SLIDE 1

*Cloudburst* and *Nebraska* are recent North American movies about elders on road trips. In *Cloudburst,* an older lesbian couple from Maine, Stella and Dottie, drive to Canada to get married, along the way picking up and effectively adopting Prentice, a male modern dancer/hitchhiker. And as many of you saw last night, in *Nebraska,* a 40-something man, David, drives Woody, his confused father, from Billings, Montana, to Lincoln, Nebraska, to claim a scam sweepstakes prize, stopping by to reconnect with the father’s family and acquaintances along the way.

At first glance, the elders-and-roadtrip plot is where the connection between these two movies ends. At a second glance, they get even less close. Rather, they can serve as useful foils for each other, highlighting how much filmic decisions can reinforce the story’s thematic elements. Thus, filmic analysis can reveal the story’s themes. This analysis is going to focus mostly on Nebraska, using Cloudburst mostly as a foil for what Nebraska is doing. As you will see, in both of these movies, the landscape and cinematography reflect the main characters’ concepts of love and self, and the cross-generational caregiving tends to be redemptive for the younger generation and deadly, or almost deadly, for the elder.

SLIDE 2

Let’s start with a consideration of the setting. Nebraska’s director, Alexander Payne, said that the studio asked him to locate the movie in some other state – one in which the government gave kickbacks to the studio for making movies there. Payne is from Nebraska and insisted on having the movie set there. He said, “I definitely wanted Autumn in Nebraska, with the corn stubble in the fields and those leafless trees, so you can see the skeletons of the trees. I was trying to see the skeletons of the people and the skeletons of the trees, things really, really stripped back to their essence.” He was so focused on making things bare that he shot the film in November and early December so that it was unlikely that there would be snow. He wanted what he called, “the beauty of austerity.” To add to that austerity, the film, which was shot digitally in color, was then altered to be black and white.

Payne says that black and white allows him as a filmmaker to portray “what feels real, not what feels beautiful — then do a beautiful representation of what feels real. A beautiful representation of the quotidian is what I think about with all the films. Flaubert said if you look at anything long enough, it becomes interesting. I feel that way about Nebraska.” Payne also appreciated the way that the black and white movie offers viewers an experience that puts “a ‘period’ perspective on the present.” Ironically, while trying to depict “what feels real,” Payne not only changed the full color digital shots into black and white, he also added in the graininess and the occasional white streaks that are characteristic of actual black and white film. He then worked with the technical crew to slow the pacing enough that viewers could soak in the details of the long panning shots across the Nebraska fields and the Nebraska faces.

It is a stark interiority that Payne offers viewers through his depiction of what he calls the skeletal, the essence, and the beautiful representation of what feels real. On one hand, the film has plenty of scenes in which people care for each other and about each other. On the other hand, the idea of love seems kept quite at arms length. In one bar scene, David and Woody discuss David’s recent break-up with his girlfriend and Woody’s marriage to Kate, David’s mother. It’s clear in the exchange that David represents the ideals of romantic love. For example, he expects that love was an integral part of how marriages happened:

David: You must have been in love, at least at first.

Woody: It never came up.

David: Did you ever talk about kids–how many you wanted and that sort of stuff.

Woody: Nope.

David Why did you have us?

Woody: I like to screw. You’re mom’s a Catholic. You figure it out.

Similarly, when David talks to a woman who was his father’s girlfriend during high school, she says that she didn’t have a chance in competing with Kate for Woody’s attention during high school because she “wouldn’t let him run the bases” – reinforcing viewers’ understanding of Woody’s unromantic and pragmatic approach to relationship decisions. We also learn that Woody’s desire to win the million dollars is so that he can leave “something” for his sons. The idea that he might already have given them something worthwhile during their childhoods seems beyond his cognition. Woody’s last words to David in this film are “Goddamnit, I said get down [onto the floor of the truck]!” Thus, in the film’s penultimte scene, we see David on the floor of the truck while his father drives through town, with David getting some of that “something” just from watching his father enjoy the experience, but Woody seems oblivious.

Here, members of the younger generation seems to be the repository of romantic ideals, yet they also are shown as living more isolated lives than their parents’ generation. Even though Kate has not visited the town in more than a decade, she knows people and knows enough of the town gossip to get caught up quickly, as in this exchange with David’s aunt:

Aunt: Peggy Hudsucker is pregnant.

Kate: Peggy got knocked up again?

Aunt: Yeap

Kate: At her age? That old cow must be 50.

David and his brother, Ross, on the other hand, seem to know relatively few people in Billings other than their family and their coworkers.

After Alexander Payne hired Phedon Papamichael as Director of Cinematography and Photography for Nebraska, the two of them took a road trip following the route that Woody and David take. Payne was from Nebraska, but the trip into small towns in Nebraska was new territory for Papamichael. He reports,

“We’d drive down these main streets and I’d never see any people,” he said. “I asked, ‘Where is everybody?’ [Payne] said, ‘I guess they’re inside watching TV.’”

Papamichael considered how to recreate that sense of separation and isolation for the viewer.

SLIDE 3

Much of the film is therefore shot through Panavision C-Series Anamorphic Lenses, which make the image narrower but which covers more area. In this way, viewers see more but it feels farther apart. Examples of how that lens captures images are in the cemetery scene and in the living room scene with the men watching football.

SLIDE 4

These are additional group shots from Nebraska. Note the interpersonal distances, facial expressions, and group (lack of) engagement. Also, again you’ll see the effects of that special Panavision C-Series Anamorphic Lense is notable.

SLIDE 5

In contrast, Cloudburst offers a different vision in its setting, its cinematography, and its concepts of love. The coast from Maine up to Canada has its rocky beaches, but the film shows viewers sandy beaches, grassy slopes that run down to the water, and idyllic coves and seaports. The colors may have that 1970s haze on them sometimes, but the cherry red of the truck even matches the cheery red of the town’s main waterfront buildings. There is sun in these two scenes, but even in the times of fog…

SLIDE 6

….as in the upper right here, and rain, as in the lower left, the colors still have a gentle tone to them. Even more significant is that the people are visually connected as members of a group. For example, even in the loneliest-looking picture in the upper right, though Prentice is by himself in the back of the truck (and he seems to be sucking his thumb), the visual framing of the truck body still links him to the two women. The connections are a little more clear in the other three screen shots from Cloudburst. Contrast the interpersonal distance, facial expression, and group engagement with the group stills you saw from Nebraska a few slides ago.

The differences also reflect the difference in beliefs about and representations of love. Early on in this film, viewers see Stella and Dottie engaging in caring and play, negotiation, trust, and respect. Those scenes contrast darkly with a brief glimpse of Prentice’s mother and stepfather. He has hitchhiked for a week to get to see them. When he tells his mother he loves her, she says, “yes, I know.” In response, Prentice slides down his chair into a slouch and mutters, “I love you too.” His parents won’t even let him stay overnight at their house. It’s clear that he is studying Dottie and Stella’s openly loving relationship – admiring it and trying to figure out how it works. The night before their wedding, his impromptu speech at the Irish pub (picture on the lower right) shows how well he has come to understand their bond:

They’ve been in love for 30 years. [They correct him.] Thirty-one. They don’t lose count. But you see, Dot can’t see, but she knows Stella so well, it’s like she can see her, and only her. And Stella sees everything else, so Dot doesn’t have to. And that’s it. I mean, if love is your goal, be like these two dykes and practice!

The ending of the movie reinforces these ideas, as Stella closes out the movie’s dialogue by pronouncing that the day of her wedding was the “best fucking day of my life,” and the credits begin to roll to a song that affirms, “Ain’t life sweet when we know what we’re doing. Aint’ life sweet when we’re not afraid to care.” In this movie, Dottie and Stella’s repeatedly state that their love is the most important thing in their life.

Spoiler alert: if you haven’t yet seen Cloudburst and you want to see it without knowing the ending, you may wish to leave the room, because there soon will be a terrific spoiler.

In an article I co-authored with Aagje Swinnen, we explored narrative practice in non-mainstream movies about older women who are socially transgressive/progressive.

We found, for example, that younger people’s lack of gerontological literacy can add to seniors’ feelings of isolation. In these movies, for the protagonists’ families, thinking of the women as having, or even wanting, sexual agency is so far from normative that the women’s transgressions are literally unheard of. Dottie’s granddaughter follows this pattern by refusing to accept that her grandmother is a lesbian. She asserts, “I know my Nona and I know what lesbians look like and Nona is no lesbian!” One also could read David’s non-normative loving actions toward his father as socially transgressive. He takes a leave from his job, he transports his dad on a wild goose chase, and he gives his dad what film critic Lee Marshall (no relation, by the way) calls “magical” assistance. For such practices, new, renewed, or developing love can be read as resisting socially acceptable but restrictive options.

Cultural critics (e.g., Gullette 1988, Rooke 1988, Waxman 1990) write of age as a category of cultural and literary analysis with which one can explore depictions of resistance. Their scholarship focuses on genres—the midlife progress novel, Reifungsroman, and Vollendungsroman—in which time-ripened female characters journey toward self-knowledge, demonstrating the transformative potential of late-life development. Cloudburst and Nebraska may seem to echo such narratives. In each case, the viewers come to appreciate the positive, liberatory effect of the characters’ choices. However, the older character’s developing love is paired with a return to the punitive dynamics of conventional romance plots. These scripts have bifurcated, limiting options for narrative closure: euphoric endings, in which heteronormative coupling leads to reintegration into society, and dysphoric narratives, which end with death disciplining transgressive agency (Miller 1980). Although twenty-first-century narratives somewhat modify the punitive dynamics, the plots of these two movies somewhat reinscribe the narrative boundaries, leading these authors to wonder how much these seemingly-liberating films reflect or support cultural change.

In Cloudburst, Stella and Dottie have 31 years together before they get married. Literally as soon as they say “I do,” Dottie dies. Stella returns to Maine with Prentice as her new partner, but their relationship will be platonic. In this movie, same-sex marriage is so accepted that the one person who opposes it is the movie’s antagonist. Nonetheless, actually going through with such an act, even for two genuinely, exemplarly loving people, is so socially transgressive as to be punished by death. Stella tells Prentice that she is not actually sad about Dottie’s death, explaining that “I’m 80 years old Prentice. Nothing is forever.” Ok – but they still could have given the women a day together before killing one of them off. The screenplay’s author is a gay man. I would like to ask him if he kills off male characters that decide to get married as often as he does female characters.

In Nebraska, David has been stretching his comfort zone further and further to accommodate his father’s wishes – taking time off from his job, taking more time off from his job, putting his (ex-)girlfriend on hold, stealing (and returning) an air compressor, defending his father to family and friends, sleeping in a trundle bed next to his parents…and these acts of kindness seem to nearly kill his father. First, it looks like there might be a bar fight. Instead, Woody walks away unscathed and David has a mild hand injury. Then, Woody decides to reciprocate the kindness that David has been extending: he acquiesces to David’s repeated requests that they just go home. Again, literally as soon as the words are out of his mouth, he falls over and gets taken to the hospital, where he remains in what seems like a coma until the next morning. Then, he reverses his decision and sets off down the road to Lincoln again. One way of reading this set of plot twists is to suggest that even the father/son type of bromance can become too much to be acceptable – that there has to be a hierarchy in order for the relationship to be socially acceptable enough to let both participants continue to be alive.

SLIDE 7

As Sally Chivers has pointed out, “*Cloudburst* cannot entirely commit to the possibility of a viable alternative to the care home nor to the care home as a viable alternative.” And Nebraska suggests that cross-generational male caregiving has its rewards, but it may be more deleterious on the health of the senior than it’s worth it to do. North American societies have come a long way in their acceptance of same-sex marriage, their understanding of the persistence of sexuality and the need for non-sexual love. The good news is that these movies show that there *are* new models and they are gaining visibility. The cinematic responses to these models, however, suggests that there continues to be sizeable room for improvement. Perhaps we now understand the lay of the land, but we still are breaking ground to advance the usefulness and accessibility of this area. At GSA, at ENAS (the European Network in Aging Studies), at NANAS (the North American Network in Aging Studies), and beyond, the most effective approaches are multi-generational, multi-disciplinary, and multi-person. I hope this presentation and the others have given you some ideas of how to join in. Thank you.