



Croned

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An experimental exploration of the monstrous old woman—the crone—in mid-century Hollywood films. This video essay considers how cinematic form might act as a tool for revealing and resisting the sexist and ableist notions of old age embedded in the crone figure.





Creator's Statement

The crone. The hag. The psycho-biddy. The Grande Dame Guignol. We are not short on terms for horrific old women. Her image conveys all our anxieties about aging, gender, disability, and death. This essay explores how to reconfigure “croning”—the process of creating older women as horrific—to resist the norms that aging women are subjected to later in life: able-bodiedness, able-mindedness, and youthfulness. Turning to examples from three films—*Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950, starring Gloria Swanson), *Strait-Jacket* (William Castle, 1964, starring Joan Crawford), and *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (Robert Aldrich, 1964, starring Bette Davis)—my essay puts three crones in conversation with each other to ask: what we can learn from the crone figure when we circumscribe her cinematic image to reveal and resist ageism?

This essay draws on a few emblematic examples of “Grand Dame Guignol” films, which, as Peter Shelley describes, stage narratives of older women grappling with a traumatic past, longing for youth, or exhibiting an overly child-like demeanor (2009, 8). I juxtapose the similar social and gestural depictions of three older women in these films, despite their different dramatic contexts: a star who has aged past designated desirability in *Sunset Boulevard*, a woman’s sense of lost time and youth after decades of institutionalization in *Strait-Jacket*, and a woman seemingly frozen-in-time by a traumatic event in her youth in *Hush...Hush Sweet Charlotte*. Despite the rich context and cultural legacy of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Aldrich, 1962), I turn to less-examined Crawford and Davis films to consider how monstrous, gendered conceptions of aging appear elsewhere in their filmographies.

I reframe the monstrous feminine figure of the “crone” as a verb—the active process of “croning”—taking up Margaret Morganroth Gullette’s (2004) description of the

older woman as “aged by culture” (6) and framing the process of aging as “always becoming” (Sobchack 1999, 209). Within the films I feature, in addition to their dramatic material, the actors were made to look older through make-up and styling for their parts: Swanson was 50 years old, Crawford was 49 years old, and Davis was 56 years old at the time of the respective filmings. These films exploit what scholars have attended to as “the ageing female grotesque,” where, as Niall Richardson (2019) observes, an older woman attempts and fails to “disguise the aging process” (4). These films are where the low cultural statuses of the horror genre and older women converge in the crone figure (Chivers 2011, 21).

The psychological and physiological changes that accompany aging are oftentimes viewed in excess of or secondary to gender, as Kathleen Woodward (1991) famously argues about women’s experience of ageism (16). In my essay, I reconfigure the crone to witness her own constructed, gendered monstrosity. This process of bearing witness to herself and others works against the invisibility that has often defined older women’s existence and takes a reparative approach to the monstrosity of the crone figure (Woodward 1999, x–xi). Barbara Creed’s monumental horror studies text *The Monstrous Feminine* (1991) informs discussions of horrific women such as the crone, where inevitably “woman’s reproductive functions mark her as monstrous” (83). For the crone, patriarchal logic has cast her as an abjected figure precisely for her *lack* of reproductive capacity (Gunew 202, 162).

Beyond the crone, scholarship from the past decade has demonstrated an intensified interest in aging on screen. Amir Cohen-Shalev (2012) and Pamela Gravagne (2013) attend to the cultural devaluation and negative portrayals of old age, where cinema acts as a site of struggle for the meaning of old age. Focusing on aging and femininity, Richardson (2019) takes a compelling feminist and queer approach to aging on screen, considering the possibility of reading films to queer “the discursive and gendered construction of age” (25). In my essay, I build on Richardson’s critique of compulsory and curative femininity in old age alongside Chivers’ disability studies approach in *Silvering Screen* (2011). Chivers’ careful consideration of the ways that aging and disability intersect and diverge informs my own approach to a disability studies framework, where “rather than merely read old age as disability,” conceptions of disability and fears of “the body’s failure” in old age can mutually inform the complicated relationship between what it means to be disabled and what it means to be old (22). Taking this nuanced approach to ageism and disability embraces the imaginative nature of many disability studies frameworks and allows for a lens where ableism and ageism act as distinct but overlapping structures.

The formal composition of this essay takes inspiration from Alison Kafer’s theorization of *crip time*. Kafer (2013) *crips* normative and future-oriented conceptions

of queer time through “the experiences of disabled people” (27). Rather than deferring to a “cured” future without disability, crip time embraces new relationships to time in both the present and future. Building on Eli Clare’s (2017) critique of cure, where disabled individuals are “cast as an obstacle to progress” (14), Kafer explores the *productive* possibilities of what it means to be cast “out of time” (2). In each of the films in this essay, the women enact opposing gestural constructions of frailty, violence, and general instability; the women in these films are “out of time” as they simultaneously embody characteristics viewed as grotesquely too young and too old and are seen as villainous yet imperiled. To consider the potential to crip the queer time embedded within these films, my essay deploys my own conception of cinematic crip time as a liberatory mechanism for the crone’s cinematic image by imposing slow, reverse, or stop motion to manipulate the films’ relationships to time and duration, as well as a circular structure that contradicts conceptions of progressive futurity. In this essay’s soundtrack, I also meditate on the sonic manifestation of crip time, utilizing nonlinear expression through ambient noise, reverberation, and tremolo. In my reimagining, I hope to consider how cinematic form might allow us to commune these crones and open the possibility for these women, together, to resist sexist and ableist notions of old age.

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Biography

Rose Steptoe is Ph.D. candidate and teaching fellow in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research focuses on the intersection of feminist film theory and body horror. More broadly, she is interested in genre and horror studies, gender and sexuality, and sound studies.

Review by Hailee M. Yoshizaki-Gibbons, Hiram College

Queering and Crippling Gendered Late Life: A Review of "Croned"

In "Croned," Rose Steptoe challenges the viewer to understand the crone—and by extension, the practice of croning—in new and important ways. The figure of the "crone" historically has sexist, ageist, and ableist connotations, conveying images of the old, decrepit, infirm hag (Payerle 2016). As Steptoe notes, in the film genre of horror, the crone further takes on a psychotic, dangerous, and violent persona as she struggles and fails to deal with her waning youth.

By remixing images and scenes from three films featuring crones—*Sunset Boulevard*, *Strait-Jacket*, and *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte*, the video prompts the viewer to deconstruct this traditional understanding of "crone," and consider how croning fits into the politics of queering and crippling. In her seminal essay, *Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer*, Carrie Sandahl (2003) defines queering as the practice of "putting a spin on mainstream representations to reveal latent queer subtexts; of appropriating a representation for one's own purpose, forcing it to signify differently; or of deconstructing a representation's heterosexism" (37). Relatedly, Sandahl notes, crippling "spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied

assumptions and exclusionary effects” (37). In a similar vein, Steptoe’s video theorizes “crone” not as an object but as a verb, reflecting the ways in which women are “aged by culture” (Gullette 2004). Croning, thus, highlights the ways in which old women queer and crip temporality and challenge the so-called “normal” yet limiting and oppressive expectations of gendered aging. Hence, croning as a practice calls attention to and defies the paradoxical fantasies of old age as a linear progression into frailty, infirmity, and non-(re)productive obscurity and as a time of “successful” aging defined by continued vitality, health, beauty, and able-bodiedness/able-mindedness. Steptoe visually and auditorily accomplishes this form of croning in multiple ways, including the non-linear, circular nature of the images, the constantly changing, cyclical, and unsettling soundtrack and the splicing of individual, normative narratives of the crone into a collective, defiant reimagining.

With this idea of “croning” in mind, I interpreted the representation constructed by Steptoe as a resistance of what I have termed compulsory youthfulness, or the mandate to remain as youthful and non-disabled as possible throughout the life course (Gibbons 2016). While the crones in *Sunset Boulevard*, *Strait-Jacket*, and *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte* initially seem to long for youthfulness, in Steptoe’s reconceptualization, they watch one another with a mix of concern, shock, and fascination as they each ultimately push back against compulsory able-mindedness and youthfulness, the gendered norms of late life, and the violence of erasure. The crones all eliminate those who threaten to control, confine, and condemn them. In doing so, they refuse a descent into invisibility and obscurity, instead centering themselves as women embracing their freedom and personal power in old age.

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Review by Núria Casado Gual, University of Lleida

This video-essay and its critical statement are clearly inscribed in the field of ageing studies and, in particular, they both contribute to enhancing the interconnections between ageism, sexism, and disability that have been reflected in and promoted by emblematic studies of cinematic representations.

The primary sources the video-piece resorts to in its creative interrogation of the effects of age-based discrimination on older women have already been explored by age and film scholars (see, for example, Sally Chivers' pioneering 2011 title, *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Cinema*, in which Chivers identifies the declinist, sexist, and ableist ideologies of classic Hollywood cinema); yet, the powerful effect of juxtaposition favored by the montage of the piece itself contributes to presenting the various cinematic texts as generating a single cinematic discourse that pervades in our modern times and that continues to inform current (frequently negative and highly reductive) cultural perceptions of older people, and of older women in particular, as "the Other" in our youth-centered societies.

Moreover, the astute manipulation of the various images from the piece into an apparently coherent sequence in which several characters from different films seem to surveil, react to, care for, and be shocked by one another, results in a highly effective choral representation of female ageing in which the cinematic "crones" are rendered both victims and agents of the grotesque, marginal, and limiting identity imposed on them by a society that is characterized by anxieties around the phenomenon of ageing.

The author's interrogation of cinema's capacity to overcome these cultural interpretations, and her questioning the ambivalent re-presentation of the crone as a figure of resistance whereby ingrained fears of old age (and of ageing femininity in particular) can be exorcised and, therefore, addressed, are overtly expressed through the combination of open questions that counterpoint her creative work on the images she has selected for the piece.

The subversion of chronological time in its montage (especially in the final sequence), alongside the intriguing effect of its subtle but suggestive soundscape, invite viewers to consider classic cinematic "crones" from a "futuristic" and "anti-ageist perspective," from which they may derive alternative lessons about the female life course that can actually make a change in the future.

