

Sex-Swapping the Age-Gap Romance on Screen

The May-December romance is one characterized by a significant age gap between lovers who are at different stages of life: the younger person is in their supposed Spring while the older partner is in their Winter. Historically this configuration involves an older man and an ingénue, and commonly – be it explicitly or implicitly – their story is presented as one of resource exchange: the older man brings to the relationship his money, power, and status while the younger woman brings youth, fertility, and ripe Spring freshness. While routinely boasting romantic and erotic themes, such stories regularly also stir in taboo and social judgment, power play, manipulation and possibilities for genuine love and personal development too.

Likely sparked in part by the MeToo movement and sustained by ongoing interest in the private lives of celebrities, the sexual politics at play in these age-gap relationships have been under close scrutiny. At the 2020 Golden Globe awards ceremony, Ricky Gervais joked, “*Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* [2019] - nearly three hours long - Leonardo DiCaprio attended the premiere and by the end his date was too old for him”. Apparent in the quip was just how mainstream it has become to not only comment on these relationships but notably to criticize a dynamic that had once been accepted as completely normal. Such romances,

of course, are also regularly defended with any scorn decried as a sign that society has become excessively puritanical and predisposed to infantilizing the younger female participants.

The same Zeitgeist so well versed in interrogating the politics underpinning these relationships has delivered a cluster of narratives that sex-swap this age-old dynamic. Instead of the clichéd older man/younger woman dynamic, it is now older women in trysts with younger men. The French language *L'été dernier* (*Last Summer*) (2023) for instance, along with the American docudrama *May December* (2023), both focused on older women having affairs with younger men. The following year, the same dynamic was at the heart of the quartet of films focused on in this essay: *The Idea of You* (2024), *A Family Affair* (2024), *Lonely Planet* (2024), and *Babygirl* (2024). This list of 2024 sex-swapped, age-gap romances is certainly not exhaustive: the film *Between the Temples* (2024) and the Italian mini-series *Inganno* (*Deceitful Love*) (2024) released that same year also told stories of older women/younger men love affairs, demonstrating that the theme has certainly been having a moment.

I begin this essay by presenting the case for discussing the four films together, and introduce the idea of them being sex-swaps. I then present two intertwined explanations for the whys of their

close succession releases: economics and the Zeitgeist.

Introducing the Quartet

Clustering films as being similar is often criticized as a reductive exercise: that drawing links between films based solely on synopsis – as I am doing with these sex-swapped, age-gap love affair narratives – overlooks all the things that make each presentation unique (Rosewarne 2020). This is, of course, accurate: in discussing how films are similar, their differences invariably get papered over. Such reduction is also, problematically, part of the reason that some films in a cluster will be overlooked or even condemned by critics and audiences because they are perceived as little more than the third or fourth film about the exact same topic released that year. *Lonely Planet*, for instance – arguably the worst reviewed of the four films discussed here – was inevitably compared to similar productions released the same year, as apparent in a *New York Times* review: “In this 2024 lineup, *Lonely Planet* is distinctive mostly for being the one starring Laura Dern. Unfortunately, despite its wattage, it pales in comparison to its cousins” (Wilkinson 2024).

Media analysis and also film criticism however, are inherently discussions of the connective tissue that links films to not only those that have gone before but – as is the focus of this essay – those released at approximately the same time. On the occasions when this happens, a snapshot is provided of a society’s preoccupations and anxieties as well as the kinds of storylines considered as bankable at a given moment.

The clustering of *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet*, and *Babygirl* in this essay – as well, to be fair, as occurred in many reviews where the films were discussed together – is that in each instance an affair transpired between an older, successful woman and a younger man. In *The Idea of You* for instance, Solène (Anne Hathaway) is a divorced 40-year-old gallery owner who has an affair with the 25-year-old lead singer of a boy band, Hayes (Nicholas Galitzine). In *A Family Affair*, Brooke (Nicole Kidman) is a widowed author who has an affair with her daughter’s employer, actor Chris (Zac Efron). In *Lonely Planet* Katherine (Laura Dern), also a writer, is freshly out of a long-term relationship and has an affair with the younger Owen (Liam Hemsworth). In *Babygirl*,

Romy (Nicole Kidman) is a married CEO who has an affair with her younger intern, Samuel (Harris Dickinson). In *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair* and *Lonely Planet*, the narratives end with the affairs destined to become committed relationships. In *Babygirl*, Samuel takes a job overseas and Romy seemingly stays in her marriage.

The unique if not wholly unprecedented sex-swapped age-gap relationships offered in these films link them but there are additional commonalities that serve to further justify viewing them as a cluster. At the helm of each film is a superstar actress with a decades-long career. These are female stars who audiences have well-established familiarity with and who have each quite literally grown up on our screens. While comparing careers is fraught – we would first need to agree upon a set of criteria for doing so which is beyond the scope of this essay – it nonetheless is relatively easy to identify that each actress has had a longer career than her on-screen lover and that all three actresses have won Oscars; something that can’t be said for their on-screen male counterparts. While only *Babygirl* plays with power within the storyline in a meaningful way, from a production perspective each actress in each film holds a position of authority on the screen – wielding real-life power as well as the power possessed by her character – and each female protagonist is framed as not merely consenting to her affair but holding power within.

Further linking the films is that women also had significant roles in each production. *The Idea of You* for instance, was based on a novel written by a woman. *A Family Affair* was written for the screen by a woman. *Lonely Planet* and *Babygirl* were both written and also directed by women. While I’ve discussed elsewhere that women scribes and women directors don’t automatically make for a feminist film (Rosewarne 2019), nevertheless, women in production roles certainly help to diversify storytelling, at the very least.

Understanding The Sex-Swap

The 2016 film *Ghostbusters* – the remake of the 1984 film – was a high-profile example of a sex-swap, igniting a firestorm of backlash attributable to it not only being a remake of a “classic”, but for daring to be a reimagining. The 2016 film updated its 1984 source material via a sex-swap:

the four male protagonists were replaced by four women and the female secretary character from the first film was swapped with a male. The 2016 *Ghostbusters* was by no means the first film to reimagine a story with a different gendered cast. This phenomenon, in fact, can be traced back at least as early as 1921 with the German silent film *Hamlet* where the title character was a woman secretly living as a man (Rosewarne 2019).

While changing the sex of a character or a cast is one manifestation of a sex-swap, the same thing can happen where a particular *type* of gendered story gets altered. In 2017, *Girls Trip* and *Rough Night* for instance, took the male ensemble raunchy comedy – think the *Hangover* (2009, 2011, 2013) trilogy – and sex-swapped it by reimagining the story with a female cast. *Widows* (2018) and *The Kitchen* (2019) similarly took the male ensemble heist film template and reimagined it with female thieves. The release of *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet* and *Babygirl* fits this sex-swap template where the standard older man/younger woman narrative trope is flipped.

Certainly the act of taking a male narrative and sex-swapping the characters can be construed as progressive filmmaking, if not necessarily *feminist* filmmaking. In a mediascape where men still occupy most protagonist roles, to have women at the helm is noteworthy. Further, in a world where so few films are successful and where sequels, remakes and franchise expansions dominate (Rosewarne 2020), by offering audiences material they are already somewhat familiar with but tweaking it via a sex-swap, the new women-led film gets a head start. These reasons however, also explain why sex-swapped films are often criticized as crude ways to make a film appear modern and cutting-edge when, in reality, they are often risk averse means to produce female-led content. Further, there is an opportunity cost argument that when a sex-swap is produced, a more original, more authentic *women's* story isn't told (Rosewarne 2019). Each position has merit. It is for these reasons though, I assert that sex-swaps of the classic age-gap romance isn't inherently an act of feminist filmmaking, although definitely can be. While I sideline the debate about the extent of each films' feminism, certainly their sex-swapping makes them modern.

The Modern Age-Gap Narrative

The idea of what constitutes *modern* love or a *modern* relationship or even a modern affair is complicated and worthy of its own analysis elsewhere. Suffice to say here, I focus on the technique of updating a familiar story – in this case the age-gap romance – via a sex-swap to make it feel modern, fresh and newly appealing to audiences. While the sex-swap itself is key in the modernization, so too are other elements. Two aspects that enable us to view *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet*, and *Babygirl* as uniquely contemporary are their modern takes on sex appeal and also sexual agency.

Reimagining Attractiveness

In 2023, then CNN anchor Don Lemon made an off-handed on-camera comment about presidential candidate Nikki Haley – 51-years-old at that time – claiming that she was no longer “in her prime”. Lemon went on to say that a woman is “considered to be in her prime in her 20s and 30s and maybe 40s.” So very controversial were his remarks – many viewing them as completely sexist, notably so when spoken by a man who was actually *older* than Haley, thus highlighting rampant double standards in media – Lemon was fired. While CNN obviously decided Lemon's comments conflicted with their values, it is by no means a new idea that women are perceived to have an expiry date even if it has become unacceptable to articulate it. In Western culture sexual attractiveness has long been bound to youth; that it is the young fertile woman who is the object of lust, not her older counterpart. It is for these reasons that when actress Melissa Joan Hart – known to audiences for her starring role in the teen series *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003) – was, at 47-years-old, cast as a grandmother in *Would You Kill For Me? The Mary Bailey Story* (2023), audiences were largely appalled: “That's it. I'm done ... Let's get on a porch in a muumuu, yelling at teenagers to get off my porch ... I'm spiraling” commented one fan on TikTok (in Solé 2023). Sure, it's biologically possible for a 47-year-old to be a grandmother, but Hart's casting was viewed as part of the very long, troubling history of women's portrayals on screen: either they're the sexy figure of desirability on to whom audience fantasies are projected, or all too quickly they're relegated to mother or grandmother

roles, defined primarily by care duties. The Hart example actually seems much less egregious when compared to some of Hollywood's other high-profile sexist casting decisions premised on the idea of a woman being past her prime. In *Blue Hawaii* (1961), for instance, Angela Lansbury played Elvis Presley's mother. Lansbury was only ten years older than Presley. In *Forrest Gump* (1994) Sally Field was similarly only ten years older than Tom Hanks, yet she played his mother. In *Alexander* (2004), Angelina Jolie was only one year older than her co-star Colin Farrell, yet she too was cast as his mother. A distinctly ridiculous example occurred in *Riding in Cars with Boys* (2001) where Drew Barrymore played the mother to Adam Garcia's character: Barrymore was two years younger than Garcia. Countless similar casting examples can be drawn upon to paint a picture of Hollywood long having had a problem when it comes to imagining roles for women over 40. Something that makes *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet* and *Babygirl* appear modern in comparison is that these characters are not defined by their care duties. Further, in each instance, the female protagonist is presented as attractive and as possessing sex appeal: qualities she proffers to the audience long before she ever meets her affair partner. These characters aren't subjected to a makeover before being recognized by audiences as appealing – these are women who are presented as objectively attractive from the outset.

While there is a point to be made about the actresses in these films not being reflective of what ordinary over-40s look like – as Alison de Souza wrote in *The Straits Times*, “These movies would not work quite so well if their female leads did not look exceptionally youthful” (de Souza, 2024) – to be fair, actors on screen rarely ever look their age nor mirror the appearances of the audience.

Reimagining Appetite

It would be an overstatement to claim that women over 40 suddenly discovered their capacity for arousal in 2023. From *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), to *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone* (1961), to *The Graduate* (1967), to *40 Carats* (1973), to *White Palace* (1990), to *The Piano Teacher* (2001), to *Adore* (2013), to *Film Stars Don't Die in Liverpool* (2017), there are plenty of films where older women allowing themselves to feel and also

act upon arousal, notably so within affairs with younger men. *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet* and *Babygirl* letting their over-40 leads desire sex and then have sex on screen certainly isn't unprecedented. And yet, because all four films came out in close succession, an impression was conveyed that some kind of cultural shift had occurred: that rather than us having to scour film history for isolated examples of age-gap love affairs featuring older women, a batch of them released in the same year signified change. Robinne Lee, actress and the writer of the novel that *The Idea of You* was based on, discussed her own activist intentions with the story as specifically related to sex appeal:

I was learning the hard way that in Hollywood, after 40, women are much less desirable. The assumption was that we ceased to be sexual beings and were thus less valuable. I was eager to prove the industry—and our culture at large—wrong, in my own little way (Lee 2024).

Recurrent in reviews of the four films was the idea that a kind of “reclaiming” was transpiring – of self, of identity, of sexuality. Even Lee made this point in an interview claiming that her novel was about “a woman approaching 40 and reclaiming her sexuality and rediscovering herself” (in Ruiz 2024).

While we can interpret the reclamation assertion in various ways – i.e., as affording older female characters the kind of desirability that Hollywood largely implies they've aged out of – the allegation became almost a cliché in reviews. While the word is generally not defined, the inference is that the sexuality possessed by these characters bucks conventional screen presentations and those constraints generally imposed on such narratives by Hollywood conventions. Most sharply in contrast to most films with older female characters, the women in *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet* and *Babygirl* are not defined by their caretaking responsibilities. Mentioned earlier were older films with older women/younger man affairs. While, for their eras, those earlier films were groundbreaking, in retrospect their clichés about older female sexuality can be viewed as somewhat anachronistic today. The stereotypes of the “MILF” and the “cougar” for instance, have been critiqued on numerous grounds: that such women are ultimately “othered” – that they're flagged as different to the kind of women society normally deems appealing due to their age, due to

them being mothers – and that there is something objectifying and fetishistic about desire for them: as May Friedman argues, the label “denies sexual agency, positioning mothers as the recipients of sexual attention and as sexual objects, rather than as active participants” (Friedman 2014, 50). When we think of characters like Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft) in *The Graduate* or Stifler’s Mom (Jennifer Coolidge) in *American Pie* (1999), both have little identity beyond embodying the sexual fantasies of the men they seduce. Their identity in the films is inextricably bound up with the man’s desires and her wants are restricted to reciprocating his. For the women in *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet* and *Babygirl*, not only are these women the protagonists – a departure from films like *The Graduate* or *American Pie* – but these are women who had very full and fleshed out lives before engaging sexually with their younger lovers, and are granted identities and personalities beyond objectification by their sexual partners.

Hollywood is a business and thus it is one thing to identify that these films are doing something different and something modern, but it’s important to understand the financial drivers of such storylines as opposed to tricking ourselves into believing Hollywood has suddenly decided to do women a favor.

The Economic and Zeitgeist Rationales

Whenever I’ve written on the whys of film and television production, my starting point is almost always the same: money (Rosewarne 2020). We get the screen content that we do because someone thought it would make money. Thus, in 2024, on at least four separate occasions production teams believed that an older woman/younger man romance had the capacity to make money. The why of this occurrence is unpacked in this section, identifying what was happening in the culture that made *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet* and *Babygirl* suddenly seem like good bets.

Capturing the Moment

In one review of *The Idea of You*, the film was described as having “soaked up the cultural zeitgeist” (Ross 2024), and in another as having “hit the zeitgeist” (Proudfoot 2024). A review of *Babygirl* similarly claimed that it “captures the

zeitgeist moment we’re in” (English 2025). While there is, of course, no singular Zeitgeist and sometimes time is needed to fully determine a moment’s social and political preoccupations, nonetheless, viewing these films as responses to contemporary sexual politics is necessary. Years on from the height of MeToo, compounded with more recent American political events – notably restrictions on women’s reproductive freedoms, interpreted widely as a very targeted attack on women’s sexuality – the films are open to interpretation as modern assertions of sexual autonomy in an environment where the power of older women is slowly being recognized.

While generally “Zeitgeist” is deployed in reviews without efforts to identify what the spirit of the age actually is or just how a film harnesses it, one review of *Babygirl* offered an explanation:

... *Babygirl* is an oddly timid film, owing in large part to [director Halina] Reijn’s attempt to fit so many ideas in the zeitgeist into it—the expectations of women in power; intergenerational conflict; age-gap relationships; discomfort with the sexuality of older women; whether sexual kinks are innate or the product of trauma; and, on top of all that, AI and the future of humanity (Schwartz 2025).

While kink, AI and powerplay are very *Babygirl*-specific, the other themes are indeed detectable across all four films. How mainstream these themes actually are, and just how prevalent they are in the Zeitgeist is a topic for another essay, but certainly they are ideas in the ether.

In a crowded media environment with so much content on offer, capturing the Zeitgeist – offering audiences something that seems fresh, cutting edge and distinctly modern – is considered as essential means to achieve cut-through and capture an audience (Rosewarne 2019). For *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet* and *Babygirl*, the age-gap relationships, the power of older women, as well as sex-swapping a Hollywood cliché are each ways to capture the moment we’re in and then sell these ideas back to an audience as an entertainment product.

Chasing an Audience

In Adrian Horton’s *Guardian* review of *A Family Affair*, the critique opens “*A Family Affair*, a new romcom from Netflix, knows the precisely

calibrated fantasy it's offering" (Horton 2024). This idea of *precisely* calibrated fantasy is at the industrial heart of these four films. Romantic content has always chased a female audience and, of course, the four films discussed in this essay were unabashedly designed to court women. These films each offer female audiences entertainment, escapism and perhaps even a little vicarious romance. While not every romance that comes off the Hollywood production line will be a success, nonetheless, that four close succession releases designed to appeal to women in very similar ways is not a surprise: the film industry has long operated from the perspective of thinking that they know what audiences want and catering accordingly, and thus apparently the moment was ripe to reimagine the May-December relationship.

Whether audiences are more savvy today or, with so many platforms offering so much content audiences can afford to be more selective – or perhaps simply because social media gives us “everywoman” insight into what audiences are loving or loathing – there is a perception that consumers are more empowered about what they watch today and can, through their consumer clout, demand a better calibre of content. While what constitutes “better” can obviously be debated, nonetheless, the idea of women characters occupying more diverse roles – across the life course – would be considered preferable to the historic alternative, and is something that boasts distinct audience appeals.

While offering female audiences something better – something more diverse, for instance – than what they are used to is one underpinning of the appeal of these films, so too is their capacity to flatter the audience, likely envisaging viewers that are similarly aged to the characters and who would far rather see themselves as the object of affection of a movie star (as in *A Family Affair*) or a rock star (as in *The Idea Of You*), than in any way akin to Melissa Joan Hart as a grandma in her 40s. The fantasy that a woman over 40 is desirable, desirous and worthy of the affections of a good man is, of course, something many women in the audience would find seductive.

Conclusion

On the day that I completed this essay the fourth film adaptation from Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones series - *Bridget Jones: Mad About*

the Boy (2025) – was released. In it Jones (played by 55-year-old Renée Zellweger) has an affair with Roxster (played by 28-year-old Leo Woodall). Also scheduled for forthcoming release in 2025 are *I Want Your Sex* and *Marty Supreme*, both also with older woman/younger man romances at their helm. Seemingly we're now in our third year of this romantic cluster!

When a certain type of storyline is popular, Hollywood is incentivised to make lookalikes – milking a trend for as long as it can keep making money. The fortunes of *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet* and *Babygirl* along with those of the similar-plotted forthcoming releases will determine whether studios feel there is mileage left in this sex-swapped age-gap narrative or whether audiences have had their fill. Regardless, that in such a short period of time so many media minutes were devoted to this romantic configuration is interesting and quite possibly reflective of a shift of not only what audiences want but notably what Hollywood is willing to offer them.

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