased, accounting for 40%, compared with 43% for men and 17% for groups. Women are protagonists in 26% of horror films, 24% of dramas, 21% of comedies, 16% of action films, and 5% of animated features. These figures show that big gender differences depending on the film genre. In terms of demographics, this study shows that leading women are younger than leading males; female roles go mostly to women in their 20s or 30s while leading men are mostly in their 30s or 40s. For both genders, leading roles are dominated by young people, with the most common age range for both men and women being the 30s. For age 40 and older, the proportion of roles for men is much higher than it is for women.

The report on European directors (Simone, 2019) published by the Council of Europe's European Audiovisual Observatory, with data covering the period from 2003 to 2018, concludes that women directed only 17% of European films made during the period studied. Half of these female directors made only one film in all those years, compared with 40% of male directors. Women make documentaries more than any other type of film; that this type of film generally requires a smaller budget reflects the difficulties women face in securing the funds they need to make their pictures.

In this far from favorable context for women, video platforms that allow specialized productions targeting niche audiences are facilitating the emergence of female creators in this industry (Maule, 2016). The TV series broadcasted on such platforms (HBO, Netflix, Amazon Prime, etc.) have become some of the most popular forms of entertainment today (Rindel & Pinsolle, 2011). This type of production is closely linked to the fan phenomenon, referring to a mobilization of audience engagement that has constituted a revolution in online viewing. In this successful context, series about older women have been rare, despite

the existence of pioneering work in television such as *The Golden Girls* (1985–1992), which found success with audiences and critics alike, but failed to inspire similar series or consolidate a genre (Van Bauwel, 2018). Female characters have often appeared in TV series merely as substitutes for male characters—female police officers, investigators, and doctors—without their inclusion representing a major shift in the traditional modes of representation.

We acknowledge that the introduction of a wider variety of female characters in television series in recent years has constituted a qualitative and quantitative change for the better. However, this progress can be seen as mitigated by the fact that strong and intelligent female characters are often neutralized in the narrative, employing strategies such as their characterization as socially challenged or as suffering from some psychological disorder (e.g., Carrie Matheson in *Homeland*, Marcella in *Marcella*, and Sara Noren in *The Bridge*).

Our analysis, therefore, focuses less on the representation of women or their place as actors than on the strategies they use to attain important executive roles in audiovisual creation, based on the examples of three successful series: *Olive Kitteridge* (2014), which is discussed next; *Grace and Frankie* (2015); and *Big Little Lies* (2017). *Grace and Frankie* was created by Marta Kauffman (born in 1956), an experienced producer of series such as the highly successful *Friends* (1994–2004), for which she received several Emmy Awards. Kauffman, who studied theatre at Brandeis University, has worked in a range of capacities: as a screenwriter, producer, and executive producer. Its female fans have lauded this hugely successful series for bringing positivity to their daily lives by creating role models for them to follow (Jerslev, 2018). *Big Little Lies* (2017) is an HBO series based on a book by Liane Moriarty (born in 1966). Its adaptation to the small screen was the brainchild of two of its stars, Reese Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman, who were both executive producers. In 2016, Reese Witherspoon (born in 1976), had created the media company Hello Sunshine, proposed as an initiative to support women's projects. Witherspoon is the winner of an Oscar, a Golden Globe, a BAFTA, and a Screen Actors' Guild Award, and she was also a major promoter of the #MeToo movement. Nicole Kidman, born in 1967, has also won an Oscar, two Emmys, a BAFTA, and four Golden Globes. She was appointed Goodwill Ambassador of the UN Development Fund for Women, which aims to put a spotlight on violence against women. All these gender-conscious women have a vast public influence and widely recognized artistic achievements, and all are involved in a diverse range of professional activities. In the second season of *Big Little Lies*, Meryl Streep, another hugely successful mature-aged actress with a significant influence in the industry, also joined the cast.

Finally, *Olive Kitteridge* (2014) is one of the best examples for an analysis of the strategies adopted by women who have dared to take on audiovisual production after the age of 40. The project to make the series was personally initiated by its star, Frances McDormand, born in 1957. She bought the rights to Elizabeth Strout's novel of the same name and pitched the series to HBO. She chose Lisa Cholodenko—born in 1964—to direct it, and Jane Anderson, born in 1954, as the writer and producer; she also chose the rest of the cast. Her awareness of how hard it is for older women to get work in the film industry was very well expressed in an interview: "If I don't look for work myself, like I do in the theatre, who's going to offer it to me? . . . I'm 57 years old, movie offers aren't lining up for me. . . . I'm a supporting star on the big screen" (Belinchón, 2014,

paras. 1–3).[3] McDormand displays a keen awareness of the obstacles faced by women in a world of men: "In movies, a lot of the work I've done was in supporting roles, generally peripheral to the leading man. That's something I'm not prepared to accept" (Belinchón, 2014, para. 3). And she adds in another interview: "I like playing women who are my age. It's kind of political. . . . It's time for us as actors, as women, as mothers, and as an audience to demand stories where we are reflected, not stereotypes" (Ayuso, 2018, paras. 5–11).[4] McDormand thus exhibits a very realistic awareness of her situation as an older woman in an industry characterized by widespread ageism. According to Letort (2016), McDormand's presence in the series helps us to construct the character intertextually based on cultural variables such as gender and age.

As in the cases mentioned earlier, the women involved in this series also have experience in more than one sector of the audiovisual industry. Jane Anderson has worked as a screenwriter 11 times and as a writer and director five times on films for television. She has participated as a producer on four projects and as an actor in another four series. She has also worked as a programming consultant and executive editor. Frances McDormand has worked mostly as a film actor, but she has also worked in theater, in association with the Wooster Group, a theater company based in New York City and directed by Elizabeth LeCompte. Besides, she has worked as a producer. On one occasion, she was asked about what women need most to reduce inequality: "Money. We've got the rest. Give us money, and you'll see everything our talent can do with it" (Olalla, 2018, para. 5).[5] Meanwhile, Lisa Cholondenko has worked as a film, and television director, screenwriter, postproduction assistant, assistant director, editor, and producer, and she is one of the most acclaimed filmmakers in the New Queer Cinema movement.

Another feature common to all these women is that they have all received numerous awards for the work they have done throughout their careers. Lisa Cholodenko has received nominations and prizes for both independent and mainstream films from 1988 through 2015. In 2014, she received the Silver Mouse at the Venice Film Festival, and in 2015, she was awarded the Directors Guild of America's Award for Outstanding Directing for a Miniseries or TV Film, in both cases for *Olive Kitteridge*. McDormand has won two Oscars, one in 1996 and the other in 2017, and she has been nominated on three other occasions. She has also won two Golden Globes of seven nominations, and she has been nominated for four BAFTAs, one of which she won. She has received four Screen Actors' Guild Awards, along with another 10 nominations, and she has won four Critics' Choice Awards of five nominations. In addition, she has won three Independent Spirit Awards and one Satellite Award. Finally, Jane Anderson took home an Emmy in 1993 and has been nominated for another three. Her list of awards is extensive: a Women in Film Lucy Award (2000), two Directors Guild of America Awards (2003, 2008), a Writers Guild of America Award (2008), a Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award (2008), two Ovation Awards (2008), and another Writers Guild of America Award and an Emmy for Outstanding Writing, both in 2015 for *Olive Kitteridge*. Considering all these information, it seems clear that women need to achieve a lot to establish their legitimacy, with long and successful careers in film and television, to be able to secure funds for their productions; they also need a gender awareness that will encourage them to forge partnerships with other women so that they can work together.

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[3] The authors translated these and other statements in Belinchón (2014) from Spanish into English.

[4] The authors translated these statements in Ayuso (2018) from Spanish into English.

[5] The authors translated these statements in Olalla (2018) from Spanish into English.

Interpretation of the Series: Olive and Ageing

The series tells the story of a middle-class woman in New England, a math teacher who lives trapped between two worlds: her austere upbringing and a new social context in which the values she has clung to throughout her life have become problematic for her now that she is entering old age. The character of Olive Kitteridge constitutes a critical view of the castrating mother, humanized, however, by the tragic loss of her conjugal and maternal happiness. Olive is a woman with a rough nature but considerable sensitivity, generally grumpy but with flashes of cheerfulness, a combination of intelligence, irony, and spite in a difficult and often short-tempered character.

After a disturbing opening that shows the protagonist, now an old woman, preparing to commit suicide in a forest, the story takes us a quarter of a century back in time to the comings and goings of a small community whose members are vulnerable in various ways. The script is structured around everyday situations in which Olive, who at first is still working as a teacher, shares with a constellation of characters more than 25 years in a story with a deceptively ordinary feel. The passage of time leading to ageing, dependence, and mental illness is a central theme of a story that deals with suicide, bipolarity, manic-depressive disorders, and hallucinations. As described by Woodward (2009), the character of Olive breaks away from the stereotype of old age, which is replaced by a kind of wise rage that underscores the health problems, financial burdens, and emotional tensions that come with ageing. In this respect, it is important to bear in mind that elderly people are particularly prone to mental health problems and that there is abundant evidence of the relationship between social isolation and mental health (Hunsaker, Hargittai, & Piper, 2020).

Ageing, solitude, illness, and death are elements that articulate this highly unconventional narrative in an audiovisual industry obsessed with happiness and youth, or otherwise with spectacular violence. However, they are elements that are presented quite differently from how they are usually treated in the industry. In *Olive Kitteridge*, death is an inevitable fate, and both solitude and illness are inherent and not necessarily negative aspects of life. At the same time, it is an atypical example of TV consumption in an era characterized by binge-watching of series. As Brooks (2019) explains, not only does it offer a story featuring a rather unpleasant older woman, but its narrative on disappointment is connected to the way the viewing time is articulated. Cholodenko has made formal choices that build a feeling of dissatisfaction and domestic confinement for the viewers, enabling them to accompany Olive and even to establish some empathy with her despite her characterization as a difficult person.

In our culture, sex and age are directly associated with another concept, madness, as a paradigm for conceptualizing anyone who has broken the barriers imposed by his or her gender. Olive is a woman surrounded by mental illness, and she is constructed as a person with a tough nature and an unpleasant manner. This image ties in with an old tradition; "female wickedness is associated with the traditional madness or mental weakness attributed to women for centuries" (Núñez, 2016, p. 55).6 As so much research from a gender perspective has demonstrated, madness has always been the social definition applied to female rebellion, the punishment for women who transgressed norms, especially in the creative

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6 The authors translated these statements in Núñez (2016) from Spanish into English.

sphere. Authors such as Gilbert and Gubar (1979), Basaglia (1983), and Lagarde (1990) have shown that any woman may be classified as insane and that madness can thus be used as a barrier or boundary for any who try to act contrary to the established gender order. Ruiz and Jiménez-Lucena (2003)[7] refer to a "feminization of madness" that operates on all women, regardless of whether they are actually mentally ill, given that historically different parameters have been used to diagnose insanity: A woman who is not submissive and sentimental could be classified as ill, in contrast to the autonomy associated with the healthy male. In the case of Olive, mental illness is imagined and even (re-)appropriated by a character who views it not as a sign of weakness, but as a sign of strength and independence, and even of intelligence.

Olive Kitteridge appears in the story (except in flashbacks) as physically aged, emotionally dissatisfied, and mentally worn out. But although it is a portrait of decline and loss, she is constructed from a perspective of both intellectual and biological autonomy. Olive makes her own decisions, never feels sorry for herself, and is often very hard on the people she loves. She is also a decisive woman with considerable physical capacity. All these attributes make it impossible to view her as a victim. According to Brooks (2019), very few television series have given as much attention to the dissatisfaction of a female character as *Olive Kitteridge*. It does this by using a structure that facilitates the creation of a rising and falling sensation through rather slow rhythms and tones capable of articulating the character's pain and unease. This is a typical high-quality television production: It is based on a Pulitzer Prize–winning book, with a big-name director, cinematographer, and writer and starring a critically acclaimed actor of unquestionable ability and reputation—but it is the aspects described earlier that turn this into a highly original series.

Entis (2014) has described this story as a "story of depression" because each of the characters who interacts with Olive is dealing with some kind of pain or disappointment; they are all wounded and vulnerable, including the protagonist's optimistic husband. Olive herself is defined in the story as the daughter of a man who committed suicide, and not only is she able to see the psychological pain of other people, but she also lives under the constant threat of her own demise, especially when she begins to age. In Cholodenko's series, there is no relief from the unease, the malaise, and the looming threat of death. The TV adaptation uses resources not present in the book to express the abyss that the protagonist is staring into, while allowing for the exploration of her psychological anxiety. Examples include the character's burping (which is especially socially unacceptable for women), and the hunger that Olive often mentions in opposition to her large body, viewed as inadequate and uncomfortable.

In contrast to the characters with major roles in other recent television series, nearly always in a professional setting and generally of a younger age, Olive, whose professional life is over, is shown entirely in a domestic setting—especially the kitchen, but also the garden. And she is also shown in an ageing process that constructs an intimate landscape of her private life and her disappointment. The ageing process is never passive, having a central role from the beginning, through close-ups of her swollen ankles, for example. The script marks out the rhythms of the domestic setting, a space that is rarely valued from a patriarchal perspective. There is considerable risk entailed in depicting a rough and ill-tempered female character in a world whose gender norms require women to be sympathetic and emotionally appealing characters.

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[7] The authors translated these statements in Ruiz and Jiménez-Lucena (2003) from Spanish into English.

Olive is convinced that she is suffering from depression, and she expresses that conviction. According to Estrada (2016), she exhibits many of the clinical symptoms: irritability, impatience, and an almost pathological apathy. However, we lack the information necessary to confirm that her depression is clinically diagnosable, as we can with other characters who interact with her; perhaps she is merely sad or dissatisfied. In this way, what the series explores is not so much illness in itself, but a way of living it (i.e., a particular experience of illness). Yet Olive not only is convinced that she has depression, but also firmly believes that it is hereditary: Her father had it, and her son will end up having it too, reinforcing a personal narrative on depression that is not necessarily consistent with the clinical definition and its treatments. Olive's explanation of her problem seems more a character trait than an illness. She even views it as something positive: "She claims that it is something that goes with being clever, that only 'normal' people are happy and that only intelligent people suffer from depression" (Estrada, 2016, p. 112). She thus upholds a common association of mental illness with intelligence or creativity. And in the process, she establishes a strong, independent character whom nothing can subdue and who breaks away from traditional depictions of the passive, dependent older woman submissive to the desires of others. Just as she demonstrates her physical strength (for example, by carrying sacks of dirt for the garden) and aesthetically bears little resemblance to the stereotypical older woman in a rural setting, she also demonstrates a fiercely independent personality.

The story is not pleasant, but neither is its protagonist. Olive will apologize for being a bad wife, acknowledging to her husband that she made his life difficult, and when she refers to her father's suicide, she recognizes that it is not a good ending because it creates problems for everybody. Nevertheless, suicide looms as a constant threat in the story, and Olive's character seems to possess some kind of sixth sense for detecting people who are contemplating their own deaths (Estrada, 2016). In her case, she chooses death as a practical option, when she believes there is nothing left for her to do, contemplating it not as a victim, but as a natural solution to her interminable existence.

The final part of *Olive Kitteridge* reveals an ending that seems unfair to the only character who seems happy—Olive's always optimistic husband, Henry—but also to Olive herself, as irritable and difficult as she may have been up to that point. In what seems like a punishment for her failure to be the perfect wife whom the patriarchy would have wanted, we see her as the self-sacrificing caregiver, performing a hard and thankless duty without complaint. Such is life, and these things do not only happen but are common: This is Olive's philosophy, as she faces this fate as a consequence of the natural order. The feminist gaze described by Ford appears here at its fullest, gazing on the bleak nature of the physical existence of dependent persons and the women who care for them, whether out of love, obligation, or responsibility.

Discussion

The series analyzed here in light of the data outlined earlier on the status of female creators in the film and television industry reveals that the participation of women in creative projects in the industry is affected by ageism. But equally significant is the narrative ageism that appears in so many audiovisual productions, even many in which some of the prestigious women mentioned here participate. *Olive Kitteridge* is one of the few exceptions because not only is it a product conceived and produced by these prestigious, mature-aged women, but it also tells the story of a female protagonist confronted with the very problems that ageism provokes. And it is perhaps this that constitutes the great exception of the series starring McDormand:

The protagonist is depicted through an ageing and overweight body, far from the aesthetic norm. This is something that does not appear in *Grace and Frankie*, starring an octogenarian Jane Fonda who looks 20 years younger (although the narrative critiques this fact), or in *Big Little Lies*, starring women around 50 who conform to the aesthetic norm. Olive is also willing to express her anger, and in her outbursts of rage, we sense the disappointments of the series' creators themselves with an industry that constantly relegates them to the background. At the same time, despite her problems, Olive is a fiercely independent woman who speaks out against the barriers she faces in a manner that reflects McDormand's own remarks about the problems faced by women—even women with her prestige and position in the film and television industry. On the other hand, the choice of the private sphere to express this disappointment makes this product a clear example of the feminist sensibility being adopted by these women in their work. Finally, the role of caregiver by obligation, which tends to take women away from their professional careers, is revealed here as a call to attention issued by the creators of the series, who thus offer an explicit criticism of what the patriarchy expects of women.

Conclusions

Women are at a disadvantage in the film and television industry, not only in the United States, but in Europe as well. The discrimination faced by women in the cultural industries has multiple causes: The difficulty of access to economic resources, professional routines that favor the hiring of males, entrenched stereotyping of female characters, and other factors contribute to it. Ageism also plays a role in this discrimination; older women constitute a specific group that faces huge difficulties when pursuing projects to work on. This discrimination is present in all sectors of audiovisual production and affects female actors, directors, producers, writers, and others. The television industry has discovered that older women do in fact have a potential audience (Jerslev, 2017, 2018), but this has not definitively changed the profound inequalities in access to funding for productions.

The ageism women suffer can only be overcome with collaborative projects such as *Olive Kitteridge*, through a partnership of women who agree to work together. These women have certain qualities in common. They all have extensive experience in the audiovisual market, working in a wide variety of roles. They are also women who have received numerous prizes and awards for both mainstream and alternative productions, and they all have a high level of training. In addition, they all have a reputation for feminist and gender awareness. This supports the argument put forward in this article that women seem to need to achieve more to establish their legitimacy so that they can continue working in audiovisual production when they are older, and they achieve this most successfully when they partner with each other to optimize synergies. Of course, the results obtained from the analysis of a single work cannot be extrapolated as a general theory. However, our results could constitute the starting point for the design of a methodological framework of analysis aimed at defining the key elements for the success of TV shows about women. Some examples include alliances and partnerships of women behind the camera, the previous success and recognition obtained by the professionals involved in the project, and the development of strong, realistic, and confident female characters in the stories told. We believe that this proposition could be verified empirically with studies of the industry based on interviews with sector professionals.

The fictional series *Olive Kitteridge* is the result of a partnership of women in the industry. However, it also exhibits narrative interests that seem to be given less importance in mainstream projects. These

interests include portraying the ageing process with dignity and realism, offering a space for the concerns of older women, showing the emotional, physical, and mental burdens of caregivers, and doing all this with a character who is never a victim of gerontophobia. Kitteridge feels no self-pity or self-hatred; she accepts herself and even positively constructs her own identity based on her place in the world as an older woman, but also as a woman who is both depressed and irritable.

A critique of ageism slips in amid the ups and downs that mark the story itself: It is impossible to ignore the social censure represented by ageing in the presence of a character like Olive, at once powerful and vulnerable. Exploring ageism, in general, has become a sign of postmodern creativity (Jerslev, 2018; Radner, 2017), and the structures change very slowly because the women who take part in these types of productions have to work long and hard to bring them to light. The team of women behind *Olive Kitteridge* reveals not only the combined efforts and shared agenda of these women in the industry but also the concerns and needs of contemporary women—especially women who have entered an age that is rarely the center of attention in film and television.

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