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Feud: Bette and Joan: The representation of ageing in TV series between crisis and wardrobes

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Abstract

The article's goal is to analyse the ageing-related crisis in the TV series *Feud* (FX 2017) through the story of two entertainment icons, Bette Davis and Joan Crawford. On-screen, advancing age is narrated as a critical moment for Hollywood of the period. In those years, women after the age of 40 no longer appeared attractive in the movies. The narrative complexity therefore recalls the set of issues related to sexism and misogyny present in the film industry of the time. That is, age challenged

the very aura of celebrity, accentuating a rivalry towards the antagonistic actress as towards a younger self. In the television series, Bette Davis and Joan Crawford are played in turn by two other major film personalities: Susan Sarandon and Jessica Lange. On-screen, the two leading ladies express their personalities already by the clothes they wear and the colours they favour, which refer to specific meanings and values. The presence of these two great actresses also defines a further level of interpretation of the text, linked to contemporaneity. The advancing of age, so well highlighted in *Feud* as a source of crisis, capable of creating a path of lonely struggles in the narrative, becomes off-screen in the current landscape, an opportunity for confrontation and complicity among many actresses and women.

Keywords: *Feud*, Tv series analysis, age, crisis, ageism, power of clothing

The focus of the article is the analysis of the crisis linked to ageing in the series *Feud: Bette and Joan* (FX 2017), which is displayed through events and rivalries involving two show biz icons: Bette Davis and Joan Crawford.

Through a complex narrativity (Mittell 2015), *Feud* makes reference to sexism and misogyny-related issues typical of the times. In other words, age questioned the celebrity's aura, thus exacerbating the rivalry of Hollywood's actresses. The success they had enjoyed in the past with its high degree of notoriety was not enough for some of them to counter the value of youthfulness of their rival newcomers.

In the TV serial, the roles of Bette Davis and Joan Crawford are played by two other cinema icons: Susan Sarandon and Jessica Lange. The presence of these two great performers sets an additional level of textual interpretation linked to contemporaneity. Getting old, depicted in *Feud* as a source of crisis, capable of creating a path of solitary struggles in the storytelling, becomes – off-

screen and in today's scenario – an occasion of exchange and complicity for the actresses and between the actresses and their audiences.

The complex narrativity provides the viewers with the opportunity to move around several levels and frames, as *Feud* recalls different – and overlapping – time frames. On the one hand, the 'archival' model is being used, through clips which are the remakes of excerpts from the past, thus opening towards a historical, shared and individual memory, at least for a portion of the audience. On the other hand, there are different jumps, leading viewers to the focus of the plot towards an elsewhere which is much closer to the present, thanks to a series of characters taken from real life.

In essence, the real is always brought in, as a sort of docu-fiction, thus widening the TV series's opportunities to connect with the present.

As we shall see below, *Feud* does not tell one single story, but many, as it comprises many narrative developments. The result of this approach makes audiences start to think about issues mainly referring to the topic of ageing, by using Hollywood as a reference background, but also as a metaphor of a much wider world space than the mere motion picture industry. This specific feature will be the focus of the last part of this article in its exploring the relevance of the celebrities' role in redefining and resignifying cultural and social contexts.

1. First framework, as prologue: *What Ever Happened to Baby*

Jane?

Feud: Bette and Joan (FX 2017), written by Ryan Murphy, presents the story of the shooting and screening of the famous movie *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, directed by Robert Aldrich in 1962 and casting two famous actresses, Joan Crawford and Bette Davis. At the time, the movie was a success with even five nominations for the Academy Awards, one of which was for Norma Koch for best costumes. The plot set in Hollywood describes the alternating successes and failures in the show business of two sisters, Jane and Blanche, in a time span ranging from childhood to old age.

The events focus on their rocky relationship mostly when, no longer in their prime time, they are forced to share the same house. Harassment, teasing and abuse that Jane commits against Blanche animate the plot, down to the end of the movie where a sort of *denouement* provides viewers with a possible reinterpretation of the events.

Let us proceed now in an orderly fashion. The story progresses through time jumps, at first showing the sisters in 1917, when ‘Baby Jane’, a young girl with a wilful attitude, is seen as a promising young talent with a large following. Blanche, instead, makes her first appearance on-screen as a shy and introverted girl crushed by her sisters’ fame. The story then shifts to 1935, when the sisters are now adult women: one – Jane – is already a forgotten star, a sort of icon from the past struggling to find work in movie productions. The other – Blanche – has instead become a shining star in Hollywood: famous and sought after by many directors, she enjoys a privileged position in the jet set of the period. Blanche’s rise to success, however, is abruptly interrupted by a fatal car crash, in which the woman loses the use of her legs and finds herself confined to a wheelchair. How the accident had occurred is not clear and viewers are presented with a scene where Jane seems to be somewhat responsible for it, matter that will be revealed only in the closing scenes of the movie.

What emerges along the entire narrative arc is a clear-cut hostility between the sisters, a *feud* – specifically – experienced throughout their lives, from start to end. Jane and Blanche seem to symbolize two adverse parties, although tied to the same yoke. After having basked in the aura of celebrity (one in childhood, the other in adulthood), they seem to embody two different destinies only apparently, since they find themselves living in a sort of normality, under the same roof, and distant from the glory of previous ages.

They also represent two characters corresponding to two peculiar styles: one is blonde, with an eccentric personality and a wardrobe turning increasingly quirky with the passing of time; the other is a brunette, more contained and always well groomed, even when she finds herself confined to a wheelchair. Two antithetical models, therefore, whose complexity is highlighted by the closeness of

such different personalities, in a shared living space, the home, full of tension and criticality, when instead it should symbolize an environment of protection and comfort.

The sisters represent as well two different ways of expressing femininity: Blanche embodies the tenets of *bon-ton* and etiquette; Jane, instead, seems to be totally unconventional. The freedom she indulges (from the wearing of slippers outside the home to the general lack of care for her appearance and her poorly controlled manners) recalls traits typical of childhood. Apparently Jane wants to continue being the child prodigy that she once was, showing through her behaviour her unfriendly and somewhat naïve personality: she does not try to hide her contempt for her sister, just as she does not try to be kind to the people she meets (e.g. her neighbour). She seems to have no inhibitions: she is always too direct with people and for this reason she constantly appears to be out of place, since she indulges in attitudes that are typical of children.

These are then two characters opposing – and clashing with – each other, thus outlining two antithetical models of womanhood: one in line with the norms of the time, subjected to the expectations of the male gaze, especially in their self-representation ‘as the ability to seduce, all played on the eroticization of the body and the enhancement of the look’ (Capecchi 2018: 53). The other model instead seems to be indifferent to the *male gaze*: through behaviours, makeup and wardrobe, better complying with one’s desire to express oneself, a sort of autonomy is shown in the construction of *one’s own gaze*. In order to build and define herself, albeit following the dictates of a personality that appears borderline, Jane therefore communicates an autonomous and free ‘female gaze’, so free that in the plot she takes on, at times, the features of disquiet.

The passing of time – and with it the fading of glory – is one of the main focuses of the story: Jane stays trapped in her image as ‘baby’, which had initially gifted her with success, set to vanish later on. Blanche, in her stead, relives the pleasures of celebrity by watching on television the movies she had played in in the past. The memory of the past is however staged through a solipsistic and homely viewing, a totally different setting than the experience in the cinema hall that had cloaked her in fame.

As Mindy Buchanan-King says (2020), in essence Aldrich's work does not wonder so much about what happened to Baby Jane. The real question driving the narrative seems to be instead: 'What ever happened to youth?' And the answer is, again according to Buchanan-King, 'Baby Jane gives its audience a monster: The Aging Female. [...] [T]he true horror of the movie is predicated on cultural anxieties of the physical and emotional loss of youth through visual manifestations of the grotesque female body' (2020: 409). It is a gaze brought on by the story that goes beyond the proposed plot and seems instead to call into question – through more or less obvious references – the world of Hollywood and its contemptuous judgement of the passing of years, especially for actresses.

All of that was however challenged by Crawford, who obviously refused to appear on set aged and ugly, by keeping instead an impeccable posture, despite impersonating a character who cannot move her legs. This type of presence on-screen helps to disrupt the crystallized and negative view that was used at the time in movies to depict a body no longer young. It is a choice made by an actress with a strong character, capable of ruffling the standards of the time, and starting a revolution with respect to ageing: 'Crawford complicates cultural fears of the ageing actress, becoming a non-normative – because she is aged – female, sexual body' (Buchanan-King 2020: 409 - ibidem).

2. Second framework. *Feud: Bette and Joan: The story in the story*

The TV series *Feud: Bette and Joan* brings on-screen the events regarding the movie *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*: the origin and development of the project, the backstage, its screening, the Oscar nomination and the following years. In particular, the plot delves on the dynamics played out by the protagonists, Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, in their complicated relationship, as well as other difficult relationships, such as that between Bette Davis and her daughter Barbara Sherry, or between Robert Aldrich and Jack Warner, the director and producer of the film, respectively. In all these cases, the focus is often placed on the theme of age and the nature of old age, which is seen as a problem.

In the dialogues between the characters, in effect, youth is often evoked as a form of power for women, a power which at the time in Hollywood manifested itself both in a concrete way, through proposals for contracts and participations in multiple films, and in a symbolic way, through the exaltation of that period of life, constantly showing protagonists under 35 in the movies. In the early 1960s – and more frequently than now – actresses over 40 had to abide by a very strict rule: as they aged, and inversely proportional to their years, there was an ongoing and steady decrease of offers and roles, down to zero, and their total disappearance from the screens and therefore from jet society.

For men, actors in this case, the fate was much different. As the character of Nonah, Joan Crawford's (Jessica Lange) masseuse says, at the start of the first episode of the TV series: 'You know how it is. Men age, they get character. Women age, they get lost'¹.

The theme of old age is therefore raised from the start and the first minutes of the pilot of *Feud* speak for themselves. The two protagonists, Bette and Joan, played by two equally important and trailblazing Hollywood stars, Susan Sarandon and Jessica Lange, are introduced by the off-screen voice of Catherine Zeta-Jones playing the role of a 60-something Olivia de Havilland. Through the ploy of the interview, with a self-styled documentarian called Adam, the actress Catherine-Olivia declares:

'There's never been a rivalry like theirs. For nearly half a century they hated each other [...] and we loved them for it'. And again: 'At the peak of The Depression when I was first starting out, [Joan] was the woman every man wanted – and every woman wanted to be. Many think of her as the greatest star of all time. Now, my dear friend Bette [...] she was, quite frankly, the greatest actress Hollywood has ever known. What a career! During the war she played all the best roles, and she played them with a – I don't know how else to say this – but with a ballsy intensity that none of us, actor or actress, would have dared. You know, they only made one film together, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, but how that happened, and what happened afterwards [...] oh my [...] that's a story and a feud of Biblical proportions'.

Adam the documentarian: 'What was behind their feud? Why did they hate each other so much?'

Olivia: 'Feuds are never about hate. Feuds are about pain. They're about pain'.²

¹ Minutes 4:30–4:35 (Season 1 Episode 1).

² Minutes 1:50–3:02 (Season 1 Episode 1).

Pain thus becomes one of the main themes of the storytelling, as developed through a specific directorial strategy based on the connections established through three-time frames: 1978, the year setting the first narrative present, where several interviews take place, including the one with Olivia de Havilland. Then 1962, namely the year when the shooting of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* started. Finally, an antecedent past referring to the two protagonists' lives in their heydays. While the scenes from 1978 and 1962 are in colour, the earlier period is depicted in black and white, together with the 'takes' from the various movies being mentioned. This would engender in audiences a body of reference points, clearly highlighted by the specific chromatic choice. For example, the interview with Olivia is shot in colour, but when she talks about the story of the two actresses, black-and-white clips are inserted, where both Susan Sarandon and Jessica Lange play in old movies by Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, respectively. The use of black and white works therefore as a device to mark a time jump between the time of the interview and the two actresses' golden era tucked away in the past. And not only that. This ongoing shift of perspective creates a sort of 'truth effect': the black and white points at the documentarist feature of the series, while colour would seemingly refer to its more fictional side. The result is a sort of emulation of the docu-fiction genre, with use of mock stock footage.

At narrative level, the story told by *Feud* also focuses on events taking place during the production of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*. In this way, a sort of structure composed of layering plots creating a cadenced and constant rhythm, emerges: the reference to a given period, or another one, through the use of stories or interviews (besides Olivia de Havilland [Catherine Zeta-Jones], there are also Joan Blondell and Geraldine Page, played by Kathy Bates and Sarah Paulson, respectively) comes to define the spaces of the plot and pseudo-reflection. The stage designs, costumes, postures contribute as well to underline the time jumps, the differences between the filmic and the pseudo-real registers, the shifts from one age to another.

Another time frame level, a fourth one, should also be added: contemporaneity. It is here that the viewers' gaze should be placed on the entire narrative arc, on the situations taking place in the different decades, on the possible comparisons being hinted at.

The theme of ageing comes across all the different stages: age – and its related decline – is mentioned in the interviews; age is a matter being discussed by the director and the producer; finally, age becomes the interpretation key for all the conflicts (and reconciliations) inside the plot, marking the relationships between the characters. Although old age is highlighted mostly negatively, being elderly would also mean having a lot of experiences and knowledge, as Bette Davis (Susan Sarandon) repeats during tense moments with her daughter who wants to become an actress. Thus, a double level of the use of the ageing theme comes to the fore: on the one hand, it means losing one's beauty and wholesomeness, especially at physical level; on the other hand, however, it means acquiring skills, personality and professionalism, in terms of experiences.

2.1. The value of ageing in *Feud*

By bringing on-screen the shooting of the movie *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, and making forays in the private lives of Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, *Feud* actually outlines a portrait of Hollywood in a specific time: it offers a snapshot of celebrities, power dynamics, the gender stereotypes present in movies, together with the misogyny characterizing the world of cinema in the 1960s. The series therefore presents a reconstruction of the society of the period, highlighting the disparity in power between men and women. In this context, as we have seen, old age appears to be an important, even discriminating, issue. It is approached from different angles, exploiting above all the rivalry between the two actresses, exacerbated by the press and the film industry of the time, which always portrayed them as enemies.

In 1962, when *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* was released, Bette and Joan were not yet 60 years. Despite important careers behind them, both had struggled to find new job opportunities and meaningful roles, as they faced the challenge of wanting to keep on acting in an environment that

discriminated against older women. Their growing old had made them more fragile, aggravating the insecurity they felt in terms of their career in their maturity.

The TV series *Feud* highlights this specific feature: advanced age is a theme being present in the dialogues of many scenes. It also appears to be as a sort of spectre capable of contaminating the entire narrative, producing behaviours in the two women shifting from being in awe of directors and producers to attempting, and not always successfully, to seduce them. *Feud* presents then an interpretation of the forms of women's submission to men's dominance (Bourdieu 1998), thus staging time-consolidated rationales and customs, together with the opportunity to question them.

Although their growing old contributed to set up a tense environment for Bette and Joan, it is likewise true that sharing the problem of ageing contributes to establishing a feeling of closeness and complicity – frowned upon by the film production aiming at kindling conflict as a way to ensure the best performance on the set.

Old age is then described also as a space of reciprocity and understanding, a sort of alliance which strengthens the two women – in essence, a weapon against their surrounding environment. In this case, then, old age is a positive value, as a device capable of triggering the onset of a kind of subversive feminism, aiming at reframing traditional behaviours and forms of female agency typical of that historical period. By observing the attitudes and ways of acting of the different characters, a glimpse of the early 1960s is shown on-screen, which must be compared to the behaviours of the two protagonists, which clearly clash with the standards of the time. As is well known, agency corresponds to the individual's ability to act, also determining forms of resistance to power structures (Ahearn 1999). In this sense, behaviours expressing autonomy and difference can produce variations, as compared to the models established by culture. The actions carried out by any individual can, in effect, determine an impact on social and political structures, while at the same time being influenced by them (Giddens 1979).

Feud narrates these cultural struggles, showing viewers the complicated behind the scene of a movie staging for the first time the two celebrities together, whose careers are in the waning because

they are old. However, through their behaviours and actions, not always in line with the cultural mores of the time, they are still capable of showing strength and the female potential needed to counter a system strictly based on male-defined rules. As a matter of fact, Joan and Bette move indeed in their private sphere, although determining consequences that in the long term will have effects on the public sphere. The protagonists try then to obtain greater rights and autonomy both in their careers and in their personal lives. These aspects can be interpreted as attempts to express a feminist vision, since they coincide with the women's intention to gain greater control over their private and professional lives. Their participation as co-protagonists of the movie *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* would determine new and unprecedented possibilities, in the following years, for mature actresses in Hollywood. The series contributes to somewhat describe the affirmation of a sort of feminism based on the battles that women have had to face to obtain greater equality and recognition in society and in the film industry³. It is true that *Feud* presents a view on the cultural battles that actresses had to fight in order to get more opportunities and respect as their careers moved along. In addition to the protagonists, the presence of Olivia de Havilland (Catherine Zeta-Jones) also plays an important role, due to the battles she waged in Hollywood already in the 1940s. In essence, what the series recounts appears very close to reality, as it is also documented by the research carried out by Amaral et al. (2020) with the title 'Long-term patterns of gender imbalance in an industry without ability or level of interest differences', carried out by analysing 26,000 movies produced in the United States from 1910 to 2010.

The refusal to deny the end of one's career as decreed by the *studios*' unwritten rule, which sets 'age limits' for actresses⁴, marks the opening lines of the story of *Feud* and carries the viewers inside the beginnings of a revolution. The alliance of the two actresses against the age-based prejudice

³ Even today, the treatment of actors and actresses is still different. See: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/09/19/these-charts-reveal-how-bad-the-film-industrys-sexism-is/>.

⁴ Cf. Amaral et al. (2020).

starts a struggle which becomes plural and calls into question women's agency as a form of resistance, as a series of actions fostering complicity, concordance, thus engendering new processes and new ways of doing (Ahearn 1999). By introducing a problematization – and the consequent transformation – of actresses' status, *Feud* offers a critical depiction of the challenges women had to face in the 1960s' cinema world, by highlighting gender inequalities and social pressures linked to beauty and age.

3. Third framework: Inside and outside *Feud*

If, as we have seen, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* describes the story of a complex relationship between two sisters, *Feud: Bette and Joan* focuses on the critical relationship between the two film stars at the end of their careers. Therefore, two characters appear on-screen interpreting two other characters. As spectators, we follow their different personalities (and wardrobes) in a play of mirrors that constantly recalls the dialectic between stage and backstage. The lives of women in the entertainment industry are placed at the centre of these narrative paths: in the movie, as in the series, as in real life off-screen.

This set of connections produces an inevitable series of references because, although the time periods do change, as well as the characters, the focal issues seem to remain unchanged. How much did the early 1960s' Hollywood appear substantially different from that of 1917, the golden age of Jane the performer, or from that of 1935 when Blanche had to interrupt her career? How distant does it appear from today's Hollywood, in terms of misogyny, sexism and the fight against ageing? To what extent is the representation of female figures of different ages present in the contemporary mediascape today?

In the TV series, the presence in the cast of two protagonists who are points of reference in the cinema of the past decades, Jessica Lange and Susan Sarandon, is an extremely essential feature, and for two reasons. They are two very politically active celebrities in several ways: the former is

also a UNICEF ambassador for the awareness-raising campaigns about HIV in Congo and Russia. Sarandon, besides her openly siding with the Democrats, is a pacifist and ecologist and has supported various causes, including those for the civil rights of homosexuals. Both, then, evoke meanings and values going far beyond the acting profession: they are public and charismatic figures, expressing their political views and positions, with a large and long-standing following of fans on whom they have a certain influence⁵. It is precisely in this aspect that they differ from the actresses of the past, as their mode of expression, in line with our contemporaneity, embodies the achievements accomplished by women in the past decades (Capecchi 2018).

It should also be recalled that during the shooting of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* ‘Joan Crawford and Bette Davis were 58 and 54 years old. In 2017, Jessica Lange and Susan Sarandon played their role at 68 and 71, respectively’ (Re 2021: 20–21, my translation). The choice of having older actresses, continues Re, enables us to reason on the variations in the ‘socio-cultural interpretation codes for the ageing processes, mostly regarding the female identity and the active practices in the audiovisual sector’ (Re 2021: 20–21). Jessica Lange as Joan Crawford, or Susan Sarandon as Bette Davis, can only foster a double or, in any case, multi-perspective gaze (Mittell 2015; Mascio 2023) in the more aware viewers, in their calling to question the possibility that a 50-something actress had in Hollywood in the 1960s in comparison with the challenges – and success – that a 70-something actress can have today.

The ‘new’ way to perceive maturity falls within a complex framework, contemplating an emancipated understanding of women’s ageing. Ashton Applewhite in her recent book, *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism* (2016), overturns the representation of the elderly as a fragile person to instead give a strongly positive connotation to the passing of years, by mentioning the famous ‘U-shaped’ curve in happiness, theorized by Blanchflower and Oswald in 2008, according to which the happiest moments in life are those lived in childhood and old age.

⁵ See Susan Sarandon’s statement regarding her decision not to vote for Hilary Clinton in 2016 and the visibility the media gave to it.

It is important to remember that he was a man, Robert Neil Butler who already in the late 1960s (1969) coined the term 'ageism', in analogy with sexism and racism, therefore considering it an attitude that involves stigma and prejudice. More recently Judith Butler considered three distinct, but interrelated aspects of the problem of ageism:

1. Prejudicial attitudes toward the aged, toward old age, and toward the aging process, including attitudes held by the elderly themselves; 2. discriminatory practices against the elderly, particularly in employment, but in other social roles as well; and 3. institutional practices and policies which, often without malice, perpetuate stereotypic beliefs about the elderly, reduce their opportunities for a satisfactory life and undermine their personal dignity. (1980: 8)

From 1969 to the present day, the conception of old age has certainly changed to the point of even giving rise to forms of actions against ageism, claiming the right to rally for the Age Pride, stopping perpetuating the widespread method – especially for women – of having to declare themselves younger, cheating on their age (Applewhite 2016; Ravera 2023).

Today's 'older adults' disrupt the stigma of age through everyday actions, by means – as I wrote above – of a subversion of agency, also considering the set of practices connected with dressing habits and the transformation of their wardrobe⁶.

The ongoing changes in dressing norms allow us to trace that revisitation connected with the sociocultural codes that seem to have changed, in view of the current approaches of managing advanced age. Old age is no longer, or not solely, a delicate and depressing period of life. It does not necessarily coincide with a crisis in attitudes and agency linked to the discipline of dressing, as it happened until a few decades ago for both celebrities and ordinary people. Important magazines have been celebrating this stage of human life. Let us take for example the October 2017 issue of *Vogue Italia*, titled 'The timeless issue' and totally devoted to mature women, with a gorgeous Lauren

⁶ Let us refer to, for example, the Instagram profile 'Sciuraglam' showing only shots of mature women wearing different styles of clothes, in the luxury range, with 249,000 followers in August 2023 (<https://www.instagram.com/sciuraglam/>).

Hutton, then 74, on the cover, wearing a dress revealing her shoulders and arms, and an ample cleavage. Consider also the courage of 65-year-old Andy Macdowell who elegantly and proudly displays her long grey hair, thus helping to free other women from the slavery of the ‘need’ to dye one’s hair after a certain age.

Namely, and especially for women, the desire to be able to freely choose how to appear in public has made its way through dress codes, expressing resistance to a set of rigid rules which in the past required compliance with a series of demands, such as covering the knees and shoulders, hiding the breasts through chaste necklines, using gloves for the hands and so on.

3.1. The importance of clothes in the re-signification of aging

By looking at Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, we observe many differences between the two stars, starting from their dressing styles – and consequently their attitude – as they are depicted in *Feud*, through the acting of Sarandon and Lange. In particular, Crawford was deemed to be an icon of style, a living epitome of the high fashion of those years, as opposed to Davis who wore a much simpler wardrobe. Even Lou Eyrich⁷, *Feud*’s costume designer, said in an interview published in *The Hollywood Reporter* on 21 April 2017:

Bette was very East Coast pragmatic, more sensible, down-to-earth with a bit of that Yankee touch. She dresses very much in earth tones – green, golds, browns, checks, more richer autumnal colours. Joan was more of a movie star, and she never went out of the house without a full face of makeup, and the sunglasses and purses – everything matched. Even when she received guests, according to her book on tape, she would come down dressed. We kept her in cool tones, icy blues and greens and pinks, and she did dress a little youthful for her age, sort of reliving her glory days. Bette also wore a lot of capris, but Joan rarely wore pants’.⁸

⁷ Lou Eyrich won the nomination for the Costume Designers Guild Awards for *Feud*.

⁸ See <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/feud-costumes-lou-eyrich-creating-fashionable-looks-fx-series-996542/>.

The differences in the dresses of the protagonists may also help to emphasize the differences in personality: Davis's more traditional style contrasts with Crawford's more sumptuous one. All of this is part of a system belonging to the period being portrayed in the series, which tolerated a range of choices included in a horizon of norms governing the socially accepted taste for an advanced age.

Off-screen, thanks to great performers such as Jessica Lange and Susan Sarandon, the spectre of old age turns into pride, and the crisis narrated in *Feud* becomes an exhibition of new possibilities and new models. In all of this, the language of clothing is the one that more than others determines an immediate impact on the viewers, triggering a clear and evident message: age cannot correspond to a prohibition.

In 2017, the year of *Feud*'s production, at the 69th Emmy's Governors Ball, Sarandon and Lange, wore dresses which could have been easily worn by women 40 years younger.

In particular, in several occasions, Susan Sarandon has proudly worn dresses with plunging necklines and slits, which have earned her compliments and approval by multiple publications.

The female pride associated with ageing is therefore also expressed through dressing choices breaking the mould. Styles and colours which once would have been expunged from the wardrobes of elderly ladies are now found in different occasions and contexts. Clothes therefore represent a desire for affirmation against stereotypes and crystallized cultural rules, pointing at future directions and perspectives.

Conclusion

In order to define humour, Luigi Pirandello used the example of an elderly woman dressed according to standards that at the time were not allowed. The playwright wrote the following: 'I see an old lady, with dyed hair, [...] and then awkwardly made up and dressed in youthful clothes. I start laughing. *I sense* that that old lady is the opposite of what a respectable elderly lady should be' (Pirandello 1908)

– a social judgement that made a woman no longer in her prime look ridiculous because she was dressed in a style that was not suited to her age.

In 1985, in her *Adorned in Dreams*, Elisabeth Wilson stated: ‘Now fashion is accessible to all age brackets and the reproach for the “old lady dressed like a girl” has vanished’, although later underlying in a footnote that when she had shared that thought to his students, one of them had strongly voiced their dissent. The path to questioning age in relation to wardrobe has therefore been traced, even if perhaps it has not yet fully completed its course.

Feud is showing us some of the changes that have occurred, by using clothes that we can define as ‘off ageing’ on-screen, proposing wardrobes based on a feminine taste in line with the two main characters and with the period in question, showing the first effects of a resistance. If you look, for example, at the dress worn by Crawford during the 1962 Oscar ceremony, you may notice a provocative style for her age: the actress wore a dress with a wide neckline and bare arms.

Wearing certain clothes can therefore produce a challenge, and in some cases a real provocation in terms of what is permitted or not, especially for women. If for Veblen, in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), the symbolic meaning of clothes had to be considered with respect to status, with the aim of underlining the vicarious function of female consumption, which was supposed to account for the professional position and, consequently, the income of her husband and entire family, today other forms of ‘conspicuous consumption’ are carried out through clothing, touching on much wider political issues, including that of the Age Pride, now well represented also by the many examples of older women on the covers of magazines⁹.

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⁹ For the September 2023 issue, *Vogue* has on cover the top models from the 1990s, defining them ‘Fabulous then and now’, thus erasing the issue of time and age.

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