

Andrea VIRGINÁS

Empowering Archetypes: Middle-Aged ‘Eco-Warrior’ Women in Small National Ecocinematic Landscapes

Abstract: A three-section argumentation is advanced in order to unravel the functioning of the female eco-warrior stereotype in (Eastern) European, mostly small national cinematic creations working with/in the genre of eco-cinema. The aim is to prove its pertinence in mediating not only climate emergency, but also in reacting to challenges posed by the greying ageing of Europe – specifically that of women –, while circumscribing a position that is relatable to both what Sandra Harding describes as “feminist standpoint theory” (2004) and Martin Müller as “Global East” (2020). Infertility – be it articulated explicitly as a consequence of the female ageing process, or as instances of mysterious childlessness, of tragic miscarriage, of artificial fertilization or of adoption of even non-human beings – is the marker of the female heroines with a penchant for fighting bigger or smaller ecological wars in the examined 21 century feature films. According to their positioning in time these protagonists are entering middle age, or have passed to the second, non-reproductive part of the female life trajectory, and their complex, above-described linkages to actual, hypothetical, imaginary or symbolical offsprings constitute a powerful method by which to represent female existence modulated by the ageing process.

Keywords: ecocinema, small national, Eastern European, petro-menopause, trauma narratives, Global East.

Andrea VIRGINÁS

Babeş-Bolyai University
andrea.virginas@ubbcluj.ro

EKPHRASIS, 1/2025

**ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES
ACROSS MEDIA
pp. 85–102**

DOI: 10.24193/ekphrasis.33.6
Published First Online: July 16, 2025

Acknowledgment. This article was supported by a grant of the Ministry of Research, Innovation, and Digitization, CNCS—UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.1-TE-2021-0613; by the Bolyai János Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences; by the Affiliated Fellowship of the Institute of Advanced Study, Central European University 2023–2024, and by a grant of the Volkswagen Stiftung in the context of the research project AGE-C-Ageing and Gender in European Cinema (2023–2027).

Introduction

Mediating climate change as an emergency that needs to be acted upon is perhaps the greatest challenge of our present. Chaotic and unpredictable real-world processes petrify rather than enable, with debilitating effects on the individual level – from climate anxiety to climate trauma – and downsizing, fake news-ing or conspiracy theorizing dominating our “deeply mediated” (Hepp 2020) public sphere. Stereotypes redundantly repeated and streamlined to “qualified media(l)” (Elleström 2020), transmedial and emerging media(l) contexts – in this case that of eco-cinema – have the power to elicit mythological frames (Frye 1957) and archetypal interpretation (Jung 1988, 2004), and which might break through the threshold of apathy and inaction.

This article suggests that the figure of the eco-warrior woman – (past) middle-age(d), infertile and engaging into small-scale individual actions on behalf of a natural world in need of help – is such a cultural-medial construct, thriving on formulas of adapting literature and transmediating regional folklore or Greek mythology in(to) contemporary eco-cinema. Locating one of its European points of origin in Polish 2018 Nobel-prize novelist Olga Tokarczuk’s 2009 ecological noir crime novel, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Death* (UK English-language edition: 2018, US: 2019), 21st century cinematic actualizations examined here include, besides major national Eastern European productions like 2017 Polish *Spoor* or 2017 Ukrainian *Brama*, small national European examples: Icelandic *Woman at War* and *Lamb*, Lithuanian *Vesper*, Slovakian *Nightsiren*, Swedish *Aniara*, Hungarian *Womb* and *Eden*.

A three-section argumentation is advanced in order to unravel the functioning of the female eco-warrior stereotype in these cinematic creations working with/in the genre of eco-cinema, proving its pertinence in mediating not only climate emergency, but also in reacting to challenges posed by the greying ageing of Europe – specifically that of women –, while carving out a position that is relatable to both what Sandra Harding describes as “feminist standpoint theory” (2004) and Martin Müller as “Global East” (2020). In the first section a short introduction to the genre of eco-cinema is meant to create a context for the second section: a closer analysis of the middle-aged, infertile eco-warrior women’s narrative development(al) paths, with “petro-menopause” (Waade, Leyda 2022) an important explanatory concept linking mainstreamed eco-cinema to ageing female protagonists and demographic transformation. The construct’s archetypal and trauma-processing underpinnings are then examined in the third section, synthesizing the insights that the analysis of the middle-aged, (post)menopausal eco-warrior woman in Eastern, or small national European ecocinematic examples in fiction films made in the 21st century enables: “address[ing] uncertainties, unpredictabilities and improvisational tactics” while treating “Global East’s liminality as a strength” (Müller 2020, 749–50), and similarly to how thinking “from the lives of marginalized people... will generate illuminating critical questions” (Harding 2004, 128).

1st section: eco-cinema

In the 2007 monograph *Kulturgeschichte des Klimas. Von der Eiszeit bis zur globalen Erwaermung* – or *The Cultural History of the Climate. From the Ice Age to Global Warming* – Wolfgang Behringer describes how human intervention through industrialisation “until the mid-20th century influenced only the environment and the climate, but since then has affected the whole *Earth System* and its components – the atmosphere, the land, the oceans, the seaside zones, and of course the climate” (Behringer 2010, 274), (translation mine, A. V.). In our current geological era this transformational activity reached the point when “one can no longer speak of natural climate eras as Paul Crutzen, the Nobel Prize-winning chemist states” (Behringer 2010, 272), (translation mine, A. V.), therefore the era’s generally accepted name, the Anthropocene. From the Anthropocenic vantage point large-scale processes in recent decades may be retrospectively re-positioned as always and already having contained the seeds of an environmentally challenged, economically perturbed, and socially-politically deregulated world, a recognition that has been articulated through narrative films, among other forms of fictional art.

In their introduction to the 2013 volume of studies *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* editors Stephen Rust and Salma Monani identify Scott McDonald as the godfather of the term “ecocinema”. It was in his 2013 “chapter, ‘The Ecocinema Experience,’ a revised and expanded version of his 2004 article, ‘Toward an Eco-Cinema,’ in which he [McDonald] coined the term ecocinema to describe films that provide ‘something like a *garden*—an «Edenic» respite from conventional consumerism—within the *machine* of modern life, as modern life is embodied by the apparatus of media.” (Rust and Monani 2013, 5, emphasis in the original) Fundamentally reinterpreting this early 2000s vision, Rust and Monani – in their capacities as editors a decade later – state that “[i]n essence, we tend to agree that *all* films present productive ecocritical exploration and careful analysis can unearth engaging and intriguing perspectives on cinema’s various relationships with the world around us.” (Rust and Monani 3, emphasis in the original). In the 2013 revised version of his 2004 paper envisaging ecocinema in reference to the “garden/machine” dichotomy, McDonald steers away from circumscribing the nascent genre of ecocinema, arguing that “the fundamental job of an ecocinema is not to produce pro-environmental narratives shot in a conventional Hollywood manner (that is, in a manner that implicitly promotes consumption) or even in a conventional documentary manner (although, of course, documentaries can alert us to environmental issues). The job of an ecocinema is to provide *new kinds of film experience* that demonstrate an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship and help to nurture a more environmentally progressive mindset.” (Macdonald 2013, 20, emphasis in the original). Commenting on McDonald’s foundational essay, David Ingram considers that aesthetic markers routinely related to authorial cinema are those that characterize eco-cinema in McDonald’s understanding,

among them “slow cinema” and “retraining perception”.¹ Ingram also makes reference to another theoretician of ecocinema, Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, editor of the 2010 volume *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*. Her standpoint favours all forms of non-mainstream cinema narrativity when thinking about the acceptable, also desirable cross-section of ecology and cinema: “For Willoquet, [observes Ingram] art cinema and activist documentaries are more likely to be eco-films than the products of mainstream commercial cinema, which are too ideologically evasive and complicit in promoting consumerism to promote radical environmentalist ideas.” (Ingram 2013, 44–45). In Willoquet-Maricondi’s own formulation from the Preface to *Framing the World*: “ecocinema strives to have a social, political, and material impact, and to be a tool for activism. The overt eco-activist intent of ecocinema offers an alternative to more popularized mainstream ‘environmentalist’ fiction films, such as *Erin Brockovich* (2000) ... whose principal intent is to put a topical subject in the service of entertainment” (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010, xi).

Still hoping in circumventing rapid-pace global warming, eco-theorists in the first decade of the 21st century could assume a more relaxed position – like making the normative-canonical differentiation between consumerist-oriented “environmentalist fiction films” and “ecocinema striving to have an (serious) impact and be a tool for activism”. In his 2013 essay Dave Ingram also favoured the arthouse features of “long takes and slow pacing” which “can promote contemplation along ecological lines”, pointing to “cognitive estrangement ... [as] the first step by which the desired state of environmental awareness may be attained” (Ingram 2013, 44–45). Unfortunately, mid-2020s Anthropocene urgency in the physical world definitely put us in the situation to accept “the emerging genre of *ecocinema*” (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010, xi, emphasis in the original) as already fully formed in a heterogenous mode. It is the proposal of this article that all the various facets and media should be considered when thinking about what we mean by ecocinema in the 2020s. As Ingram suggests, this is “a conceptual content ... more or less explicitly promot[ing] ecological ideas, or, more generally, an ecological sensibility” (Ingram 44), including the topic of “ecological equilibrium being threatened” emerging as the worldbuilding axiom and rule in science fiction blockbusters hybridized with disaster action in such well-known titles as the *Mad Maxes*, the *Blade Runners*, or the *Avatars*. That this constellation is doubled in the material conditions of current media “reframed as ecological media [ecomedia]” and in reference to “[m]edia...[becoming] inseparable from their material conditions and the environment that produced them” (Ivakhiv, López 2024, 21) is a refreshing and sad observation prompted by the Anthropocene.

1 “For MacDonald, then, an aesthetics of slow cinema can encourage the retraining of perception he sees as a necessary condition for greater ecological awareness” (Ingram, 2013, 45).

The ecocinema genre has visibly been in evolution in what may be considered a global and mainstream canon of spectacular action cinema, referred to by Pietari Kääpä in terms of “the planetary/universal scope of global Hollywood” (Kääpä 2013, 22). This is a characteristic which may be attributed, no doubt, to such well known examples as the two *Blade Runners*: in the 1982 production helmed by Ridley Scott the only allusion to any kind of equilibrium on the verge of disappearing – be that of the environment and of the planet, even of the universe – is to be found in the starting intertitle sentence “Replicants were used Off-world as slave labour, in the hazardous exploration and colonization of other planets.” The Anthropocene-era threat of the Macdonaldian “Garden” by a “Machine” is articulated here, in the neoliberal 1980s, in reference to other planets than the Earth. A strange similarity to how the incessant rain and murky darkness of future Los Angeles is much more linked, truly film noir-style, to the interior, psychic processes of the melodramatic, sad, and melancholic characters, instead of documenting the imminent process of global environmental deterioration. In thirty years, the Blade Runner universe enters the Anthropocene era and the corresponding postulates are articulated on the first black intertitle of *Blade Runner 2049*: “The collapse of ecosystems in the mid-2020s led to the rise of industrialist Niander Wallace, whose mastery of synthetic farming averted famine.” This is the sentence that shall make us, the audience, prepared for the lack of living vegetation and fauna, for the constant dust and half-darkness, for the high radioactive radiation levels resulting in an orange atmosphere that houses mountains of garbage and malnourished humans. Reiterating the problematic of humans vs. succeeding generations of replicants, the gigantic and malevolent Tyrell corporation exerts its influence amid an evidently destroyed ecological and environmental equilibrium.

If compared to these and other globally distributed and consumed fictions on film, in television or through videogames, feature films produced in small national industries – classified as such based on the small(er) country’s territory, few(er) inhabitants, low(er) GDP value per capita and the experience of having been dominated by another nation in Hjort and Petrie’s paradigmatic work(s) (2007) – or peripheral canons like that in Eastern Europe, articulate more marginal experiences, and from explicitly non-mainstream standpoints. Surveying feature film production in the Western, Northern and Eastern European national cinemas² – or “small to medium industries reliant on public funding, where film production is coordinated by gatekeepers such as national film funds or institutes” (Kääpä, Vaughan 2024, 181) – it is somewhat surprising that far from simply reacting belatedly to the 1989–1990 political changes or the 2000s economic perturbations, these entities are remarkably reactive, including in the Anthropocene discourse. Compared to the small number of films

2 In the context of the group research project *Cultural Traumas in Contemporary European Small National Cinemas* funded by the Romanian Research Agency (UEFISCDI) in the 2022–2024 period.

produced, a high number of creations engage in what definitely needs to be described as eco-cinematic preoccupations and ensuing generic world-building: the already mentioned Hungarian-German *Womb* (2009), Icelandic *Woman at War* (2018) and *Lamb* (2021), Swedish *Aniara* (2018), Hungarian-Romanian-Belgian *Eden* (2021), French-Lithuanian *Vesper* (2022), Slovakian *Nightsiren* (2022), Greek *Apples* (2022) and Slovakian-Hungarian *White Plastic Sky* (2023) are Anthropocene-era tales of the ecological equilibrium having been broken, with environmental and/or personal level crises and catastrophes arising within the diegetic worlds as a consequence of it. These films definitely have left behind Scott McDonald's concept of ecocinema as defined back in 2004 in reference to films "that provide 'something like a garden—an 'Edenic' respite from conventional consumerism—within the *machine* of modern life, as modern life is embodied by the apparatus of media'" (Rust and Monani 2013, 5, emphasis in the original).

In Greek *Apples* crowds lose their memories of who they are and need to enter a governmental rehabilitation program, with the large-scale process emerging as unstoppable, the only salvation perhaps the bodily coded memories of flowers or the taste of fruits – like the titular apples the main male protagonist keeps peeling and eating. In Hungarian *Eden* Eva's strange and all-encompassing allergies and panic attacks seem to be as much psychically induced as being caused by outer elements like the nearby mobile signal tower or invisible particles in the air, with Andras's teenage daughter suffering explicitly from climate change anxiety. The claustrophobic and incestuous tragedy of Rebeca and son-lover Thomas in *Womb* is indirectly connected to Thomas' reckless behaviour as an environmental activist and to the dystopic development of such genetic engineering clinics where humans can re-birth their lost loved ones in habituated modes as if going to the dentist. *Woman at War's* plot is set in motion by the Icelandic government's establishing power lines all along the island's fascinating natural landscape, destroying it; the similarly Icelandic *Lamb* introduces us to an apparent Edenic Garden, a faraway bio-farm and loving family, where the ethical respect for all life forms has vanished, the human colonizing the animal at all prices. Lithuanian *Vesper* and Slovakian *Nightsiren* similarly present a deteriorated nature mirroring and also housing a deeply immoral human society through the stories of lonely females fighting injustice, and simultaneously trying to heal the wounds of the natural landscape. Complementing the panorama of ecocinema emerging from the Global East, Ukrainian *Brama/The Gateway* situates its world within walking distance of deserted Chernobyl, its ensemble cast of a three-generational family co-existing with mutation and radiation. Meanwhile in Polish *Spoor* the Polish–Czech hilly countryside is slowly conquered by game animals taking a revenge on hunting associations enmeshed with local political corruption – a fight led by yet another female protagonist nearing third age.

The natural scenery is breathtakingly beautiful or strange and pathetic in all cases, with very strong effects of "authentic nature" – or the Macdonaldian garden – being created through

crystal-clear (profilmic) imagery, innovative image- and sound-editing, and mesmerizing digital effects in the visual, but also the aural spheres. A few protagonists are followed throughout, and they are linked to each other in what we may name chamber structures: literally closed in rooms, apartments, mansions, small villages, forest and swamp patches. The actors and actresses playing the parts of these contemporary ecocinema heroes are stars and performers who are well known for their naturalistic, gritty, even Method Acting-style performances, embodying the protagonists on the verge of existence amid Anthropocene threats. The constant fight with a surrounding, natural world gone havoc further enlarges the palette of realist and neorealist acting styles, surroundings, decors, costumes, and special effects – from the most basic one of editing to computer-generated imagery depicting fantastic creatures and happenings while employing documentary stylistics supposed to emanate authenticity. Somewhat in contrast to how David Ingram identifies two ways of depicting “environmental crisis” through “the use of metaphor and symbol favoured by non-realist genres such as melodrama, science fiction, and fantasy,” respectively “preferring (...) metonymy to emphasise the materiality of the fictional environment (...) [through] the affordances of social realism” (Ingram 2024, 317), these Eastern European and small national ecocinema examples hybridize the two methods while “addressing the contemporary realities of ecological crisis” (Ingram 2024, 317).

2nd section: petro-menopause

The 2018 Icelandic movie *Woman at War* depicts a person who definitely may be categorized as an “ecological desperado”: “not trusting in hope alone as a way of engaging with passing time” while “looking in near total isolation for other ways of resisting [the] anguish” (Latour 2027, 13) caused by “the *end of 'nature'* as a concept that would allow us to sum up our relations to the world and pacify them” (Latour 36, emphasis in the original) – as described in Bruno Latour’s 2017 *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. In *Woman at War* actress Halldora Geihardsdottir performs an amazing double role as the title character Halla, and her twin sister, Asa. Befitting the film’s title in Hungarian distribution – *Icelandic Amazon* – both Halla and Asa are single, strong, very fit and highly intelligent, also compassionate women nearing their 50th birthday. Main protagonist Halla works as a choir leader, but also as an undercover ecological activist, and in the latter capacity her aim is to stop new investments in aluminum industry on the territory of Iceland. Towards this aim, Halla carries out complicated actions of sabotaging electricity lines and poles placed mostly in the wilderness – on fields, in swamps, occasionally on hills, close to mountains and glaciers. Meanwhile she is in the process of adopting a child from Ukraine, her childlessness and inability to have a child of her own partially motivated by the 50th birthday approaching, leading the viewer to think of the process of menopause.

Infertility – be it articulated explicitly as a consequence of the female ageing process as in the case of Halla, or as instances of mysterious childlessness, of tragic miscarriage, of artificial fertilization or of adoption of even non-human beings – is the marker of the female heroines with a penchant for fighting bigger or smaller ecological wars in the examined (Eastern) European, mostly small national filmic corpus. According to their positioning in time these protagonists are entering middle age, or have passed to the second, non-reproductive part of the female life trajectory, and their complex, above-described linkages to actual, hypothetical, imaginary or symbolical offsprings constitute a powerful method by which to represent female existence modulated by the ageing process. We may think, besides Erlingsson's *Woman at War*, of titles such as Hungarian-German coproduction *Womb* (Bence Fliegau, 2009), Hungarian *On Body and Soul* (Ildikó Enyedi, 2017), Polish *Spoor* (Agnieszka Holland, Kasia Adamik, 2017), Ukrainian *Brama/The Gateway* (Volodymyr Tykhyy, 2017), Swedish *Aniara* (Pella Kagerman, Hugo Lilja 2018), Hungarian-Romanian *Eden* (Agnes Kocsis, 2020), Greek *Apples* (Christos Nikou, 2020), Icelandic *Lamb* (Valdimar Johansson, 2021), Romanian *Intregalde* (2021, Radu Muntean), Lithuanian-French *Vesper* (Kristina Buozyte, Bruno Samper, 2022), Slovakian *Nightsiren* (Teresa Nvotova, 2022), or Hungarian-Slovakian *White Plastic Sky* (Sarolta Szabó, Tibor Bánóczki, 2023). Even whole television series deserve a mention: like Swedish *Real Humans* (2011) or Danish *Borgen* – especially its season 4, *Power and Glory* (2022). It was the last example which prompted the term “petro-menopause,” coined by Anne-Marit Waade and Julia Leyda to describe the common elements linking menopause and “transitioning away from fossil fuels”: “[b]oth herald irreversible changes that demand physical and emotional adaptation,” observe Waade and Leyda, and “[b]oth trigger fear, dread, helplessness, and uncertainty” (2022).

In the 2003 medical handbook *Understanding Menopause*, medical sociologist Karen Ballard mentions that the word “menopause” was used for the first time in 1821 in reference to “changes to the ovary” and leading to “a diminishing reproductive function, which is finally lost around the time of the menopause” (Ballard 2003, 1). Based on literature and also on the results of her Women's Health Study of 650 women aged 51–57 in 1999–2000 in Great Britain Ballard summarizes that “[t]oday, on average, the menopause occurs naturally at the age of 51 years, although many women cease to menstruate a few years before or after this age. Eighty per cent of women will have reached the menopause by the age of 54 years.” (Ballard 1). In her 1970 *La Vieillesse* – and its 1972 English edition under the title *Coming of Age* – feminist philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir described the process which she herself must have undergone by the age of 62 when the book was published. Beauvoir contrasted menopause in women with how in men “[t]here is no general law upon the cessation of spermatogenesis”, whereas “[i]n women, the reproductive function is suddenly interrupted at a comparatively early age”, a “phenomenon ... unique in the ageing process, which in every other respect is a continuous development” (de Beauvoir 1972, 27–28).

Prefiguring Ballard's statistical data, and contextualizing the stereotype of the middle-aged eco-warrior woman in (Eastern) European small national films, de Beauvoir states that "the abrupt termination of the ovarian cycle and of menstruation" is to take "place at about fifty with the menopause" when "[t]he ovaries harden and the woman can no longer be made pregnant", with "[t]he sexual steroids vanish[ing] and the sexual organs degenerate[ing]" (de Beauvoir 1972, 27–28).

As suggested by Waade and Leyda's concept of petro-menopause, changes are not limited to the ageing female body: perturbations in the environmental equilibrium are fundamentally defining the diegetic world-building in the enumerated European, mostly small national – that is, not mainstream – examples – a corpus which I propose that it articulates insights also made possible by, and in the Global East. These heroic female characters, though at odds with fertility given their mature age and which may be objectively described as part of the menopausal phenomenon stretching over several years, have a calling nevertheless, which puts them into contact with nature, environment and ecological issues overall. To follow this calling, they need to leave the social texture: this means moving to the mountains and woods, like Otilia, Mira and Charlotte, the good witches, also healing women in Slovakian *Nightsiren*, who gradually withdraw from the village buildings and community to abandoned huts or even the forest canopy and vegetation. Or leading the double life of a jovial music teacher and a well-organized terrorist in *Woman at War*, which results in Halla's camouflaging in endless moss heaps or hiding in ice-cold water streams. Or simply ignoring the outer world while living in the remote countryside depicted as enmeshed in lush greenery in *Lamb* or covered by seaside water patches and constant breeze in *Womb*. Maria in Icelandic *Lamb*, or Rebecca in *Womb* are involved in multilayered processes of mourning their dead offspring or killed lover, and they compensate (for) the unconsolable sadness with an extreme openness towards the world beyond the human: be it adopting and raising a lamb as her child in the case of Maria, or giving birth to the clone of her deceased lover in the case of Rebecca. These activities, however, are represented as transgressing boundaries and with consequences because of that, also figuratively constituted through the wild natural scenery of Icelandic mountains or the North Sea beaches, swept by winds, rain, or snow, in processes of constant change and disappearance.

Post-menopausal Astronomer Roberta Twolander in Swedish sci-fi *Aniara*, one of the crew of a giant spaceship transporting humans from a melting and uninhabitable Earth to the Mars, though not having a family of her own any more, becomes the mothering entity for the disoriented younger travellers and crew once the spaceship loses its way in deep space. With only virtually simulated plants or animals present on the deck of *Aniara*, a claustrophobic, closed-circuit entity, Roberta adopts what's closest to an undisturbed ecological wholeness: the young still dreaming of flowers or of returning to Earth. The Hungarian versions of the eco-warrior women are less active in their rebellion and which plays out as self-destruction

instead of destruction of harmful processes in the outside world losing its ethical and ecological equilibrium. Eva in Agnes Kocsis' *Eden* suffers from an all-encompassing allergy to our contemporary urban world and consumerist way of life, she can bear only a few types of metal and pure wool in her surroundings and can intrude into ordinary entourages only if she wears a hazmat suit. Maria, the heroine of Ildiko Enyedi's 2017 *On Body and Soul*, has an autistic personality and she lives isolated from the outside world – while trying to sabotage through her petty means the mass killing of animals at the slaughterhouse where she works, counteracting her sad, grey daily reality with beautiful dream projections of ecological idylls: stags meeting and playing in the snow-covered forest. In animated *White Plastic Sky* Nóra cannot overcome the death of their young child and the prospect of lifelong infertility unless she sacrifices her body and herself in order to help the much-deteriorated ecological cycle of a Hungary sometime after the apocalyptic catastrophe has happened, and humans live under an artificial dome enclosing inner city Budapest.

Rebellious and heroic, these female characters are therefore united in a corpus of analysis also thanks to their bordering on the menopausal 50 as for their age. Marginalized from a social perspective, they often earn little, or don't even have regular personal income, their status is diminished, and their recognition might come from the audience of these films, but they evidently don't get the diegetic world's attention and approval – as a matter of fact, the opposite is the case. In extreme cases they are stigmatized, rejected, laughed at by those who enter into socially mediated contacts with them, making us therefore face the possible and complex consequences of women living longer than ever before, with their ageing selves and bodies slowly transferring into chronological and statistical aging after 65, a phenomenon that is happening at a bigger scale than ever before in human history.

In spite of (their) childlessness and infertility – an existence that we need to understand in reference to the menopausal 50 age threshold too given the films' explicit suggestions in this respect – the characters in this corpus display a remarkably flexible attitude, to the extent of engaging in ecologically oriented guerilla activities, or indeed overtaking the raising of young non/humanoid creatures. Their “chronological” and “biological age” – that positions them (as) closer to third generation(al) grandmother figures than to young mothers – do not coincide with their “psychological age” (Woodward 2006). They are illustrative of Kathleen Woodward's formulation according to which “[p]sychologically a person may ‘feel’ older or younger than their chronological age” (Woodward 183). This outstanding (inner) power – thanks to which these female characters may be assigned the position of classical heroes – also enables their overlooking both “social age” – retirement or unemployment through redundancy for example – and “cultural age” – “the meanings or values that a culture assigns to different people in terms of age, but here status and power are crucial” (Woodward 183) – and which is manifested as the marginalization of these female “mothers as grandmothers” fighting an ecologically inspired war within the diegetic worlds of the examined films.

Thanks to the outer signifiers described above, one can speak about the pervasive influence of the menopausal 50 years of age in the examined Eastern European and/or European small national ecocinematic narratives – also pertaining to the Global East as suggested in the introduction – and which exposes a real-world social phenomenon. Namely, how 21st century female existence is being split into two distinct, and even equal phases, given the growth of human lifespan – one important factor in contemporary demographic ageing. The analyzed heroines' biological, functional and psychological age-constructions are not impacted by their individual, or collectively experienced hardships, yet social and cultural age-assignments by their surroundings are in great opposition to their devised solutions to ageing as women. As already alluded to, the Icelandic film *Woman at War* should be considered a successful, enjoyable, creative and memorable template, perhaps even a catalyst for the other mentioned examples making use of the trope and the narrative of the eco-warrior woman: – past her prime beauty, even having surpassed middle-age and fighting for the natural world's non-human perspective to gain relevance. Polish 2018 Nobel-laureate Olga Tokarczuk's fascinating, ageing female eco-warrior protagonist in her 2007 ecological noir novel, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* should be definitely mentioned as a literary pre-image too. The English teacher retiring to the materially deprived yet idyllic mountain region on the Polish-Czech border zone, and the mystical yet fully down-to-earth campaign she leads against the male political elite killing the animals in aggressive hunting parties was adapted to the screen by Agnieszka Holland in the 2018 *Pokot/Spoor*. Holland's film synthesizes all the described elements of (post-)menopausal ageing and which engenders eco-activism within the Anthropocene framework.

There is a one to two, perhaps even three decades of fluctuation between the ages of these filmic heroines, the unifying element being their infertility and, consequently, their menopausal positioning as far as female gendered life course is concerned. The lack of actual children or grandchildren is compensated by adopted beings, often of non-human form, animals, plants, or greater living organisms, perhaps nature in its idealistic understanding – embraced by these Latourian *esperados*. Even if none of them is defined within the diegetic world of the films as literal grand/mothers, their described post/menopausal positioning in the female ageing process is a signal in this respect. The ambiguity in positioning them as mothers and as grandmothers at the same time – thus leading to an a-historical aspect – is a characteristic that Kathleen Woodward already analyses in detail in her 1995 study "Tribute to the Older Woman: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Ageism." Although in reference to the field of Freudian psychoanalysis Woodward formulates an extremely important observation that nearly 30 years later might be extrapolated to the filmic discourse of peripheral, small, or Eastern European cinemas engaging with imagining the world of, and the world for post/menopausal women. "If in Freudian terms a female child prior to the Oedipus complex is consigned to a *prehistorical* state, a postmenopausal woman, an older woman, is dismissed

from the world as *posthistorical*, finding herself outside of the discourse of history yet again” since “[i]n Freudian psychoanalysis a woman beyond child-bearing age is old, dysfunctional in sexual (reproductive) terms, a dysfunction which is written on her body in folds and wrinkles for everyone to see” (1995, 85, emphasis in the original). As a matter of fact, Simone de Beauvoir has the same observation on the opening pages of the 1972 *La Vieillesse*, and with a relevance far wider than the discourse constructed by Freudian psychoanalysis: “Great numbers of people, particularly old people, told me, kindly or angrily but always at great length again and again, that old age simply did not exist! There were some who were less young than others, and that was all it amounted to. Society looks upon old age as a kind of shameful secret that it is unseemly to mention.” (1972, 9). Woodward draws our attention to the ageism so blatant in feminism too, suggesting that third generation, old women – or post/menopausal women to correlate it with biological and functional age constructions – need to find their position in culture and criticism too. Since, as Barbara Macdonald (cited by Woodward), argued in the 1983 *Look Me in the Eye: Old Women, Age and Ageism*: “[t]here would, in fact, be no youth culture without the powerless older woman” (1995, 83).

3rd section: eco-warrior women from archetypes to post-traumatic (narrative) development

The described filmic examples in this European corpus of analysis are united by their small national features, their peripheral – occasionally Eastern – European situatedness, and an overall decipherability within the framework of the Global East which is “too rich to be a proper part of the South, but too poor to be a part of the North ... too powerful to be periphery, but too weak to be the centre” (Müller 2020, 735–736). Their comparative overview also leaves us with the stereotype of the lonely, female, ecological warrior or ecological benefactor – emphatically represented in what may be considered the two most paradigmatic cases, Icelandic *Woman at War*, respectively Polish *Spoor*. Their heroines of 50, respectively 65 years of age are united through their generational positioning as non-child-bearing any more. Comparing these representations transnationally and transculturally definitely requires considering the possibly archetypal, and consequently, mythological underpinning(s) of the ageing woman beyond the menopausal 50 years of age, and slowly transitioning to the third generation.

Barbara G. Walker enriches the biological phenomenon of the menopause, an index of female ageing, with an ancient mythological and archetypal lining, affirming that “women past the age of menopause, in whom the blood of life no longer appeared outside the body” were “(t)he original Crones of the matriarchal community” (1988, EPUB 44), with the “retained menstrual blood ... often regarded as the source of their wisdom” (45). In these

prehistoric times, while pregnancy signified that the magical menstrual blood of women was used in creation, the onset of menopause meant that this blood stayed inside the woman, attributing her special powers. From the perspective of cultural gerontology, one might add that the construction of the Crone is marked by biological ageing – and not by chronological or functional ageing – suggesting that menopause as a stage of biological transformation serves as the initiator of “croning.”

Concepts and characters such³ as the wise old woman, the witch, the crone or indeed the matriarch are indispensable in interpreting these cinematic examples – which stretch far beyond the European or the small national fictional filmic canons and into global Hollywood or the documentary generic realm through such 21st century examples like *Harry Potter's* Professor McGonagall, *Dune's* Reverend Mother Mohiam, the Icelandic Seer or the Bulgarian Baba Vanga, to name some of the possibly most well-known examples. The mentioned (Eastern) European and/or small national examples – so courageous in their actively constructing post/menopausal heroines in ecocinematic narratives – evidently rely on archetypal underpinnings when creating these protagonists.

These lonely women – the film posters are quite telling in this respect (Fig. 1) – performing sabotage actions or small charities on behalf of nature and the environment constitute a 21st century actualization of the stereotype, also archetype, of the caring woman, possibly wise,

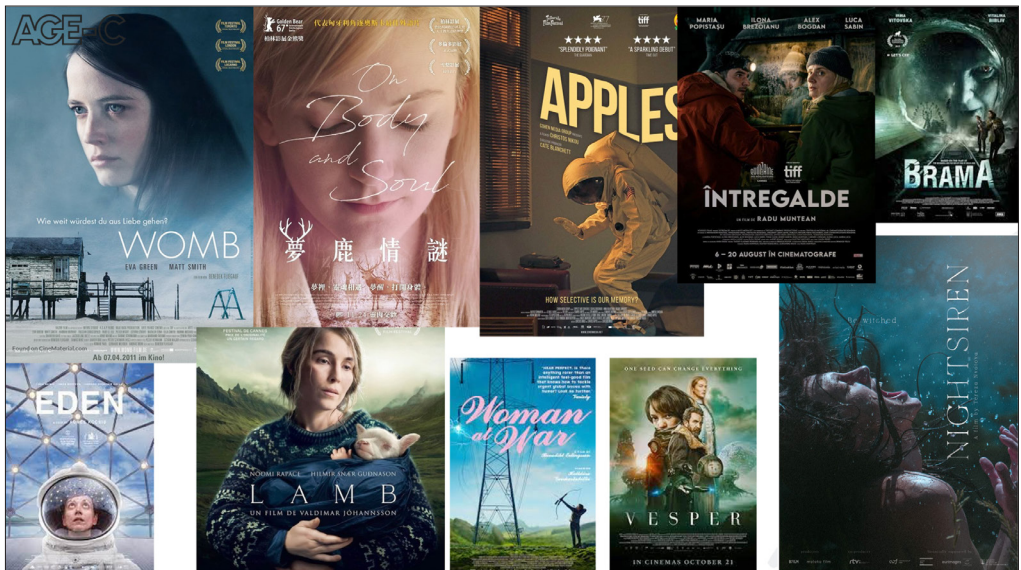


Fig. 1. Collage of publicly available film posters, photo by the author.

3 I thank Boglárka-Angéla Farkas for drawing attention to research on crone/ing.

old, a witch or a priest, even a deity. In the 2004 edition of Carl Gustav Jung's *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster* such "qualities [are] associated with" the mother archetype as "maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse" (Jung 2004, 15). However, the sinister loneliness, secrecy and overall tabooization of these women by their surroundings also finds its roots in the archetype, since "[o]n the negative side the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate" (Jung 2004, 15).

The lineage of the arche- and stereotype's actualization(s) is a distinguished one, from Athene, the Greek goddess of wisdom, to Minerva McGonagall, Bellatrix Lestrange and Jane Goodall, and it is also housed in many popularized retellings. One can think of monetizing instances offering lifestyle and non-professional psychological guidance like "The Sage Archetype/The Wise Woman Within You" subsection of "artist-adventurer" Anna Heimkreiter's *Where Wonder Waits* hub. Or Jungian analyst and bestseller writer Clarissa Pinkola Estes' 1992 *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, which starts with the following introduction: "Wildlife and the Wild Woman are both endangered species. Over time, we have seen the feminine instinctive nature looted, driven back, and overbuilt. For long periods it has been mismanaged like the wildlife and the wildlands. For several thousand years, as soon and as often as we turn our backs, it is relegated to the poorest land in the psyche" (Pinkola Estes 1992, 10).

Though aware of the many pitfalls – leading to essentialization and naturalization – of working with concepts such as arche- and stereotypes, we must also acknowledge that Jung himself gave a rather nuanced description of what he also calls "archaic remnants in the individual psyche" (Jung et al. 1988, 64), differentiating them from "instincts" or "personal complexes" (Jung et al. 1988, 64–76). A third aspect, theorized therefore already in the mid-20th century, emerges as a logical explanation for the presented (Eastern) European and small national recurrence of the post-menopausal wise woman who devises plans to assist a battered natural world in the Anthropocene. Jung argues that in contrast to "personal complexes" which "never produce more than a personal bias" being "compensations for onesided or faulty attitudes of consciousness", archetypes not only "create myths, religions, and philosophies that influence and characterize whole nations and epochs of history" but, thanks to this process of contributing to the creation of "myths of a religious nature" archetypes "can be interpreted as a sort of mental therapy for the sufferings and anxieties of mankind in general, hunger, war, disease, old age, death." (Jung et al. 1988, 76) This archetypal, also symbolic trope, this time in its audiovisual moving image format, and actualized in the form of women determined to fight for and protect the natural world – amid recognizable contemporary processes of ecological disbalance – provides a somewhat calming solution to the great collective trauma that we witness within the Anthropocene: the threat of ecological disaster and human civilization's ensuing extinction.

The theory of culturally representing collective traumas rests on the axiom that in order for this process to happen “individualization” and “personalization” are indispensable, in the wording of Jeffrey C. Alexander (2012). The fact that all the analyzed films are what András Bálint Kovács defines as “closed situation drama” (Kovács 2006, 137–138), (translation mine, A. V.), concentrating the development conditions of the diegetic world within literally closed interiors or in remote areas where only the protagonists are present, with the fact of enclosure contributing to narrative development, might be considered a superficial aspect related to dramaturgical decisions taken while writing the script. However, this feature needs to be seen within the context of scarce production resources feeding into the aesthetic development of peripheral, small national films – especially valid amid the unstable Eastern European conditions. The moving image-based, narrative fictional articulation of the ageing, childless, or infertile woman, fighting an ecological(ly) inspired ‘war’ constitutes a way to engage with climate trauma through a powerful yet cost-effective method, so important for scarce(er)-resource small national film and television cultures.

None of the analyzed wise old(er) women turn towards collective solutions – like building an army of fellow-minded fighters – but they act alone, often explicitly formulating their strong inner urge to do so in order to survive the scarring of their lives and psyches. Their small, everyday practices of ecological benefactions are somehow the result of their successful engagement with filling the voids caused by great tragedies, occasionally catastrophes, in their lives: such as the inability of conceiving children (*Woman at War*), losing a child to death (*Lamb*, *Nightsiren*, *White Plastic Sky*), or losing a partner to death (*Womb*, *On Body and Soul*), to disease (*Vesper*), or to literal oblivion (*Apples*). Maria in Icelandic *Lamb*, or Rebecca in *Womb* are involved in multilayered processes of mourning their dead offspring or killed lover, and they compensate (for) the unconsolable sadness with an extreme openness towards the world beyond the human: be it adopting and raising a lamb as her child in the case of Maria, or giving birth to the clone of her deceased lover in the case of Rebecca. In animated *White Plastic Sky* Nóra cannot overcome the death of their young child and the prospect of lifelong infertility unless she sacrifices her body and herself in order to help the much-deteriorated ecological cycle of a Hungary sometime after the apocalyptic catastrophe has happened, and humans live under an artificial dome enclosing inner city Budapest.

Taking into consideration the previously discussed elements – the archetype of the mother, which Carl Gustav Jung, in *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster*, associates with “any helpful instinct or impulse” but also with “the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate” (Jung 2004, 15), the mythical figure and concept of (the) crone/ing, and the sociological-demographic processes so pervasive at the European level of a “greying continent”, a temporary conclusion may be drawn. These infertile, yet caring, marginalized, yet heroic female characters are predestined to be(come) the eco-warrior protagonists of peripheral,

usually small national, or Eastern European ecocinema also because of their post-traumatic trajectories explicitly represented within the diegetic worlds.

Narrativity has been long recognized as a chief cultural mode and process of coming to terms with collective traumatization – an aspect that emerges in its entirety from Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart’s comparative theoretical description of “narrative memory” and in opposition to traumatic memory: “in contrast to narrative memory, which is a social act, traumatic memory is inflexible and invariable. Traumatic memory has no social component; it is not addressed to anybody, the patient does not respond to anybody; it is a solitary activity. In contrast, ordinary memory fundamentally serves a social function...” (van der Kolk, van der Hart 1995, 163). As if tune with how post-traumatic growth is described in psychological literature – following “the cognitive reconstruction due to the confrontation with trauma, the subject ... begins ... to pay attention to small things that were previously considered insignificant or unimportant ... resulting in a ... a greater appreciation of life” (Ramos, Leal, 2013, 44) – the struggle of these infertile, scarred women to find post-traumatic balance seems to be what triggers their ecological inclinations and guerilla or sabotage activities. Given their multiply disadvantaged standpoints from where they are scanning the Anthropocenic environment, these European (often small national or Eastern European) middle-aged women are embodying the well-known truism: “[T]rauma is redeemed only when it becomes the source of a survivor mission” (Herman 1992, 207; Woodbury 2019, 6).

Historical and political events that have led to collective cultural traumas – such as the two world or Balkan wars, economic and social depressions, or territorial changes – have been quite numerous on the European continent, and practically the norm in the Eastern European region. Most recently the collapse of communism and the transition to neoliberal market democracies, greeted with hope, has had its human toll – referred to more and more often as the shock doctrine (Naomi Klein) or the “trauma(togenic change)” of 1989 and the “postcommunist trauma” of the 1990s (Piotr Sztompka). These historical, social, and political experiences, paradoxically, also proved beneficial when global challenges like 21st century migration and climate change reached Eastern Europe too, due to a certain resilience and strategies of coping with waves of successive individual and collective traumatization. Thanks to the eco-warrior women’s simple, down-to-earth, and always low-budget methods, we are offered adaptable solutions to dealing with climate anxiety and mitigating the disastrous effects of Earth’s human induced, most possibly negative-direction climate change. The Jungian archetypal, also symbolic trope, in its audio-visual moving image format, and actualized in the form of women determined to fight for and protect the natural world – amid recognizable contemporary processes of ecological disbalance – provides a somewhat calming solution to the great collective trauma that we witness within the Anthropocene: the threat of ecological disaster and human civilization’s ensuing extinction. These ageing eco-warrior female characters may be positioned as the binding material of European, and specifically Eastern European, small national eco-cinema as a generic construction – suggesting a consistent

template which helps peripheral, poorly equipped cinemas to engage with the Anthropocene, or humans altering the “*Earth System* and its components” (Behringer 2010, 274).

Works Cited

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. *Trauma. A Social Theory*. Polity Press, 2012.
- Ballard, Karen. *Understanding Menopause*. Wiley, 2003.
- Behringer, Wolfgang. *A klíma kultúrtörténete. A jégkorszaktól a globális felmelegedésig* [*Kulturgeschichte des Klimas. Von der Eiszeit bis zur globalen Erwärmung*, 2007; *A Cultural History of Climate*. London: Polity Press, 2009]. Trans. Judit Tarnói. Corvina Publishing House, 2010.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. *Coming of Age*. Translated by Patrick O'Brian. G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1972.
- Elleström, Lars. “The Modalities of Media II. An Expanded Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations.” *Beyond Media Borders: Intermedial Relations among Multimodal Media*, edited by Lars Elleström, vol. 1. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 3–91.
- Estes, Clarisa Pinkola. *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. openbooks.tk, 1992. *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/women-who-run-with-the-wolves-clarissa-pinkola-estes>. Accessed 5 October 2024.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays*. Princeton University Press, 1957. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvct0080>. Accessed 5 October 2024.
- Harding, Sandra. “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is ‘Strong Objectivity’?” *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader. Intellectual and Political Controversies*, edited by Sandra Harding. London and New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 127–140.
- Heimkreiter, Anna. *Where Wonder Waits* hub. <https://www.wherewonderwaits.com/the-sage-archetype>. Accessed 5 October 2024.
- Hepp, Andreas. *Deep Mediatization*. Routledge, 2020.
- Hjort, Mette and Petrie, Duncan (ed.). *The Cinema of Small Nations*. Edinburgh University Press, 2007.
- Ingram, David. “The Aesthetics and Ethics of Eco-Film Criticism.” In *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, edited by Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubbitt. London, New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 43–62.
- Ingram, David. “Social Realism and Environmental Crisis. Clío Barnards’ *Dark River*.” *The Routledge Handbook of Ecomedia Studies*, ed. Antonio López, Adrian Ivakhiv, Stephen Rust, Miriam Tola, Alenda Y. Chang and Kiu-Wai Chu. Routledge, 2024, pp. 312–318.
- Ivakhiv, Adrian, Antonio López. “When Do Media Become Ecomedia?” *The Routledge Handbook of Ecomedia Studies*, ed. Antonio López, Adrian Ivakhiv, Stephen Rust, Miriam Tola, Alenda Y. Chang and Kiu-Wai Chu. Routledge, 2024. pp. 19–34.
- Jung, Carl Gustav, and M.-L. von Franz, Joseph L. Henderson, Jolande Jacobi, Aniela Jaffé. *Man and His Symbols*. Anchor Press, Doubleday (1964), 1988.
- Jung, Carl Gustav. *Four Archetypes. Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster*. Translated by R. F. C. Hull. Routledge (1953), 2004.

- Kääpä, Pietari and Hunter Vaughan. “Environmental Media Management. Overcoming the Responsibility Deficit.” *The Routledge Handbook of Ecomedia Studies*, ed. Antonio López, Adrian Ivakihv, Stephen Rust, Miriam Tola, Alenda Y. Chang and Kiu-Wai Chu. Routledge, 2024, pp. 179–186.
- Kääpä, Pietari. “Transnational Approaches to Ecocinema: Charting an Expansive Field.” *Transnational Ecocinema. Film Culture in An Era of Ecological Transformation*, ed. Pietari Kääpä and Tommy Gustafsson. Intellect, 2013, pp. 21–38.
- van der Kolk, Bessel A., and Onno van der Hart. “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and The Engraving of Trauma”. *Trauma. Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 158–182.
- Kovács, András Bálint. *A modern film irányzatai. Az európai művészfilm 1950-1980* [Trends of Modern Film. The European Art Film Between 1950-1980]. Palatinus, 2006.
- Latour, Bruno. *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Transl. by Catherine Porter. Polity Press, 2017.
- McDonald, Scott. “The Ecocinema Experience.” *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, edited by Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubbitt. Routledge, 2013, pp. 17–42.
- Müller, Martin. “In Search of the Global East: Thinking between North and South.” *Geopolitics*, 25(3), pp. 734–755, DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2018.1477757.
- Tokarczuk, Olga. *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*. Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones. Riverhead Books, 2009.
- Ramos, Katarina, Isabela, Leal. “Posttraumatic Growth in the Aftermath of Trauma: A Literature Review About Related Factors and Application Contexts.” *Psychology Community & Health* March 2013, 2(1), pp. 43–54, DOI: 10.5964/pch.v2i1.39.
- Rust, Stephen, and Salma Monani. “Introduction: Cuts and Dissolves – Defining and Situating Ecocinema Studies.” In *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubbitt. Routledge, 2013, pp. 1–14.
- Waade, Anne Marit, Julia Leyda. “Petro-Menopause in «Borgen: Power&Glory»”. *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 18, 2022. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/petro-menopause-in-borgen-power-glory/>. Accessed 21 March 2025.
- Walker, Barbara G. *The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom and Power*. HarperCollins, 1988 (EPUB).
- Willoquet-Maricondi, Paula. “Preface.” In *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*, ed. Paula Willoquet-Maricondi. University of Virginia Press, 2010, pp. xi–xv.
- Woodbury, Zhiwa. “Climate Trauma: Toward a New Taxonomy of Trauma.” *Ecopsychology*, March 2019, pp. 1–8.
- Woodward, Kathleen. “Tribute to the Older Woman: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Ageism.” *Images of Aging; Cultural Representations of Later Life*, edited by Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick. Routledge, 1995, pp. 77–96.
- . “Performing Age, Performing Gender”. *NWSA Journal*, 2006, vol. 18, no. 1 (Spring), pp. 162–189.