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Of bees, boobies and Frank Sinatra: Masculinity and Alzheimer's in contemporary European film comedies

Stefan Horlacher and Franziska Röber

This article examines how masculinity, sexuality, Alzheimer's and older age are conceived of and intertwined with one another in a selection of film comedies, both mainstream and non-mainstream, produced for European and American markets. We ask whether and how traditional Alzheimer's and gender stereotypes are used (but also questioned), what this tells us about hegemonic but also implicit, unacknowledged, and probably alternative concepts of masculinity, and whether there is a trend in films on Alzheimer's away from the perspective of those caring for patients towards narratives that prioritize experiences of the persons living with dementia.¹ If the scripts of traditional hegemonic masculinity are no longer suitable for male Alzheimer's patients, we inquire which alternative scripts are offered, how the relation between Alzheimer's, masculinity/gender identity, maleness, age and sexuality is presented and how the films deal with the paradox that men with Alzheimer's, too, define themselves mainly 'through the most available and accessible avenues legitimated' in heteronormative patriarchal societies, i.e., 'sex, sexuality and male dominance of women' (Hope qtd. in Jackson 2016, 81).

¹ Like most scholars, we use the terms Alzheimer's and dementia interchangeably. Dementia is an umbrella term for a variety of symptoms that affect 'memory, other cognitive abilities' as well as '[behaviours] that interfere significantly with a person's ability to maintain their activities of daily living' (WHO 2019). Among various forms of dementia, Alzheimer's is the most common form, contributing to 60–70 per cent of cases (WHO 2019). However, there are no clear-cut lines between the set of symptoms that constitute Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia. As some of the films analysed in this article do not clearly state which form of dementia their protagonists suffer from, we generally assume that the protagonists are suffering from Alzheimer's.

One reason why we focus on the intersection of film comedies, Alzheimer's, sexuality, and masculinity is that comedies have been largely overlooked in gerontological research, given that most films dealing with Alzheimer's belong to the 'serious' and more prestigious genre of drama; a genre which seems to naturally go along with the disease, given that the 'dominant dementia discourse is decline, loss and negativity' (Sandberg 2018, 26). Films on Alzheimer's seem to favour a tragic tone and, more often than not, focus on female protagonists.² Portrayals of male dementia patients seem to be few and far between; a tendency which echoes the 'feminization' of Alzheimer's by representing women as the centre of the illness, both as carers and as patients.

The second reason for our focus pertains to the genre itself: While some basic research has been done on the vast majority of films featuring Alzheimer's, i.e., movies such as *The Notebook* (2004), *Iris* (2001), *Mr Holmes* (2015), or *Happy Tears* (2010), films that tackle the motif of Alzheimer's from a decidedly different, i.e., comic perspective, are still the exception. In the face of the (often tragic) portrayal of dementia on screen, however, we argue that the apparent unsuitability of comedy might be the very reason why different and more affirmative approaches to dementia may be found in 'funny' films, as these films, for instance, can invite the audience to adopt a 'laughing-with' and as its consequence a 'suffering-with' position based on inclusion and the notion of our shared humanity.

Forcing audiences to assess characters with Alzheimer's and their situations may help to overcome binary understandings of the illness so that the Alzheimer's patient ceases to be an object to be pitied or even laughed at. Here, again, it is the genre of comedy which lends itself to critical analysis, especially if one takes into consideration that, more than drama or tragedy, comedy (at least theoretically) allows the films to shift away from portraying the illness as a burden which seeks to rob the patients of their agency, and to offer alternative perspectives.

We argue that because of its inherent logic and unique perspective, comedy³ has the power to challenge hegemonic discourses of stigmatization, isolation,

² Notably some of the more commonly known and critically acclaimed films such as *Iris* (2001), *Still Alice* (2014), and *The Iron Lady* (2011) are first and foremost dramas, focusing on the struggles and loss of agency faced by those suffering from the illness.

³ Parts of the following paragraphs are based on Horlacher and Röber 2020; for a more elaborate discussion of comedy and the comic, see Horlacher 2009.

and exclusion. Viewing the often-crushing diagnosis and illness in a humorous light may help to dismantle negative stereotypes by employing 'a special type of communication impossible in everyday life' that 'involves a temporary suspension of everyday norms and anarchically subverts established boundaries', thereby unsettling power structures, 'often making them visible in the first place' (Kamm and Neumann 2016, 6). This unsettling might also help to remove 'the horror and the embarrassment associated with dementia [...] in order to avoid stigma and discrimination' (Medina 2018, 3).

If we differentiate between two fundamental aspects inherent to the comic, firstly denigration or exclusion, which works with the help of contrasts and incongruencies, and secondly, valorization or inclusion, which is liberating and often has recourse to the grotesque, thereby emphasizing the corporeal and the creaturely, then, at least theoretically, comedy can offer the possibility of valorization and inclusion of the repressed, of the marginalized, i.e. of the Alzheimer's patient. Through humour and laughter, comedies can function as powerful instruments of inclusion that challenge and subvert the established orthodoxies, authorities, and hierarchies (Horlacher 2009, 18). Thus, they may reformulate 'for a temporary period at least, socially sanctioned power relationships, bringing the margin to the centre, making it visible and giving it voice' (Stott 2014, 35).

1. Introducing the corpus of analysis

By far the most successful production discussed here is Til Schweiger's *Honig im Kopf* (2014). The film grossed \$78,127,384, was seen by 7.19 million viewers, was the most successful movie in Germany in 2014, and ranks as number six among the most successful German movie productions since 1968 (insidekino.com). In this, it fundamentally differs from its American remake *Head Full of Honey* (2018), which was pulled from distribution in the US after only six days (grossing \$12,300 in the US and \$138,844 in total⁴) and which was lambasted by critics and audiences alike. Though *Honig im Kopf* and *Head Full of Honey*

⁴ All following box office numbers and grossing numbers are taken from the respective imdb.com pages.

are essentially the same film, albeit with slightly different cultural and national angles, Schweiger's US-remake was derided as 'stunningly awful' (Buck 2019), with an 'idiotic plot' (ibid.), i.e., a 'wildly implausible, overlong jumble' which would have 'required a scalpel, but saw the blunt end of a sledgehammer instead' (Goldstein 2018).⁵

La Finale (2018), directed by Robin Sykes, grossed \$4,742,293 worldwide and received mostly positive reviews which lauded its script and intergenerational focus. At the 21st 'Festival du film de comédie de l'Alpe d'Huez', *La Finale* won the 'Grand Prix' and its protagonist, Thierry Lhermitte, the 'Prix d'Interprétation masculine.' The fourth film analysed here, *Vater Morgana* (2010), was directed by Till Endemann and grossed \$7,609, rendering it more of a niche film.⁶ It was deemed pleasant entertainment (Engel 2010), with the performances of Michael Gwisdek and Christian Ulmen receiving approval overall, while it was criticized for its lack of emotional depth (Schwickert 2010). From a technical perspective, it is probably the most conventional of the films analysed here, relying mostly on slapstick and over-illustrated physical humour.

The films analysed are rather similar in their choice of male protagonists⁷ who are 'third agers', i.e., male retirees who, at the onset of their disease, are active, healthy, autonomous, and engaged with and in society, or who have just lost their wives and are confronted with a new and demanding situation. This holds true for Amandus/Amadeus (Dieter Hallervorden/Nick Nolte) in *Honig/Honey*, who is a veterinarian and after his wife's death moves in with his son Niko's/Nick's (Til Schweiger/Matt Dillon) family, and for Roland (Thierry Lhermitte) in *La Finale*. Roland had to give up his brasserie in Paris about one

⁵ This difference in reception of Schweiger's films could be due to the fact that *Honig im Kopf* 'retains its provincial character and is not cosmopolitan'. This, together with its overly moralistic undertone and its focus on retaining an uncritical status quo, both of which also characterize its remake, spelled trouble as it became obvious that German audiences were too parochial and 'undemanding' in what they watch. Thus, the film, contrary to how German critics argued, was not 'too demanding for US audiences' (Decker in Landsberg 2019) but simply not sophisticated, innovative or critical enough.

⁶ The numbers for *Vater Morgana* might seem, in comparison to the previous examples, extremely low. This is mostly due to its limited release. While *Honig/Honey* and *La Finale* were released in most cinemas nationally and, in terms of *Honey*, internationally and were preceded by a large-scale advertising campaign, both the advertising and the subsequent release of *Vater Morgana* was smaller in scale, with *Vater Morgana* being only released in selected cinemas in Germany before being made available by syndication (programmokino.de).

⁷ Given that all of the films analysed focus on a very limited number of specific masculinities which are embodied by male protagonists, and given that this is only a first foray into the field of masculinity and Alzheimer's, this article does not take concepts such as female masculinity or transgender masculinities into account.

year before the main action of the film is set and now lives with his daughter Delphine (Émilie Caen) and her family in Lyon. Though Walther (Michael Gwisdek) in *Vater Morgana* is placed in a nursing home and the use of props such as a cane denote him as 'old', he is nevertheless perceived as an active 'showman', using the nursing home rather as a hideout and more for his criminal and sexual activities than as a place in which he is actually being cared for.

Thus, none of the films follow traditional representations of frail, pitiable Alzheimer's patients in dire need of care; instead, the films feature active and mobile protagonists. With the exception of *Honig* and *Honey* (and both films only devote very few scenes to the final stages of the disease), none of the movies go into any detail on what severe cases or deterioration might look like; presumably both for dramatic reasons and due to the perceived 'intrinsic unwatchability' (Williams et al. 2007, 2) of the later stages of the disease, they rather choose to end on positive or at least harmonious notes.

2. Hegemonic masculinity (revoked), the trickster, and the ability to voice feelings

Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity seems best suited to explain how, in the comedies analysed, the male Alzheimer's patients deal with their predicament, why they adopt certain strategies, and to which degree these strategies mirror extratextual realities. Though 'masculinity varies with both time and place, creating a multitude of masculinities', Bethany Coston and Michael Kimmel argue that 'generally, a dominant model exists – a "hegemonic" definition of masculinity, to which men are expected to adhere' (2013, 192). For the United States, they trace the dominant image of masculinity back to the nineteenth century and identify it as 'the self-made man' who, they argue, is generally known 'for manly stoicism and fierce resolve, he was emotionally impenetrable, an armour-plated machine who showed no weakness' (2013, 192).

These characteristics of what could almost be called an archetypal version of traditional masculinity are by no means limited to the United States and correspond to what Robert Brannon and Deborah S. David define as 'the four

basic “rules” of manhood’ (Coston and Kimmel 2013, 192; Brannon and David 1976, 1–48). In their rather reductionist categorization, they characterize masculinity as being defined by distance from what is considered to be feminine, and as being characterized by wealth, power, and success, by reliability and stoicism, as well as by risk-taking behaviour and aggression.

For healthy men, but also for men with dementia, concepts of personhood and self are often based on a continuity and stability of gender and sexual identity over the life course; a continuity that is perceived as ‘natural’ and desirable. While the categories above, thus, still function as guidelines for older men affected with Alzheimer’s, in the following we will focus on sexuality as one of the staples of the construction of later life masculinity. Not only do people, at least in the early stages of dementia, ‘continue to regard themselves as sexual beings’ (Sandberg 2020, 2), but many conceptions of later life masculinity are also traditionally understood ‘to be linked to the penis and the ability to gain an erection’ so that the loss of virility (and thus sexuality) ‘is consequently commonly understood as [...] a threat to masculinity’ (Sandberg 2011, 19). As such, older men, in order to be perceived as ‘real men’, are tasked to conform to a ‘play hard, stay hard’ mentality which corresponds to a rather Manichaeian view, similar to binary understandings of the illness (before/after), of gender (masculine/feminine), and of sex (male/female).

Indeed, sexuality and the expression thereof seem to be a cornerstone in constructing later life masculinities in the films analysed: In *La Finale*, we encounter a *sportif* and good-looking male protagonist who used to run his own business, is used to driving a Porsche 911, and openly alludes to sexuality when his daughter gives him his medication and he jokingly asks whether this is Viagra (00:04:52). Sexuality is also, more implicitly, addressed when Roland is introduced to Juliette, another Alzheimer’s patient, three times in a row, with both of them starting to flirt after each successive meeting. On the one hand, the film uses this to create laughter and to make fun of the situation, on the other hand, there is also an openness and a candid quality involved which at least hints at an alternative reality symbolized by the community of Alzheimer’s patients on their bus tour. Roland can join them only for a few hours, but the film implies that this is probably where he belongs. Though the film hints at the possibility of a romantic relationship, this is finally negated – as is sexuality,

which not only in the logic of this but also in Schweiger's films is still a taboo for the old, the sick, the handicapped.

The funny, but to a certain degree surreal or dreamlike sequence of falling in love three times with the same person and of joining an alternative community is balanced with moments that reveal another side of Roland's character: a side characterized by racist and misogynist tendencies. What becomes evident here is a kind of behaviour already shown in the very first scene of the film when, in his brasserie, Roland thinks that a customer has not paid his bill and he – in a rather unfriendly tone – shows him 'le carton rouge' (00:01:22). Roland clearly stands, or rather stood, for a traditional form of hegemonic masculinity. He is used to being in control, to give orders and to monitor others, and is shown checking his ledgers long after he has sold his restaurant – a scene that mirrors the beginning of the film, thus harking back to his life 'before' the illness.

This configuration of masculinity and the power it comes with is also evident when he explains to his nephew that you have to fight for your right, that power has to be taken ('le droit ne se donne pas, il se prend' 00:40:37). However, 'his right' is linked to his subject position as a functioning male in a patriarchal socio-symbolic order. The moment his disease sets in, Roland starts to lose his specific hold on reality and power until he does not even recognize himself in the mirror and is reintegrated – almost as a child – into the fold of the family, taking over the room of his nephew Jean-Baptiste (Rayane Bensetti), who leaves for Paris.

From the few scenes in which Roland is shown in his brasserie in Paris and the few moments of insight (if they can be called such) where old prejudices resurface, we can conclude that before his illness, Roland represented a rather traditional, white middle-class model of hegemonic masculinity which is now slowly disintegrating. Though he does not show bodily frailties and though there are not many awkward or really embarrassing scenes, he comes across as confused, as losing his grip on reality, as not being in control anymore, not even of himself. His joke on Viagra can be read as a way of dealing with his loss as he has to give up all the symbols which stand for hegemonic masculinity – on his way to Paris he even forgets how to change gears and has to hand over his Porsche to his grandson.

This symbolic 'emasculatation' is counterbalanced by misogynist outbreaks, the most noticeable being in a police car where, in the presence of Jean-Baptiste

and a male police officer, he starts to guess what kind of sports an accompanying female police officer practices because of her looks and her body. He comes up with a barrage of stereotypes (including badminton, figure skating, and synchronized swimming), and is completely shocked when he learns that she plays football: 'et vous faites comment pour les amorti poitrine? Enfin le foot, faut des couilles' ['and how do you stop a ball – with your chest? Football, well, you need balls to play football'] (00:36:05–00:37:08). However, this outburst does not lead to male bonding, there is no patriarchal dividend, no complicity the men (and the audience) share. Roland's misogynist outburst only speeds up his further isolation so that in Sykes's film, this form of masculinity discredits itself as outdated, racist, chauvinist and vanishing, which, due to Alzheimer's, it indeed is.

Walther, the protagonist of *Vater Morgana*, is one of the few characters who live (more or less) together with a female partner and supposedly retain an active sexuality. He is presented as the 'Frank Sinatra of the nursing home', where he sings to entertain the patients. While Walther is, on the surface, functioning well by, for instance, being dressed elegantly in white, his introductory scene clearly sets up his illness as he forgets the lyrics to the song 'My Way' (00:08:54). This lapse is symbolic and stands for both the setting in of Alzheimer's as well as for a growing dependency on Britta (Ulrike Krumbiegel), his nurse who is also his lover. Though the illness resurfaces again and again in Walther's verbal slips and his lapses in memory, it does not impede him in any other way. Throughout the film, Walther is revealed to be a charming fraud, an elegant womanizer without scruples who flirts with the female patients in the nursing home.

At first glance, Walther's masculinity is in no way subdued or changed by Alzheimer's. Though he becomes less sure of himself and is conscious of his lapses, he is still able to enjoy life, for instance by ordering champagne and oysters for consumption in a bathtub when hiding in a hotel with his son Lutz (Christian Ulmen). Moreover, he is also able to functionalize his illness, i.e. by using his Alzheimer's diagnosis to feign incontinence in order to avoid having to defend himself against his son. Even at the very end of the film, he does not appear as the suffering patient but as the same trickster and charmer he has been right from the start, even making fun of Alzheimer's and celebrating his romantic relationship (01:21:03–01:21:22).

Walther is all shine and very little substance, a charming conman changing from one personality to another, all performance but no core. As long as he performs and is on stage, he is alive, the very embodiment of Pierre Bourdieu's habitus of an 'old school' seductive heterosexual masculinity. This phallic image, however, is perforated and slowly starts to crumble at the margins when the first symptoms of his disease show. This tension between the active womanizer and the vision of the passive recipient of care the film hints at, between being able to plan and commit a crime only to forget where the loot has been hidden, characterizes the film right from the start when Walther, realizing his health problems, alludes to Britta's double function as lover and as nurse:

Walther Passt du auch auf mich auf wenn ich nicht mehr ... [Will you take care of me, even when I ...]

Britta ...auch wenn du mich vergessen hast? [...even when you've forgotten about me?]

Vater Morgana 00:09:15–00:09:25

Walther embodies a very traditional heteronormative masculinity which is conscious of being threatened, transformed, and probably erased. *Vater Morgana* does not really offer an answer to these problems but leaves Walther's fate (as he enters a submarine to flee to Cuba in the end) – just as the consequences of his Alzheimer's diagnosis – ambiguous and ultimately unexplored.

However, there is also another aspect of masculinity and Alzheimer's in this film: Similarly to *Honig* and *Honey*, the disease is functionalized to enable men to talk about their feelings and create a bond between estranged fathers and sons. Right from the beginning of *Vater Morgana*, it is obvious that Walther has been an uncaring and absent father who has the tendency to appear only in order to wreck his son's life. From this perspective, Walther is a threat to his unadventurous, slightly boring son Lutz who is fully aware of this, and almost throughout the entire film refuses to call Walther 'father'. This changes only in the very end when the threat of Alzheimer's combined with – or even symbolized by – Walther's disappearance in a submarine makes it possible for the two men to openly declare their feelings, declare their love: 'Ich liebe Dich, mein Sohn' ['I love you, my son']; 'Ich liebe Dich auch, Papa' ['I love you too, Dad'] (01:19:45–01:20:00).

This is similar to scenes in *Honig* and *Honey* where Alzheimer's virtually destroys power structures and hierarchies linked to hegemonic masculinity and sets men free to give voice to their emotions. Only in moments of acute crisis are Niko/Nick and Amandus/Amadeus able to open up, to acknowledge their feelings, and thus their love for one another: Niko is in tears when his father says:

Amandus 'Ich liebe dich' ['I love you'] (00:58:11).

Niko 'Weißt du denn gar nichts mehr?' ['Don't you remember anything anymore?']

Amandus 'Nee, alles weg, da ist nur noch n' Loch' ['No, it's all gone, there is only emptiness'] (00:59:08–00:59:25).

Amandus cries and both men embrace, reduced to their bare being and shared humanity, as if the disease enables them to break through the carapaces of their masculinity. Or, in Sarah's (Emily Mortimer) words: 'He's always loved you. But now he can say it' (*Honey*, 01:10:41–01:11:00).

This is somewhat paradoxical since it is finally a disease affecting language and memory that enables the subjects to speak; at least in some of the films, Alzheimer's opens a bridge into the semiotic, the emotional, the non-rational and makes it possible for both, patients and relatives, fathers and sons, to acknowledge and to voice their innermost feelings. In other words: Alzheimer's becomes a means to transfer some kind of 'inner truth of the (male) subject' into the symbolic and thus creates not necessarily a new but an explicit and more conscious kind of knowledge for all concerned.

3. Instead of alternative masculinities: Functionalizing stereotypes

If the episodes in which voice is given to the unspoken are notable in *Vater Morgana*, *Honig*, and *Honey*, it is no less notable that Schweiger's films contain more sexual connotations, and even denotations, than any other of the films analysed here. Especially in *Honig* and *Honey*, sexual connotations are obvious markers of a traditional but outdated kind of masculinity: When Amandus/Amadeus is forced to move in with his son and his daughter-in-law Sarah

(Jeanette Hain/Emily Mortimer), it soon becomes clear that he fancies her, for example when he makes strange – one could also say lewd – clicking sounds every time he regards her photo. Amandus/Amadeus does this while the entire family is present, and later shows the same kind of behaviour when Heidi Klum and, in the US version, Melania Trump are shown on the TV screen. Though Sarah takes offence at his leering, no one else in the family seems to mind, both Tilda/Mathilda (Emma Schweiger/Sophia Lane Nolte) and Niko/Nick even going as far as laughing at his antics, rather than sympathizing with Sarah.

Amandus's/Amadeus's sexually offensive behaviour resurfaces several times, i.e., when he and his granddaughter Tilda/Matilda spend a night in a nunnery on their way to Venice. Not only can Amandus/Amadeus not resist making a dirty (and silly) joke with a cucumber (*Honig* 01:43:40), but when the nuns seemingly do not understand the joke, he insists on explaining it, which Tilda/Mathilda only barely manages to prevent. However, the film alludes to Amandus's/Amadeus's obsession with sexuality and the phallus again when they take leave and he gives one of the nuns a cucumber as a present (*Honig* 1:49:28). What becomes obvious is that this kind of behaviour is not conscious, but rather suggests that his social skills and awareness of societal 'rules', i.e., what is acceptable and what is not, are slowly vanishing. This stereotype of the unrestrained, even lewd Alzheimer's patient is reinforced several times and the film even suggests that this is a common problem for carers and relatives of Alzheimer's patients: When Niko visits a nursing home to find a place for his father, he is chatted up by a female Alzheimer's patient who seems to have worked as a 'dancer' and makes very explicit propositions if Niko were to agree:

Hildegard Wollen wir zusammen ein bisschen ficken? So'n, so'n ganz kleines bisschen? (...) Kannst Du Dir ja mal überlegen. [How about the two of us have a bit of a fuck? Just a teensy-weensy one? Just think about it.]

(...)

Manager Auch der Wunsch nach Sexualität ist ein großes Thema im Umgang mit Alzheimerpatienten. [Yes. Sexuality is a big issue with Alzheimer's patients.]

Honig 01:01:47–01:02:10

Here, in an act of labelling and containment by explanation, the American film version is more explicit than the German version, featuring a scene where

the manager explains that this is not only about sexuality but also about 'inappropriate sexual behaviour' which 'can be an issue with Alzheimer's' (01:06:28–01:06:31). When the manager goes on: 'And we would ensure your father is shielded from female attention as far as possible', Nick answers: 'Well. That's the last thing he is going to want, trust me. You might want to shield them from him' (*Honey* 01:07:10). What is troubling here is less that Amandus/Amadeus is – again – presented as a lascivious old man, but the fact that the more obscene suggestions come from a female Alzheimer's patient, casting her in the role of seductress and creating the highly problematical ideological subtexts of 'dancer equals whore'⁸ and 'once a whore, always a whore'.

The last impression the film gives of Amandus's/Amadeus's sexuality is him back at home with his family, groping the caretaker's breasts (*Honig* 02:01:56) who finally leaves because of his continued sexual harassment – a mirror image of a scene on the night train to Venice when Amandus/Amadeus enters the wrong compartment of the sleeping car and fondles the breast of an unknown woman (*Honig* 01:19:55) who then shrieks and complains but whose complaint is ultimately dismissed and not taken seriously. This obsession with breasts is introduced early in both movies when, during the church ceremony at the funeral of Amandus's/Amadeus's wife, he openly talks about her big bosom (*Honig* 00:05:16) and, in the American version of the film, jokes 'What bees make milk? Boobies' (*Honey* 00:05:24–00:05:28).

All of these scenes play into the question as to whether the sexual behaviour(s) of Alzheimer's patients are, somewhat categorically, 'inappropriate' or 'improper'. Given Amandus's/Amadeus's tendency to sexually harass nuns as well as nurses, it paradigmatically raises the question of policing and regulating sexuality. What is important for the political subtext of both films is that neither Amandus's/Amadeus's nor the sexuality of the female Alzheimer's patients represents a 'gendered performativity, where the expression of an inappropriate (queer) sexuality challenges or transgresses a heterosexual matrix' (Sandberg 2018, 27). To the contrary, there is nothing new to the sexuality presented here, which never surpasses the unimaginative heteronormative repetition of the *topos* of the dirty old man.

⁸ The film makes it quite clear that the word 'dancer' is used as euphemism for prostitute, in that it highlights that 'dancer' is only the way Hildegard's daughter paraphrases her mother's seemingly colourful past (*Honig*, 01:02:02–01:02:31).

If Schweiger's films pretend to challenge the discourses of an asexual old age, it is neither to advance the sexual rights of older people nor should the characters' sexual overtures be understood as sincere manifestations of 'embodied selfhood, where masculine and heterosexual styles that have materialised over time persist and shape interactions and continue as a means of expression' (Sandberg 2018, 27). Unless, of course, we argue that Amandus/Amadeus has always been a closet breast fetishist and is now simply acting on it, much in the same way as he enjoys urinating in the family fridge instead of the toilet (*Honig* 00:37:55). Since this interpretation is rather unlikely, it follows that Schweiger's films do not assert the right of Alzheimer's patients to sexuality, but make fun of it by going out of their way to portray Amandus and Amadeus as breast-grabbing dirty old men who flirt offensively, covet their daughters-in-law, harass nuns with 'naughty' jokes, publicly tout the qualities of their wives' breasts and fondle sleeping women. Not only are these actions brushed or laughed off with Alzheimer's being cited as the only possible explanation for such behaviour, but moments which start out as intimate and emotional, such as Amandus/Amadeus searching for his wife while staying in the aforementioned convent, are also ridiculed, as offensive sexual behaviour seems to take precedence over questions of intimacy, love and grief.

While identity, masculinity, and sexuality are social constructs that, with the onset of Alzheimer's, are subject to change so that different and alternative forms of masculinity or sexuality might come to the fore, what *Honig* and *Honey* offer is the resurfacing of old stereotypes – the repeated use of which is revealing about the kind of humour and the misogynist subtexts that pervade the films, but does little to closely examine the male protagonists, their psyches, their suffering, or their need for intimacy.

4. Conclusion

Even if the comedies analysed do break with some of the traditionally negative portrayals of Alzheimer's, i.e., in portraying patients as people with social or sexual needs that transcend care settings, or in representing largely independent, socially-engaged older adults who are neither objects to be ridiculed nor 'lesser

men' who are to be pitied, the films nevertheless fall prey to binary and problematic conceptions of older men living with dementia.

In *Vater Morgana*, Walther is portrayed as a sexual being, presenting audiences with another 'sexy oldie' who is more of a playboy than a dirty old man. His behaviour is not inappropriate; instead, he is in a relationship with his carer, and while sexual activity is not foregrounded as it is in Amandus's/Amadeus's case, it is certainly implied to be still taking place. In this case, it is not only the implied sexuality that reaffirms Walther's masculinity but also his choice of partner, as Britta is a much younger woman. This choice of a younger partner is not only a strategy to keep ageing at bay, but also implies that Walther is still able to 'keep up' and stay 'forever functional'. Furthermore, Britta's willingness to stay in a relationship with him, despite age and illness, suggests that she is sexually satisfied and romantically content. However, this stability in their partnership is treacherous, endangered, and probably short-lived. Britta's transformation from lover to nurse and a shift away from a traditional phallic sexuality is hinted at by Walther's significant memory lapses, his symbolic submerging in a submarine, but even more by him asking her whether she will take care of him when he has forgotten her.

At least at first sight, *La Finale* seems to be a little more ambiguous. From time to time, remnants of Roland's former gender identity resurface when his masculinity discredits itself as outdated, racist, and chauvinist, yet the film does not use this to create male complicity or bonding but exposes racist and misogynist tendencies for what they are. *La Finale* does imply Roland's continued attractiveness to women by having a woman who is also afflicted with a form of dementia develop a crush on him. Though this reaffirms his masculinity, the interlude is brief, has a dreamlike quality, and relegates both potential lovers to the sphere of the Alzheimer's community, which is somewhat separate from society. Sexuality is not denied but seems only possible, if at all, in segregation or in a dream world given that the triple falling in love scene is so improbable that it threatens to revoke itself. Since Roland is not (yet) part of this Alzheimer's community symbolized by the bus tour, he re-enters his family by taking up the position, not of the *pater familias*, but of the son. Roland moves into Jean-Baptiste's room and, in the last scene, together with his family and his grandson's peer-group, is watching 'la finale' between France and Brazil and is convinced it is 12 July 1998. Identity, maleness, or masculinity is not a

'problem' anymore if one takes the original TV commentary given in this scene seriously: 'On peut mourir tranquille!' [You can die in peace!] (01:17:44).

Of all the protagonists, Amandus and Amadeus are the most concerned, if not obsessed, with sexuality. However, neither *Honig* nor *Honey* uses the creative space Alzheimer's offers for alternative concepts of maleness or masculinity. Instead, the films reinforce pejorative stereotypes, be it of the lascivious old female 'dancer' or the dirty old man. The predominance of sexuality and (sexual) performance as a constitutive part of later life masculinity, whereby men have to stay 'forever functional and forever willing' (Sandberg 2011, 252), is a notion which has led critics to argue that later life masculinities have at times been exclusively constructed around the struggle for and loss of potency and sexual satisfaction. In accordance with this, the comedies demonstrate that Amandus/Amadeus, Walther, and to a lesser degree Roland (though he explicitly mentions Viagra) are still very much sexual beings, thus perpetuating the idea that sexuality and, by extent, virility are defining features of ageing males dealing with Alzheimer's.⁹

As such, all four protagonists are shown to conform to notions of autonomy, trying to retain most of their capabilities in the face of the illness, and simultaneously serve as examples of how the neurodegenerative impacts of Alzheimer's 'constitute a direct threat to male identities underpinned by the value placed on independence and instrumental competence' (Tolhurst and Weicht 2017, 35). If critics argue that Alzheimer's patients often 'compensate for their perceived loss of manhood by emphasizing other dimensions of that traditional role' (Coston and Kimmel 2013, 195), Amandus's and Amadeus's increasing fixation on breasts, their insistence on telling sexist jokes, and their sexually aggressive behaviour, just as Roland's misogynistic diatribes against women's soccer, could be seen as an expression of this overcompensation which ultimately covers a lack they are only subconsciously aware of.

Though the films analysed portray sexual activity and interest as continuous in spite of dementia, they nevertheless reinforce the idea of such sexual

⁹ The fact that most of the attributes of maleness the films use refer to stereotypical notions of a very traditional kind of hegemonic masculinity is not really surprising, given that the socialization into masculinity of Alzheimer's patients usually dates back more than half a century. Moreover, most of the comedies analysed are geared towards the European and North American mass market where rather traditional understandings of masculinity prevail, so that a certain conservativeness of their concepts of masculinity should not come as a surprise either.

expression being ultimately ridiculous, mostly inappropriate, somewhat improper, or hypersexual, all of which are terms that are also ‘used in scientific accounts and everyday discourses to classify and describe intimate sexual behaviours of people with dementia’ (Sandberg 2020, 1). Whereas all films make the point that the scripts of traditional hegemonic masculinity are no longer suitable for male Alzheimer’s patients, they are simultaneously presented as the only scripts available for older men. Thereby, the films not only demonstrate the importance of gender identity and sexuality for the protagonists but also their necessity to adapt and to rewrite male gender scripts to better sustain their evolving selves in dementia.

If Alzheimer’s undermines ‘the traditional equation of masculinity with phallic prowess’, it simultaneously points ‘to alternative models of being a man’ (Armengol 2018, 364). This might be experienced as a challenge, but can also be seen as a unique opportunity for Alzheimer’s patients ‘to rethink themselves as men’ (Armengol 2018, 364). Or, as Richard Ward and Elizabeth Price argue, ‘the experience of dementia may actually generate an emancipatory space in which to explore hidden, forgotten, or quite new aspects of self and identity in ways that may not previously have been possible’ (2016, 67). But if Alzheimer’s may lead to new kinds of agency, to new gender identities and forms of sexuality, this is exactly where the films fall short.

If the comedies portray their protagonists’ sub- or unconscious battles with their changing sexual needs and gender identities, this does not become a topic for discussion in the films but is functionalized to conjure up surreal romantic moments or to create laughter and awkward situations: an awkwardness, however, which never veers towards the grotesque or towards black humour but safely stays within the realms of light and easily consumable comedy. Though Walther, Amandus, Amadeus and Roland realize that their health, their living conditions, their subject positions, and also their identity and sexuality are undergoing significant changes, and though they are shown experiencing processes of emasculation, feminization, and infantilization,¹⁰ they are not allowed to seriously reflect on this or to gain insight into what is happening to them. On the contrary: On a deep structural level and without openly acknowledging it, the films make sure that the audience does not

¹⁰ See Horlacher and Röber 2020.

identify too closely with the protagonists, lest audiences be confronted with their own potential memory loss and thus, by extent, their own mortality – a thought which could be deeply uncomfortable and potentially distract from the plights and shenanigans of the patients' wider, and ultimately healthy, social network in the films. As such, scenes where serious topics such as memory loss or the ability to voice feelings of love are discussed remain an exception or are bookended by situations that, through their use of humour and laughter, diminish the potential negotiation of intimacy and emotion.

From this it follows that the comedies analysed are more interested in staging the disease than in adequately representing or understanding it. Instead of fathoming the possibilities of what humour and laughter are capable of, the movies prefer to functionalize the early stages of Alzheimer's to spark off laughter and to create comic relief and a 'feel-good' mood for the entire family who might watch *Honig*, *Honey*, *Vater Morgana* or *La Finale* on a Sunday afternoon. Repeatedly, the protagonists are kept at a distance so that laughing-at becomes possible while their masculinity is reduced to some sort of awkward phallic sexuality (Amandus/Amadeus). This process follows traditional scripts and stereotypes and is neither productive nor conducive to new insights. Thus, what the films refuse to tackle is the underlying paradox that older men or men with Alzheimer's, that is '[men] with limited or no access to true power or resources', too, define their maleness and/or masculinity/gender identity through 'sex, sexuality and male dominance of women' (Hope qtd. in Jackson 2016, 81).

However, the comedies analysed do not only give away the tragic dimension of their protagonists' predicaments, they also fail to probe the creative potential Alzheimer's as well as the genre of comedy does offer.¹¹ Neither Sykes's nor Endemann's or Schweiger's films take the risk of inviting the audience to adopt a 'laughing-with' and as its consequence a 'suffering-with position'. As such, they refrain from exploring the possibilities of alternative sexualities, gender identities and narratives for men who are barred from traditional scripts of hegemonic masculinity but are tasked, if not condemned, to perform such scripts nevertheless. Finally, neither later life nor traditional dementia

¹¹ Therefore, the films do not fail because comedy as a genre is unsuited for the topic of Alzheimer's or because of (potentially limiting) generic conventions but because of their conservative conventionality – and probably also because of their being directed at a mass market.

narratives nor, indeed, the comedies analysed here offer persuasive, differentiated representations of – or new scripts for – ageing men, or, even worse, ageing men with Alzheimer's.

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