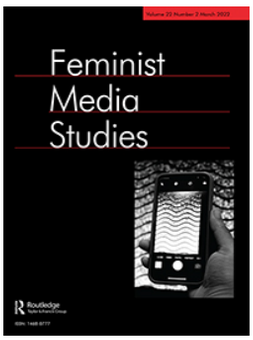

Feminist Media Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfms20

For Better or Worse: A Gendered Outlook of the films The Leisure Seeker and Alaska

Shlomit Aharoni Lir & Liat Ayalon

To cite this article: Shlomit Aharoni Lir & Liat Ayalon (2021): For Better or Worse: A Gendered Outlook of the films The Leisure Seeker and Alaska, Feminist Media Studies, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2021.1996419

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1996419

Published online: 22 Dec 2021.

FEMINIST MEDIA STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1996419

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

For Better or Worse: A Gendered Outlook of the films The Leisure Seeker and Alaska

Shlomit Aharoni Lir and Liat Ayalon

Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel

ABSTRACT

Although much has been written to date on gender equality, on personal liberty within the family, and on the burden of family caregivers of spouses, the manner in which these different aspects intersect and impact each other has gone largely unexamined. How do relationships of power and dependency interact? How do they affect the pursuit of happiness and the ability to maintain personal liberty within the family in times of sickness and poor health? Our analysis is based on a qualitative and comparative effort of two films: The first is Paolo Virzi's *The Leisure Seeker* (USA, 2017). The second Zepel Yeshurun's *Alaska* (Israel, 2018). The findings allow to identify a model of liberty within the family at old age that consists of three aspects: first, *women's freedom* within an oppressive system: the ability of women in unequal conjugal relationships to retain agency, to act, to decide, and to struggle for their beliefs. Second, *negative freedom*: the struggle of old age couples to fend off over-involvement by concerned family members and caregiving institutions, and to assert their independence. Third, *positive freedom*: the desire of older couples to pursue happiness despite illness and old age.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 13 October 2020
Revised 9 September 2021
Accepted 13 October 2021

KEYWORDS
Gender inequality; dementia; family studies; film; negative freedom; positive freedom; women's freedom

Introduction

"All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way". Leo Tolstoy's opening line of *Anna Karenina*, setting the family as the ultimate cell within which happiness is experienced, captures a fundamental truth about the historical ubiquity of the family unit throughout all human societies (George Peter Murdock 1949); The idea of considering different families uniformly by measuring their happiness on a universal yardstick, raises various questions on the possible different meaning of happiness to men and women within the family unit. These questions are especially valid given the socially unequal power-relations between men and women. An additional variable of interest is related to the liberty of pursuing happiness within the familial structure in old age. Does the passing of time enhance the social inequality, or does it allow women greater possibilities of freedom and fulfillment? Similarly, one may ask whether providing vs. receiving care within the spousal unit allows for a shift in power dynamics between men and women.

CONTACT Shlomit Aharoni Lir lirshlomit@gmail.com Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel

Historically, structural inequality between men and women has been the rule in most human societies (Marilyn French 1985). When we speak, then, of a "happy" nuclear family, we need to ask *whose* happiness we are talking about, *what* it consists of, and even whether one can truly speak of the members of a family as a single, coherent unit at all. We might also inquire whether one can posit the freedom to pursue one's happiness an unchanging endeavor throughout the evolving stages of life, and ponder what familial happiness means in later stages of life, when one or both spouses experience physical and/or cognitive decline.

This study proposes to address these questions through analyzing two recent films. The first is Paolo Virzi's *The Leisure Seeker* (USA, 2017) a film based on a novel of the same name by Michael Zadoorian whose plot follows an older couple who journey from Massachusetts to Florida in a camper trailer. The second is a low-budget Israeli feature film directed by veteran filmmaker Itzhak Zepel Yeshurun entitled *Alaska* (Israel, 2018), whose plot follows an eventful single day in the life of an aged couple, who live in a small Tel-Aviv apartment and dreams of a journey to Alaska. The two films are part of a creative wave of movies that focus on dementia, as part of the concern of Western culture with loss of agency and autonomy—a topic addressed by both films.

While the two movies portray different worlds, which offer different possibilities of actualizing one's dreams, they resemble each other in the manner they depict themes of power-relations, freedom and agency within the family unit. Both films are unique due to their portrayal of a personal viewpoint on issues related to old age that are not discussed in medical or in care-giving terms (Jane Tuomola, Jiaying Soon, Paul Fisher and Philip Yap 2016; Milena Von Kutzleben, Wolfgang Schmid, Margareta Halek, Bernhard Holle and Sabin Bartholomeyczik 2012). Instead, they focus on martial relationship in which the couple attempts to fend for liberty and fulfillment of dreams. Both movies do not shield the audiences from the sights of old age. Dementia is not afflicted on a relatively young beautiful woman as in *Still Alice* (2014); it is neither an autobiographically based story of the loss of the intellectual powers of a world-known figure, as is the case of *Iris* (Richard Eyre 2001)[1]; and the ability to identify with the characters is not manifested through a mediating figure—a younger caregiver, or a healthy grieving spouse, like in *Head Full of Honey* (2018). The two films are human narratives about coping with conjugal relationship, dementia and old age and their unique focus is on relationships between older couples at the closing stages of their lives. Certain elements in their plots are virtually the same: the fact that both male protagonists are afflicted with dementia, and both female protagonists' health is in decline. More significantly, in both films the male protagonists' dementia allows their past infidelity to their wives to be revealed and prompts reconsiderations and shifts in the couple's intimate lives.

The new space opened up by this masculine infirmity exposes unspoken social taboos, marital secrets, and, significantly, lays bare the threads that hold the couple together and determine the power relationship between the two. The discussed films therefore echo the understanding of dementia as a socio-political familial debilitation rather than narrowly an individual physical and mental condition (Lars-Christer Hydén and Elin Nilsson 2015) and therefore as a state that introduces new opportunities, and not only difficulties (Carole Cohen, Angela Colantonio and Lee Vernich 2002). Each film explores the issue of

a couple's liberty to pursue happiness and fulfillment, and each raises questions on the gendered meaning of familial happiness and on what this means in regard to women's liberty to pursuit happiness in later stages of life.

Our analysis is based on a qualitative and comparative effort targeted to examine how relationships of power and dependency interact and affect the pursuit of happiness and the ability to maintain personal liberty within the family in times of poor health in both films. We identify recurrent themes and place them within a comparative framework to review the exercise of female agency within patriarchal marital structures while also assessing the role and effect of geographic, social and cultural specificities.

Films, dementia, couples, and gender

The growing number of films on ageing and the increasing representations of older actors has gained scholars' attentions, as various books and articles have been written on this topic (Sally Chivers 2011; Josephine Dolan 2018). This phenomenon is especially notable in a culture which highlights a fear of getting old (Morganroth Gullette 2004). The shift from depicting older actors, and especially actresses as dysfunctional once they reach their fifties, is largely the result of ageing demographic, and a process viewed as part of a wider "silvering of consumer culture" (Dolan 2018, 1). Films that focus on disabled characters at the point of growing old are still rare (Chivers 2011). Yet, over the last decade, a growing number of films have examined with the topic of dementia (Rose Capp 2020). In terms of gender, dementia in films can indicate not only the loss of memory but also the loss of the masculine role of the family's patriarch (Chivers 2011).

Research has primarily focused on the effects the loss of functions associated with dementia. Researchers who offered their remarks about this interlinkage associated higher levels of burden and burnout with increased caregiving tasks and responsibilities which are—at least partially—determined by the status of the care recipient and his or her cognitive and functional status (Liat Ayalon and Ohad Green 2015).

On top of the individual challenges, losses and changes that each partner may experience, the ways that dementia affects the married couple, as a unit, also must be observed (Olivia Wadham, Jane Simpson, Jonathan Rust, and Craig Murray 2016). Dementia may entail a new division of labor, as the diagnosed person starts needing assistance and support, they did not need before, and, at the same time, reduce their ongoing responsibilities and social engagements due to deteriorated cognitive functions (Geraldine Boyle 2013).

It is likely that by the time a married person is diagnosed with dementia, they have already had a long and established marital life. Long term relations have their own idiosyncrasies, as both partners hone their relationship throughout their decades of being together (Wadham et al. 2016). When one spouse is diagnosed with dementia, then, it is not a purely personal medical issue: it is a shared experience, influenced not only by the diagnosis itself and the cognitive and functional impairments that follow, but also shaped by the context of the lifelong history of the couple (Hydén and Nilsson 2015). Dementia is, in other words, more than a medical condition. It is a deeply familial and social one.

A major factor in the experience of the burden of dementia on a marital relationship is the structural power imbalance between husbands and wives (Mary Blair-Loy, Arlie Hochschild, Allison Pugh, Joan Williams and Heidi Hartmann 2015). The historic separation between the private and the public spheres, and the concomitant entrapment of women in the domestic domain as wives and mothers suffused practices of gender discrimination, structural inequalities in access to opportunity, and daily forms of micro-violence that hindered women's advancement in the public sphere (Nancy Fraser 1990). Housework—a central occupation of women under the dominant patriarchal nuclear-family system—has never been regarded as "proper" labor because it was unmonetized. Very often this is also the case with other forms of essential-yet-invisible "feminine" labor—emotional labor and care labor—predominantly carried out by women within the family unit (Amit Kaplan, Maha Sabbah-Karkabi and Hanna Herzog 2020). Some scholars have gone on to characterize the nuclear family as a primary site of subjugation, oppression and exploitation of women (Friedrich Engels 2007).

The two illustrations of long-term couple relationships in the context of dementia and medical illness allows us to reflect on the liberty of men and women to pursuit individual happiness at old age and sickness within the bounds of the family unit. Our comparative qualitative approach (Fons Van de Vijver and Kwok Leung 1997) informs a discussion of cultural, social and geographic contexts and the way these determine the course of aging, partnership and decision making in old age.

Findings

The comparative analytical effort was conducted in order to better the understanding of how relationships of power and dependency interact and how they affect the pursuit of happiness within the family in times of sickness and poor health in different socio-cultural contests. This was done based on identifying the issues relative to gender, social space and age in each film. First reviews of each film were carried out with the objective of extrapolating themes similar in both films and analysing how they resemble each other. Subsequent reviews were dedicated to identifying and analysing the central aspects to each respective film, through focusing on spatial and cultural characteristics depicted on screen. The results of this effort are presented in two segments: "Different Worlds, Similar Experiences", and "Different Countries, Different Possibilities".

Different worlds, similar experiences

Both films depict a broadly similar familial set-up, rooted in a structural inequality between the two spousal partners. Accordingly, despite the different socio-cultural environment each film is set in, comparing their narratives reveals numerous overlaps and similarities in structures and themes. The shared familial structure, based on inequality between the spouses on the one hand and the love and codependence between them on the other, is a strong narrative backbone that runs through both films. In both plots we follow the protagonists' desire to explore aspects of happiness and liberty despite the physical and social impediments of old age.

Cross-boundary gender inequality

Both films depict a hetero-normative conjugal family model: a joint household led by married adult partners, with a breadwinner father and a housekeeper mother, who raise their biological children under a single roof (Sylvie Fogel-Bizawi 1999). The two protagonists in *The Leisure Seeker*, John and Ella Spencer (Donald Sutherland and Helen Mirren) are a Massachusetts couple who have been living together for over fifty years, and are parents to two middle-aged children, Will and Jane. In *Alaska*, protagonists Lolek and Martha (Eli Gorenstein and Shifra Millstein) have shared a small Tel-Aviv apartment for over forty years, and raised one son, Rami, himself middle-aged, who is married to Aviva and is father to a teenaged daughter, Natalie.

Until its problematization and decentering in recent decades, the Western model of a breadwinning father and a homemaking mother raising their joint biological children under a single roof has become so hegemonic as to make the specific gender-based power-relationship it suffuses almost invisible. However, this power-dynamic where the female partner is dependent on the male (Fogel-Bizawi 1999) is hardly neutral. Thus, it is scarcely surprising to find that at their thematic core the two films echo each other in their depiction of a silent but pervasive gender inequality whose emotional residue surfaces time and again in moments of tension and conflict between the spouses. This inequality and its correlated effects are etched into protagonists` status, roles and behavioral patterns. The act of explicitly pointing it out raises the question whether and how women are able to achieve happiness and fulfillment in such unequal relationships.

The component of gender inequality in each marriage can first and foremost be seen in the recurrent ascription of traditional female roles of mother and of housewife to the female characters.[2] In *The Leisure Seeker*, John was a brilliant and much beloved university professor who has had an illustrious, decades-long career before he fell ill. He is depicted as popular with his students, who often visited him. His admiration of Hemingway—whose house in the Florida Keys is the Journey's destinations, functions as symbolic emblem throughout the movie touching of the topics of male literary greatness and of masculine power and its loss. Even as he struggles with dementia, John can, on occasion, recite entire passages of Hemingway and hold long discussions on his writing, as he does in two occasions in restaurant encounters with waitresses, much to his wife's discomfort. In stark contrast to the recurring references to John's past vocation, Ella's profession, or her vocation, are completely ignored.[3] Instead, several scenes communicate her role as a wife, care-giver to her husband both in the past and mainly in the present, and a caring mother to Will and Jane. Time and again, Virzi depicts the manner in which John's career has connected him to a vibrant academic world, dominated by male authors and to a literature discourse of their works, from which Ella was left excluded.[4] Instead, Ella is depicted as having a caregiving role, which can be seen in the scene where she pulls out from a cabinet door new pairs of boxers she bought him, and gets upset when he insists on wearing briefs. Thus, though both partners are on the road together, the movie insinuate their status differences, in accordance to the old gendered separation between the public and the domestic domains.

Apart from the couple having jointly raised children who have long grown and left their parent's house, there is a clear sense that John's passions and interests take precedence over Ella's. The film depicts Ella's repeated attempts to take part in John's

life—opening their joint home to John's students, who, she points out, used to visit regardless of the hour, and recounting literary anecdotes with which she attempts to pique John's interest, although she would rather watch a film than see a play, according to her own admission. Even the very journey that sets the entire plot in motion is Ella's initiative to realize John's longtime dream of visiting Ernst Hemingway's cabin. And although the road trip she initiates collapses the age-old separation of private and public that confines women to the domestic sphere (Fraser 1990), its destination—defined by John's dreams and passions—keeps her out of the driver's seat, both literally and metaphorically.

The traditional gendered division of labor that makes the wife dependent on the husband is similarly insinuated in *Alaska*'s first scene, where Martha irons Lolek's shirt while he smokes a cigarette, daydreams about Alaska and gazes out of their apartment's window onto the Tel-Aviv cityscape below. Depictions of Martha's role as a housewife attending to her husband's and to her extended family's needs are scattered throughout the film: she prepares Lolek's dinner at a set hour, makes sure he rests in the afternoon, and assumes responsibility over cooking a warm meal for the extended family.

Alaska even goes a step further, explicitly pointing the basic inequality of marriage in terms of women's rights, and exposing the oppression and exploitation often masked by the façade of the nuclear family (Shulamit Firestone 1972). This happens when Lolek, in a dementive seizure triggered by news of the death of his mistress, becomes convinced that Martha is the maid. Enraged by her unannounced presence, he accuses her of stealing his wife's clothes and attempting to take over the house, and proceeds to terminate her employment. As he interrogates her about the duration of her employment to date, Martha hotly retorts that she "worked" for him for over forty years: "all your life I've cleaned after you, bathed you and fed you". Her response fails to provoke any sense of remorse, appreciation, or gratitude in him. Instead, Lolek becomes horrified at the compensatory costs he will have to pay to her if he goes through with his plan of firing her after forty years. Lolek's eagerness to accept his granddaughter's proposition to "marry" his "maid" in order to avoid these exorbitant costs, exposes how inherent exploitation of women is to the marital relationship. Moreover, it throws the concept of "invisible labor"—the mundane, unmonetized and mostly ignored domestic labor women perform (Nitza Berkovic 1996)—into a sharp relief and challenges notions of marriage as romantic love between two equal partners. The film thus explicitly makes the point that, had Martha truly been the maid rather than Lolek's wife, he would have had to pay an amount equal to all his possessions and more as compensation for her decades of work.

A relationship founded on love and mutual commitment could very well be motive for a woman to abide by traditional gendered-labor divisions and readily perform invisible domestic labor married women so often perform. Both films, however, undermine this possibility by involving their male protagonists with marital infidelity. Both female protagonists discover their husbands' infidelity following unwitting disclosures made by their spouses in fits of dementia. These revelations float painful forms of marital inequality that took root at the core of both relationships. Lolek and John's infidelity stresses the privileged positions men enjoy in traditional marital settings particularly as both cases involve a close friend of the betrayed wife, thus undermining the power of female solidarity and sisterhood (Bell Hooks 1986).

Despite foregrounding gender inequality in the spousal relationship, each film allows us to surpass a binary view that casts womanhood as either oppressed or liberated. Both female protagonists are strong women who assume, to one degree or another, control over their lives. Ella is the primary moving force of the plot in *The Leisure Seeker*. It is she who decides to embark on the journey; it is she who plans the itinerary and it is made clear that it is up to her when, and where, to end it. After the revelation of John's infidelity, she abandons him in a retirement home and drives off. And although she eventually decides to forgive him, the act reasserts her agency, her being in charge of her own life and her freedom of choice. In *Alaska*, Martha sets out to recover the jewelry Lolek gave his mistress and succeeds in doing so by shrewdly outsmarting her neighbor's pugnacious relatives. In both films, then, the male protagonists' dementia strengthens the female protagonist's position within the marriage. Yet both women make a conscious choice to stay in the marriage, despite their husbands' infidelity. Ella returns to the retirement home and collects John to continue their journey. Lolek and Marha revitalize their relationship through the symbolic act of renewing their wedding vows.

Although structural gender inequality does impede the communication between the partners, both films make evident the love and concern the male protagonists feel towards their wives. Thus, the capacity to acknowledge difficulty and inequality does not annul the marital bond or diminish its significance to the protagonists' lives. If anything, the sense of an impending end strengthens the bond forged through the long years of shared life. Resurfacing long pent-up tensions lead to candid exchanges, short conflagrations, forgiveness and eventually resolution. In spite of these visible tensions and fissures, the co-dependence between the spouses that emerges in both films underscores the role of the marriage as a major source of identity, solace and encouragement for both spouses. This portrayal resonates themes in the literature about caregivers that stress the positive experiences associated with providing care to persons with dementia (Cohen, Colantonio, and Vernich 2002).

And yet, despite this conservative message, both films still retain subversive elements in their portrayal of marriage. The male protagonists' dementia is an important catalyst in laying bare the black box of relationships. On the most basic level, it constitutes a plot device that abrogates the male protagonists' authority and engenders shifts in the power dynamic within the couples. John Spencer, celebrated lecturer and intellectual, wets his bed and the taxi back seat, forgets his children's names, and struggles to read a kindergarten level book. Stepping out of his shadow, Ella emerges as the organizer of the journey, recounts the family history for him, and gains newfound power—discovering she is perfectly able to stow John away in some retirement house and drive away, as if he were some disposable object. Martha, who for most of the film does not respond to her husband's invective, finds she is able to stand up to Lolek, and mocks him and his memory loss. On the other hand, however, even though the films mercilessly chart the male protagonists' decline and depict them at their most vulnerable and embarrassing stages of loss of independence and bodily control, their status within the relationship remains intact; they continue to be loved and respected by their spouses until the very end.

The freedom to choose at any age

One of the cinematic themes that unites both films, while setting them apart from many other films about old age and dementia is their rebellious nature. The heroes and heroines in both films refuse to "act their age" in the sense of agreeing to the cultural perceptions of old age (Chivers 2011). They also do not take necessarily portray the traditional caregiver-care recipient dynamic. While inequality in the marital relationships persists even during the male protagonists' decline, the couples' continued ability to confide in each other and act together testifies to the strength of their relationships. Their capacity to join forces is expressed through an us-against-the-world dynamic in their struggle to ward off concerned family members and their plans of transferring one or both of the spouses to a care home.

The shifting power-relationship between parents and children, whereby due to dementia and weakness, the former suddenly find themselves at the mercy of their children, can lead them to be separated from each other and to lose control over their lives. It is encroachment by her children that Ella riles against. Despite her grating against her position in a structurally unequal relationship with John, the relationship with her husband has come to bring her solace, to act as a repository of memories and foment a sincere desire to enjoy their remaining time together. In a phone call home to her daughter, as an exasperated Jane exclaims: "I can't believe this! We'd decided everything. Will was going to stay with Dad . . . ", Ella is quick to retort: "Your father and I didn't decide a thing. You and Will and those quack doctors did that for us". To Ella, the voyage represented an affirmation of her ability to decide and to act, whereas the care home represented the exact opposite—a complete surrender to external forces (Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs 2010). Living in the old camper-trailer, revisiting places they once visited with their children, looking at old slides every night slowly instill a sense of vacation and normalcy in the old couple; a theme visually enhanced by the name of their trailer: The Leisure Seeker. Although it is Ella who leads, the journey is impossible without John; together, they share magical, intimate, and adventurous moments.

A somewhat similar dynamic of "us-against-them" develops between Lolek and Martha. Their vacation destination is dreamt about by Lolek, and Martha joins in, partaking in his dream. Lolek's longing to set out on a voyage is expressed as early as the opening scene, where, cradled by soft music, images of Alaskan landscapes appear on the couple's television screen, representing the destination Lolek fantasizes about. Alaska becomes an outlet for the couples' elsewhere, else-self state. As Lolek watches the images he utters: "We'll go away, this is our chance. To Alaska. Nowhere else—to Alaska. Yep." Later, we see how Martha adopts Lolek's fantasy, adding a sense of picturesque to the fantasy: "we'll go to Alaska, we'll set sail and stand on the deck, I'll lean against the railing." And Lolek responds in a manner that relates the TV production with the desired life: "How nice it looks on TV. We'll go. Of course we'll go".

The transformation in both films of deterministic medical prognoses of cognitive decline into a story of reasserting control life paradoxically ends with suicide on both occasions. The suicidal acts in both films encompass a *Thelma and Louise* (1991) motif, of death as a signifier of rebellious choice that symbolizes freedom over succumbing to institutional forces. The setting up of suicide as the endpoint for both couples again raises the overarching theme of power-relation and freedom of choice. In *The Leisure Seeker*, it is

Ella who decides on suicide, with John incapable of making that decision for himself. However, her leadership position in this choice remains ambiguous, as John had asked her earlier to promise him that if it comes to him being institutionalized, she would help him terminate his life. In *Alaska*, suicide is presented as more of a joint decision, hinted at in an early stage in the plot and creating suspense throughout the film.[5] Martha's decision to follow Lolek's suicidal act of overdosing on pills complicates the issue of freedom of choice for women, because it is associated here with the perception that there is no life for women outside of their heterosexual relationships, despite the many injuries they endure within it.

Different Worlds, Different Possibilities

The differences between the countries in which each film is set raises questions regarding the pursuit of happiness in different social environments. *The Leisure Seeker* is set in the United States, known for its large geographical size and its boundless open spaces, whereas *Alaska* is set in the geographically small and spatially constrictive setting of the State of Israel. This difference is not only a matter of geography, but also informs the psychological, emotive and socio-cultural climate in which the story takes place.

An actual journey versus an imaginary one

Due to the central theme of the personal search for liberty and fulfillment within life as a heteronormative couple in both films, and the manner in which this pursuit highlights gender-inequality within the family, the different social and geographic settings these stories unfold and take on an important role in deciphering the possibility of fulfilling one's dreams. In *Alaska*, the couple's journey is imaginary; throughout the film they never leave their Tel-Aviv apartment building. The couple's longing for freedom, represented by Alaska's wide-open, icy-white landscapes, is inspired by a TV documentary. But, as Ewa Mazierska and John Walton 2006 suggest, watching fictional characters undertake a journey in film or on television can still genuinely fulfill an escapist urge.

Still, the differences between actual and fictional journeys are many. In *The Leisure Seeker*, where the protagonists engage in a "real"—not imaginary—journey, the road trip they take gives concrete substance to the film's themes of liberation and its concomitant search for happiness and fulfillment in relationships. Plot-wise, the journey is mostly a series of joyful, vacation-style experiences, where the couple tours the States and revisits places significant in their joint history. They also become involved in exhilarating but ultimately harmless adventures that demonstrate the notion of the liberty of allowing oneself to experience life to the fullest. Ella's comment, "Our old trips were never this adventurous, where they?" makes explicit the theme of reinvigoration, of taking back the reins of life and of indulging in new experiences in spite of the vagaries of old age.

This fun and free-spirited version of an "us against the world" road trip adventure film is also communicated through the soundtrack. The movie's main theme is set by Janis Joplin's version of "Me and Bobby McGee," which is played twice—early on in the couple's journey and in the final credits. The song's lyrics tell the story of two young drifters hitching rides across southern USA, living out their freedom by having no plans and nothing to lose, except, eventually, each other. When the song plays on the radio, John

and Ella hold hands and sing along in a gesture that confirms the song's status as their journey's hymn. Later on, as the couple is almost robbed by two youngsters, Ella says while pulling a rifle: "If you think we are afraid you are very wrong, because we ain't got nothing to lose", evoking the song's lyrics and driving home the notion that the couple has managed to find freedom because of their situation, and not despite of it.

While the medical world addresses time only in the present and treats people with dementia as patients (Tuomola et al. 2016; Von Kutzleben et al. 2012), the movie allows us to broaden our perspective and consider the ways in which the past and the present reside alongside each other; old age as one phase in a continuum the includes different life stages; distinct people connected to actual time and space, rather than mere "patients". As the couple relives past experiences, meets old friends and acquaintances, and comes to term with the changes wrought by the passage of time, the film communicates that the past does not disappear. Rather, it is reconfigured, represented and celebrated. This part of the journey also drives home the simple point that old-age is an integral part of life, that it is just another step in a journey across time that fuses the present with the past.

In contrast to the seemingly boundless freedom of Ella and John's journey, *Alaska's* setting of Israel is a space of arrested movement, of impossibilities and of pent-up frustrations. A singularity of space and time anchors the plot—spanning the goings-on of one day in one location—to an apartment in a residential building in the city. The protagonists' symbolic attempt to leave the building in the opening scenes of the film fails due to their frail physical condition and forces them back into the elevator and up to the apartment. The scene thus reinforces the sense of insurmountable obstacles barring their ability to realize their freedom, as the Spencers do.[6]

The theme of enclosure is also expressed in the close-quarter cinematography and their movements in the apartment's space. The small bathtub with the world-map-themed curtain the two protagonists fall into, the bed that requires them to clamber over each other to lay down in. The corridor barely lets both of them pass by each other. The narrow restroom, with its tiled walls encroaching on every side. The lack of sufficient physical space is compensated for by creative camera placement choices. Although the large majority of the plot takes place in Lolek and Martha's apartment,[7] the camerawork uses every nook and cranny of their cramped domestic space, even expanding to adjacent areas—the stairwell, the elevator, the building's entrance, the neighboring apartment—to capture their living space. A background to the plot, Tel-Aviv is a detached cityscape in the film, an object of observation laying beyond the apartment's borders.

Inspiration by television versus inspiration by literature

The inspiration to the film *Alaska* is a nature documentary showcasing the rugged beauty of the arctic land, alongside a voice-over narration that the couple watches inattentively. In *The Leisure Seeker*, by contrast, Hemingway's work becomes a subterranean current that propels the couple's journey forward; while it insinuates the asymmetrical gender power-relations, by linking John to the literary world of one of the greatest male American novelists, it also enhances the theme of masculinity and decline, as Hemingway is often considered an icon of masculinity (Mauricio D. Aguilera Linde 2005). The explicit reference to the "Old Man and the Sea" evokes a comparison not only between Santiago's and John's state of physical

decline, but also their journeys that allow both aging men to redefine themselves outside of time and away from society and thus reclaim dignity and self-respect. The affiliation to the book and the journey to great accomplishments at an old age, can also allow asking whose dreams both couples fulfil? And if living a life in which a woman adapted herself to the dream of her spouse, still allows her to exhibit agency and fulfil herself as well?

"Santiago is the perfect character. He achieved the inner spiritual success that defines Hemingway's 'true man'. He is defeated but not destroyed,"—John explains to a captivated waitress in a moment of lucidity. Unexpectedly, the waitress is well familiar with Hemingway and completes what John forgot: the last sentence of the book, "the old man was dreaming about lions". Symbolically, this encounter seems to comment upon the enduring spirit of freedom, and of dreaming big dreams, even in old age.

While the aspect of using metafiction as a source of inspiration is also present in *Alaska*, it lacks a similar reflexive depth borne of a long cultural tradition that permeates and enriches discussions of subjects such as old age, dignity and liberty. Instead, the nature documentary film about Alaska expresses—like the entire low-budget film—the capacity of dreams to thrive off even the most meagre source material. A single image is enough for the spirit to set off on an imaginary journey to an Edenic place of majestic natural beauty without barriers.

Conclusions and Discussion

This study sets out to find how relationships of power and dependency interact and affect the pursuit of happiness and the ability to maintain personal liberty within the family in times of sickness in two different films. The tension between personal liberty over one's body and soul, versus the necessity of authorized forms to intervene and jeopardize this liberty in order to prevent self-harm or harm to others is at the center of the writings of the philosopher John Stuart Mill, whose writings is also fundamental in setting a vision of equality in marital relationship:

> What marriage may be [. . . between whom there exists that best kind of equality, similarity of powers and capacities with reciprocal superiority in them—[. . .] this, and this only, is the ideal of marriage. (John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill 2009, 169–170)

Though over a century and a half have passed since these words were committed to paper, this ideal of equality between the spouses still remains elusive. Across the world, housework and child-rearing continue to be performed primarily by women, even alongside full-time employment (Blair-Loy et al. 2015).

The two films discussed here expound on this traditional division of labor between the sexes, which accords women the weaker position within the relationship and preserves the ancient association of women with domestic spaces and men with public ones (Fraser 1990).[8] The male protagonists' disability is central to both of these inversive renditions of late marital life. It is the men's dementia that sets the plots in motion and the subsequent instability in the relationship that reveals neglected, silenced aspects, but they also provide the opportunity to experience new things due to a new balance of power between the partners. Despite depicting two very different societies and cultures, both movies remind us the extent to which masculine domination remains intact even when dementia strikes, and hurtful secrets are revealed.

The romantics in each film, the depiction of the mutual love the partners feel for each other, do not offer a solution to the tangled issues emanating from the norms of inequality depicted between the partners. This echoes Firestone's argument that not only does romantic love not remedy sexual hierarchies, in many ways it enables and perpetuates them, being the axis upon which the oppression of women turns (1972). But, unlike this view, and others like it that seen in the patriarchal nuclear family a nucleus of oppression of women rooted perpetuating misogynist power relations and female dependence (Fogel-Bizawi 1999), the two films introduce nuance. While both films evoke a reality of inequality between the partners, they use it to raise the complex human drama of balancing the innate desire to pursue one own's notion of happiness and personal fulfillment with the commitment to one's partner and the desire not to face a life of multiple, interlocking challenges alone.

Narrow iterations of liberty in democratic societies make it possible to identify two primary principles: that of ensuring *negative liberty*—guaranteeing that a person or a group of people are permitted to pursue their own interests and desires without external interference (Isaiah Berlin 1969)—and that of promoting a *positive liberty* rooted in the principal of human dignity, ensuring various social and civic rights (Orit Kamir 2007). The artistic view of the cinematic medium allows us to understand these terms by dramatizing them from a personal angle, encouraging a consideration of the principal of liberty as a joint task of men and women who are simultaneously both partners and individuals.

Our findings allow us to devise a model to comprehend the principal of liberty from a personal standpoint in three primary aspects:

Female liberty within an oppressive structure

The ability of women in oppressive relationships to express agency, to act, to take decisions and stand up for themselves. This surpasses dichotomous notions of their being either oppressed or liberated.

Negative freedom by couples

A conjugal joining of efforts to preserve an autonomy and fend off unwelcome institutional and familial intervention. This notion emphasizes the joint desire of couples to preserve their marriage and insure their independence.

Positive freedom by couples

Pursuing happiness despite illness and old age, overcoming the body and its aches as a joint journey. This notion emphasizes the ability to maintain a joint familiar world and work together towards fulfilling pleasurable goals.

Instead of advancing a rigid idea of inequality as the defining trait of marriages and families (Firestone 1972), the two films depict female agency within unfavorable constellations of power. This is particularly resonant in *The Leisure Seeker*, where Ella sets the journey in motion and where every step of it is based on her thoughts, plans and exertions. Her ability to set things in motion and act in the world demonstrates how agency endures and exists even within unequal power-relations.

John's voice, rooted in the canonical world of celebrated male writers, coexists alongside Ella's own thoughts, wishes and world view. Her rediscovered voice is even heard posthumously, as her children read in her farewell letter to them after her death. *Alaska* presents a similar but different set-up. Numerous scenes capture Martha's silence when faced with Lolek's derisive behavior, echoing Carol Gilligan's 1993apt insight into many women's choice to preserve their relationships at the cost of making their voices heard within it. And yet, in the course of the film, Martha, too, finds her voice and begins responding to Lolek's harsh words with those of her own. When she recovers the jewels Lolek gave his mistress, her neighbor, Martha appears resolute, courageous and capable of acting on her own.

Both films suggest that the investment of long years into a marriage is not something easily given up, particularly not in the later stages of life. The two films thus present marriages as encompassing an entire lifetime of memories, common frames of reference and a familiarity that fosters routine behavior and habits (Hydén and Nilsson 2015). The relationships at the heart of the films, moreover, do not descend into the cliché of bonding between a caregiver and a patient (Tuomola et al. 2016; Von Kutzleben et al. 2012), insisting instead on a complex, multifaceted relationship that continues to evolve in the face of illness and old age. In so doing, the films depict *negative freedom* by couples —the joint struggle to retain a freedom to act in the face of increasing encroachment by well-meaning outsiders, such as offspring or nursing home officials. Unlike films that beautify reality and present these options as desirable outcomes for older people with dementia (Chivers 2011) the discussed films portray a different picture. The films alert us to the possible negative aspects of over-solidarity (Merril Silverstein, Xuan Chen and Kenneth Heller 1996), where the de-prioritization of all but physical need, loss of autonomy and the subordination to caregivers is perceived as worse than death.

Juxtaposing the two films underscored how the significantly different settings of the two films influence each of the couples' ability to realize *positive liberty*. The different opportunities the protagonists experience in the United States and Israel are not due only to geography. They are interwoven in the social and cultural fabric into which each respective story is stitched. American road trip culture is facilitated by established locations of outdoor camping, by affordable camper-trailers and by the enduring allure of trips involving numerous long days driving on the road. Israeli travelling culture, by contrast, is more orientated towards hiking trails, much of which carries strong undertones of nationalist idealism (Tamar Harman 2019). Skirting this nationalist discourse might account for the decision to evoke an escapist fantastic journey to a destination that has no Zionist history or connotations whatsoever.

It is not only the geographic and social differences that raise the issue of the connection between *positive liberty* and its realization. Budgetary differences do so, too. The low budget of *Alaska* made it impossible to shoot outside of the apartment building. Still, the absence of these country-specific anchors could allow the plot to be read universally, a story of an unfulfillable longing for freedom and boundless space born of cramped living conditions in a world of ever more borders, boundaries and impediments to movement.

This aspect of *positive freedom* that is independent of culture and boundaries also finds expression in the image of the old man dreaming about lions presented as a quote from Hemingway in the diner in *The Leisure Seeker*. This citation evokes the durability of liberty and the spirit of freedom even at old age. The quote constitutes one of the peak moments

in the analogy Virzi makes between Santiago and his ocean voyage and Ella and John and their road trip. The image of the old man dreaming about lions also fits the characters of Lolek and Martha in *Alaska*—a man with dementia and his wife with disability, who cannot leave their home, but still indulge in dreams about voyages to Alaska.

In conclusion, if the main theme of *The Leisure Seeker* is encapsulated in the *Me and Bobby McGee* lyric, "Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose," one could say that the main theme in *Alaska* could be: "freedom is the courage to dream, even when you can't realize your dreams". Gender-wise, the answer to the question about feminine power in unequal relationships might be: "a dream that you've invested your whole life in, even if it is not exactly what you wanted at the outset, eventually becomes yours".

Notes

1. A movie that is based on the life of the famous writer Iris Murdoch.
2. A phenomenon more acute and common characteristic of relationships that began forty and fifty years ago, as in both films.
3. In the novel by Zadoorian, Ella, the protagonist, writes about her quitting her job after getting pregnant: "I never meant to bury my talent in a napkin. The fact was, I never really know if I had a talent for anything, except for being a wife and mother" (pp. 121–122).
4. Ella's sense of being left-out is also reveled in a conversation with her daughter, who shares John's passion for literature and, like him, is a college professor.
5. This is also hinted at in *The Leisure Seeker*, for instance in the explicit mention of Hemingway's short story, *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*, in which a man is accidentally shot by his wife.
6. One reason for this limited spatial aspect has also to do with the movie's budgetary constraints.
7. The apartment belongs, in fact, to the film's director—Cheppel Yeshouroun—whose name remains on the doorbell, in a meta-commentary on how the film is enmeshed, reflects and is reflected in, reality.
8. The two films depict marriages that begun after the 1950s. One could surmise that the 50-year long relationship is that of John and Ella, starting the mid-1960s, and the 40-year long relationship was that between Lolek and Martha, starting in the 1970s or 1980s.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the European Commission> Horizon 2020 Framework Programme: GENDER-NET Plus [741874]; Israeli Ministry of Science and Technology [3-15664].

Notes on contributors

Shlomit Aharoni Lir is a feminist activist and postdoctoral scholar at Bar-Ilan University. In her research, she focuses on gender, communication and culture. She is particularly interested in how underprivileged social groups represent themselves and are depicted in cultural and digital spheres.

Her research includes exploring and theorizing gendered aspects of Israeli society, in the cinematic world, civic and digital arenas. Dr. Lir has won numerous awards, including the Golda Award, from the Ministry of Science and Technology. Email: Email-lirshlomit@gmail.com

Liat Ayalon is a researcher in the School of Social Work, at Bar-Ilan University. Prof. Ayalon promotes awareness of ageism, in order to create change at political and social levels. She is a member of the World Health Organization and in SAPEA work group, responsible for the report concerning the future of ageing, for the European Commission. She directs a research lab on psychosocial aspects of aging and focuses on the interface between formal informal caregiving for older people, and on ageism. Email: liat.ayalon@biu.ac.il

ORCID

Shlomit Aharoni Lir http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5781-4206
Liat Ayalon http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3339-7879

References

Ayalon, Liat, and Ohad Green. 2015. "Live-In versus Live-Out Home Care in Israel: Satisfaction with Services and Caregivers' Outcomes." *The Gerontologist* 55 (4): 628–642. doi:10.1093/geront/gnt122.

Berkovic, Nitza. 1996. "On 'The Unproductive Housewife'." *Theory and Criticism* 9: 189–197. (Hebrew).

Berlin, Isaiah. 1969. *Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Blair-Loy, Mary, Arlie Hochschild, Allison Pugh, Joan Williams, and Heidi Hartmann. 2015. "Stability and Transformation in Gender, Work, and Family: Insights from the Second Shift for the Next Quarter Century." *Community, Work & Family* 18 (4): 435–454. doi:10.1080/13668803.2015.1080664.

Boyle, Geraldine. 2013. "Still a Woman's Job: The Division of Housework in Couples Living with Dementia." *Families, Relationships and Societies* 2 (1): 5–21. doi:10.1332/204674313X664671.

Capp, Rose. 2020. "Head Full of Honey: Finding the Sweet Spot on Dementia Awareness." *The Gerontologist* 60 (2): 359–361. doi:10.1093/geront/gnaa002.

Chivers, Sally. 2011. *The Silvering Screen*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Cohen, Carole, Angela Colantonio, and Lee Vernich. 2002. "Positive Aspects of Caregiving: Rounding Out the Caregiver Experience." *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 17 (2): 184–188. doi:10.1002/gps.561.

Dolan, Josephine. 2018. *Contemporary Cinema and 'Old Age': Gender and the Silvering of Stardom*. New York: Springer.

Engels, Friedrich. 2007. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. New York: New York University Press.

Firestone, Shulamit. 1972. *The Dialectic of Sex*. New York: Bantam.

Fogel-Bizawi, Sylvie. 1999. "Families in Israel: Between Familarity and Postmodernism." In *Sex, Gender, Politics*, edited by D Israeli, A Friedman, H Dahan Kaleb, H Herzog, M Hassan, H Nave, and S Fogel-Bizawi, 106–166. Tel-Aviv: Red Line. (Hebrew).

Fraser, Nancy. 1990. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text* 25 (26): 56–80. doi:10.2307/466240.

French, Marilyn. 1985. *Beyond Power: On Women, Men, and Morals*. Hopkins: Olympic Marketing Corp.

Gilleard, Chris, and Paul Higgs. 2010. "Aging without Agency: Theorizing the Fourth Age." *Aging Mental Health* 142: 121–128. doi:10.1080/13607860903228762.

Gilligan, Carol. 1993. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Gullette, Morganroth. 2004. *Aged by Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Harman, Tamar. 2019. *The Israel National Trail: The Way of the New Israeliness*. Haifa: Pardes. (Hebrew).

Hooks, Bell. 1986. "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women." *Feminist Review* 23 (1): 125–138. doi:10.2307/1394725.

Hydén, Lars-Christer, and Elin Nilsson. 2015. "Couples with Dementia: Positioning the 'We'." *Dementia* 146: 716–733. doi:10.1177/1471301213506923.

Kamir, Orit. 2007. *Adam and Eve's Dignity – Israeli Social and Legal Feminism*. Jerusalem: Carmel. (Hebrew).

Kaplan, Amit, Maha Sabbah-Karkabi, and Hanna Herzog. 2020. "'When I Iron My Son's Shirt, I Feel My Maternal Role': Making Women's Invisible Work Visible." *Journal of Family Issues* 419: 1525–1545. doi:10.1177/0192513X19894351.

Linde, Mauricio D. Aguilera. 2005. "Hemingway and Gender: Biography Revisited." *Atlantis* 27(2): 15–26.

Mazierska, Ewa, and John Walton. 2006. "Tourism and the Moving Image." *Tourist Studies* 61: 5–11. doi:10.1177/1468797606070583.

Mill, John Stuart, and Harriet Taylor Mill. 2009. *The Subjection of Women*. Auckland: Floating Press.

Murdock, George Peter. 1949. *Social Structure*. New York: MacMillan.

Silverstein, Merril, Xuan Chen, and Kenneth Heller. 1996. "Too Much of a Good Thing? Intergenerational Social Support and the Psychological Well-Being of Older Parents." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58: 970–982. doi:10.2307/353984.

Tuomola, Jane, Jiaying Soon, Paul Fisher, and Philip Yap. 2016. "Lived Experience of Caregivers of Persons with Dementia and the Impact on Their Sense of Self: A Qualitative Study in Singapore." *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 312: 157–172. doi:10.1007/s10823-016-9287-z.

Van de Vijver, Fons, and Kwok Leung. 1997. "Methods and Data Analysis of Comparative Research." In *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, edited by J W Berry, Y H Poortinga, and J Pandey. 378–390. 2nd ed. Allyn & Bacon: Boston .

Von Kutzleben, Milena, Wolfgang Schmid, Margareta Halek, Bernhard Holle, and Sabin Bartholomeyczik. 2012. "Community-Dwelling Persons with Dementia: What Do They Need? What Do They Demand? What Do They Do? A Systematic Review on the Subjective Experiences of Persons with Dementia." *Aging & Mental Health* 163: 378–390. doi:10.1080/13607863.2011.614594.

Wadham, Olivia, Jane Simpson, Jonathan Rust, and Craig Murray. 2016. "Couples' Shared Experiences of Dementia: A Meta-Synthesis of the Impact upon Relationships and Couplehood." *Aging & Mental Health* 205: 463–473. doi:10.1080/13607863.2015.1023769.