

Sex and Aging in Netflix's *Grace and Frankie*: A Challenge to Dominant Discourse

By Amanda Fiedler for CMN300: Television: Advanced Concepts and Contemporary Issues

Streaming Video on Demand (SVOD) services such as Netflix continue to alter the television landscape. The affordances of a production and distribution network that is free from standards and time restrictions and where high-quality creative output defines the brand identity has resulted in an influx of niche, socio-culturally complex television shows that challenge dominant discourses. *Grace and Frankie* (2015-) – a Netflix Original – exemplifies this trend. With representations that normalise aging – particularly aging sexuality – by reshaping constructs of heteronormativity, *Grace and Frankie* challenges stereotypes about aging women and aging gay men.

Netflix is becoming increasingly influential in the televisual industry. Launched as an online service in 2007, Netflix now has 125 million memberships in over 190 countries (Netflix Media Centre 2018). The Netflix mode of production and distribution has disrupted linear broadcast models, locating it in the 'post-network' era of abundant content and on-demand viewing (Jenner 2014; Krainitzki 2016; Radošinská 2017). Free from restrictive content standards and associated programming constraints, Netflix provides a platform where diverse genres and tropes can be explored (Landau 2016:10). Ted Sarandos, Chief Content Officer of Netflix, has described the Netflix culture as one of creative freedom (Landau 2016:11) where the emphasis is on variety of content to appeal to diverse and often niche audiences (Radošinská 2017:11). Fundamental to the Netflix brand is the distribution of 'quality TV', where socio-culturally complex narrative structures facilitate the exploration of progressive storylines and encourage binge-watching behaviour in the audience (Jenner 2016:308; Mittel 2006:31). Such serialised productions, comprising episodic and ongoing storylines enable in-depth character development resulting in multi-layered representations that can challenge familiar stereotypes (Krainitzki 2016:209; Mittel 2006). The idea of 'quality' is enhanced by engaging A-list talent for productions, further legitimising the position of Netflix within the televisual ecology (Jenner 2017:313; Landau 2016:10). This paradigm shift toward flexible production, distribution and consumption allows Netflix to produce shows that might not otherwise exist.

Grace and Frankie is a Netflix Original production that would struggle to find air time on linear television. The story revolves around an unlikely friendship that develops between two women – Grace and Frankie – after their husbands-of-forty-years, Robert and Sol announce they are gay, in love and intent on marrying each other. Through interweaving, ongoing and episodic storylines, season one of *Grace and Frankie* explores aging and sexuality as the 70+ year-old characters establish their new identities. *Grace and Frankie* stars highly regarded actors Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin, Martin Sheen and Sam Waterson, who bring cultural capital and industry acumen to the show. The reputes of previous work and their media personas provide an intertextual juxtaposition to the diegetic characters, so when Grace worries about her sexual appeal (season one, episode eight (S.1., E.8.)) and Robert delicately caresses Sol

(S.1., E.9.), the audience is reminded of Jane Fonda as a sex symbol in *Barbarella* (1968) and Martin Sheen as a masculine icon in *Apocalypse Now* (1979). There is an insentient convergence between the real and imaginary when Grace – requiring hip surgery in a dream sequence (S.1., E.5.) – proclaims it as her first surgery and Frankie implies that Grace has had plastic surgery – which Jane Fonda publicly admitted added 10 years to her working life (Shoard 2015; Tortajada et al. 2018). This binary verisimilitude adds relevance to the thematic concerns of social acceptance and self-worth experienced by older people. The foregrounding of plot development allows for an in-depth exploration of the individual characters and the emotional journey they undergo (Mittel 2006:32). The overarching storylines of Sol and Robert’s relationship and the oft-fraught friendship between Grace and Frankie entwine in complexity with the smaller arcs of Grace’s renewed sexual identity, Frankie’s sense of emotional abandonment and the myriad challenges of adjustment faced by their extended families. With aging characters who smoke, take drugs, drink, swear and openly discuss their sexuality, *Grace and Frankie* does not fit the constraints of linear broadcast channels. Yet, these tropes within the socio-culturally complex narrative are essential to the important work of challenging dominant discourses about ageing, sex and sexuality undertaken by *Grace and Frankie*.

Mainstream media is ageist. Older people are underrepresented and most often portrayed as sexually inactive, feeble-minded and unwell (Liddy 2015:600; Waltz & Gran 2016:30; Wohlmann & Oró Piqueras 2016:11). Visibly older women, in particular, are unusual in popular television (Van Bauwel 2018). When represented, they regularly reflect the dominant discourse of age denial, expression of shame and anxiety about age and an obsession with the retention of youthfulness (Tortajada et al. 2018; Van Bauwel 2018; Waltz & Gran 2016). In contrast, *Grace and Frankie* normalises ageing by challenging those cultural ideals through nuanced representations of older women (Goltz 2016:187). Grace is fashionable, health conscious and sexually active. While apparently conforming to stereotypical conventions, such as following a strict diet regime to maintain her youthful figure, Grace actively critiques those feminine ideals (S.1., E.5.), stating that she is ‘quite good’ at denying herself, after years of experience, thereby emphasising the social expectations of womanhood. Furthermore, in ending her relationship with Guy due to unfulfilling sex and asserting her right to satisfaction, Grace’s portrayal subverts the ageist trope of passive acceptance and slow decline: she is both sexually active and independent. Where Grace reflects ‘successful aging’ (Tortajada et al. 2018:2), Frankie’s portrayal of femininity is a contrasting construct; she is an alternative, drug taking, grey haired woman who eats whipped cream for breakfast. Although progressive in many ways, as heard in her forthright discussions on vaginal dryness and the rise of STDs in the aging population (S.1., E.8.), Frankie is technologically challenged. After buying a computer (S.1., E.7.), Frankie declares, ‘I want to be part of the conversation;’ challenging the social invisibility and stereotypical ideals experienced by older people, particularly older women. In portraying multi-dimensional characters who are sexually, socially and intellectually active, *Grace and Frankie* challenges dominant representations of aging women in popular culture. Through criticism of mediated and social conventions, the complexities of gendered aging as constructs are accentuated, whereas heteronormative ideals are deconstructed.

In addition to concepts of aging femininity, *Grace and Frankie* also challenges dominant discourses about homosexuality, with Robert and Sol ‘coming out’ in their seventies. Gay men are often maligned in popular culture, typically represented by two main stereotypes: the lonely and potentially ‘criminal’ predator – such as Jake Randall in *Outlander* (2014-) or the overtly effeminate gay providing comic relief, like Titus Andromedon in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2017-) (Porfido 2009:166; Goltz 2016:188). The intersectional aging gay man further challenges ‘acceptable’ gay masculinity – represented as young, muscled and attractive (Avilla-Saavedra 2009:8). Even in television shows acclaimed for their positive gay representations, such as *Modern Family* (2009-), aging gay men are positioned as figures of mockery and openly disparaged, while gay relationships are physically undemonstrative (Fouts & Inch 2005:42; Goltz 2016:188; Porfido 2009:165). In contrast, Robert and Sol are represented as successful, sexually fulfilled and positive about their future together. Throughout season one of *Grace and Frankie*, Robert and Sol’s relationship reshapes the heteronormative matrix as a gay space (Dhaenens 2014:522). They move in together, attend social gatherings as a couple and follow hegemonic conventions for establishing a loving relationship. The symbolic devices of heteronormativity are transposed to their life: photos depicting children and family unity, domestic comfort, wedding planning and bickering over inconsequential matters – such as where Sol will keep his tablets (S.1., E.6.). They are emotionally and physically demonstrative, with their affection expressed in a romantic cliché of gentle kissing and caressing (Barbosa 2017:1441). Where Grace and Frankie must establish identities outside of social norms, Robert and Sol’s new identities are predicated on those same normative ideals. In addition, like Grace and Frankie’s nuanced representations, Robert and Sol resist static representations of queer identity. Sol’s assertion he is gay because he loves only one man, Robert (S.1., E.11.), disrupts stereotypes of gay promiscuity like those espoused by the caterer, Jeff, who argues that the point of being gay is to shed heteronormative conventions (S.1., E.11.). In contrast, Robert initially wishes to maintain his ‘straight’ façade and asserts they will not be ‘gay with a vengeance’ (S.1., E.2.). He appears uneasy with his gay identity, although he has had more homosexual encounters than Sol and, interestingly, as the narrative unfolds, adopts some stereotypical ‘camp’ mannerisms. Robert and Sol are not confined by limiting portrayals, instead expressing identities in flux. Combined with their visible emotional and physical intimacy, their representation of aging gay men challenges dominant discourses of homosexuality and heteronormativity.

Such challenges are made possible through the affordances of the Netflix SVOD service. Aligning brand identity with the distribution of ‘quality TV’, Netflix allows creative freedom within its production slate, resulting in an influx of niche productions. The Netflix Original, *Grace and Frankie* is one example. By disrupting heteronormative ideals of sexuality and social agency, *Grace and Frankie* rejects the invisibility most often associated with multimodal representations of aging women and aging gay men in popular culture. Instead, Grace, Frankie, Robert and Sol normalise aging and through socio-culturally complex storyline narratives, explore its nuanced complexities.

List of References

- Apocalypse Now*, 1979, Francis Ford Coppola (Dir.), Zoetrope Studios.
- Avila-Saavedra, G 2009, 'Nothing queer about queer television: televised construction of gay masculinities', *Media, Culture & Society*, vol.31, no.1, pp.5–21, doi:10.1177/0163443708098243
- Barbarella*, 1968, Roger Vadim (Dir.), Marianne productions & Dino de Laurentiis Cinematografica.
- Barbosa, KG 2017, 'Affects and female age in Grace and Frankie', *Estudos Feministas*, vol. 25, no. 3, pp.1437–1447, doi:10.1590/1806-9584.2017v25n3p1437
- Burroughs, B 2018, 'House of Netflix: Streaming media and digital lore', *Popular Communication*, doi:10.1080/15405702.2017.1343948
- Dhaenens, F 2014, 'Articulations of queer resistance on the small Screen,' *Continuum*, vol.28, no.4, pp.520-531, doi:10.1080/10304312.2014.907869
- Fouts, G, & Inch, R 2005, 'Homosexuality in TV situation comedies', *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 49, no.1, pp. 35-45, doi:10.1300/J082v49n01_02
- Goltz, D 2016, 'Still looking: Temporality and gay aging in US television,' in M Oró Piqueras & A Wohlmann (eds), *Age: Aging and Old Age in TV Series*, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost, viewed 22 May 2018, http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.usc.edu.au:2048/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzExMDk1OTdfX0FO0?sid=f3f1d166-461a-4ddc-b374-0a0f1cb1f29e@sessionmgr104&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp_9&rid=0
- Grace and Frankie*, Season one 2015, creators Marta Kauffman & Howard J Morris, Netflix.
- Jenner, M 2016, 'Is this TVIV? On Netflix, TVIII and binge-watching,' *New Media & Society*, vol.18, no.2, pp.257–273, doi:10.1177/1461444814541523
- Jenner, M 2017, 'Binge-watching: Video-on-demand: quality TV and mainstreaming fandom,' *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 20, no.3, pp.304–320, doi:10.1177/1367877915606485
- Krainitzki, E 2016, "'You've got time.'" Ageing and queer temporality in Orange is the new black,' in M Oró Piqueras & A Wohlmann (eds), *Age: Aging and old age in TV series*, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost, viewed 22 May 2018, http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.usc.edu.au:2048/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzExMDk1OTdfX0FO0?sid=f3f1d166-461a-4ddc-b374-0a0f1cb1f29e@sessionmgr104&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp_9&rid=0

Landau, N 2016, *TV outside the box: Trailblazing in the digital television revolution*, Focal Press, New York.

Liddy, S 2015, 'Stories we tell ourselves: Writing the mature female protagonist,' *Sexuality & Culture*, vol. 19, pp.599–616, doi:10.1007/s12119-015-9280-7

Mittel, J 2006, 'Narrative complexity in contemporary American television', *Velvet light trap*, no. 58, pp. 29-40, viewed 22 May 2018, <http://link.galegroup.com.ezproxy.usc.edu.au:2048/apps/doc/A151394853/LitRC?u=unsc&sid=LitRC&xid=c69e2475>

Modern Family, 2009-present, creators Steven Levitan and Christopher Lloyd, ABC.

Netflix Media Center 2018, *About Netflix*, viewed 9 May 2018, <https://media.netflix.com/en/about-netflix>

Outlander, 2014-present, creator Ronald D Moore, Starz.

Porfido, G 2009, 'Queering the small screen: Homosexuality and televisual citizenship in spectacular societies', *Sexualities*, vol.12, no. 2, pp. 161–179, doi:10.1177/1363460708100917

Radošinská, J 2017, 'New trends in production and distribution of episodic television drama: Brand Marvel-Netflix in the post-television era', *Communication Today*, vol.8, no.1, pp.4–28, 9 May 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.usc.edu.au/docview/1902049658?accountid=28745>

Shoard, C 2015, 'Jane Fonda: 'Plastic surgery bought me a decade,' *The Guardian*, 21 May 2015, viewed 27 May 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/may/21/jane-fonda-youth-plastic-surgery-sex-cannes>

'The Credit Cards,' *Grace and Frankie*, 2015-present, creators Marta Kauffman & Howard J Morris, Netflix, 8 May 2015.

'The Fall,' *Grace and Frankie*, 2015-present, creators Marta Kauffman & Howard J Morris, Netflix, 8 May 2015.

'The Earthquake,' *Grace and Frankie*, 2015-present, creators Marta Kauffman & Howard J Morris, Netflix, 8 May 2015.

'The Spelling Bee', *Grace and Frankie*, 2015-present, creators Marta Kauffman & Howard J Morris, Netflix, 8 May 2015.

'The Sex,' *Grace and Frankie*, 2015-present, creators Marta Kauffman & Howard J Morris, Netflix, 8 May 2015.

'The Invitation,' *Grace and Frankie*, 2015-present, creators Marta Kauffman & Howard J Morris, Netflix, 8 May 2015.

'The Secrets,' *Grace and Frankie*, 2015-present, creators Marta Kauffman & Howard J Morris, Netflix, 8 May 2015.

Tortajada, I, Dhaenens F & Willem, C 2018, 'Gendered ageing bodies in popular media culture,' *Feminist Media Studies*, vol.18, no.1, pp.1-6, doi:10.1080/14680777.2018.1410313

Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt, 2017-present, creators Robert Carlock and Tina Fey, Netflix.

Van Bauwel, S 2018, 'Invisible golden girls? Post-feminist discourses and female ageing bodies in contemporary television fiction,' *Feminist Media Studies*, vol.18, no.1, pp.21-33, doi:10.1080/14680777.2018.1409969

Waltz, M & Gran, BK 2016, 'The portrayal of older adults in popular TV shows,' in G Joseph, (ed.) *Diverse perspectives on aging in a changing world*, Routledge 2016, viewed 14 May 2018,
https://books.google.com.au/books?hl=en&lr=&id=FUAlDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Diverse+Perspectives+on+Aging+in+a+Changing+World&ots=-2ppFTF1X_&sig=Ea5CDPclG8kj4yzumEpH-I4Nwc8&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Diverse%20Perspectives%20on%20Aging%20in%20a%20Changing%20World&f=false

Wohlmann, A & Oró Piqueras, M 2016, 'Serial narrative, temporality and aging: An introduction,' in M Oró Piqueras & A Wohlmann (eds), *Age: Aging and old age in TV series*, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost, viewed 22 May 2018,
http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.usc.edu.au:2048/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzExMDk1OTdfX0FO0?sid=f3f1d166-461a-4ddc-b374-0a0f1cb1f29e@sessionmgr104&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp_9&rid=0