

A few points about *My Old Ass* with Aubrey Plaza

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My Old Ass is a fantasy-comedy drama insisting that youth, contrary to the notion often attributed to George Bernard Shaw, is not wasted on the young. The film, now streaming and popular with audiences, has certain strengths, including one quite moving scene but also banal and grating aspects. In the end, the work lacks the social element and understanding that would have made it more enduring.

Canadian writer-director Megan Park sets her film in the Muskoka Lakes district of Ontario toward the end of a radiant summer. The film's central figure, Elliott (Maisy Stella), whose family owns a cranberry farm, is soon leaving for Toronto and university. As the film opens, Elliott is only attracted to other women, or thinks she is.

She has made clear her lack of interest in running the family business, which she assumes her younger brother Max (Seth Isaac Johnson) will take over. In fact, we later learn her parents (Maria Dizzia and Al Goulem) have decided to sell the cranberry operation.

Her general outlook (and perhaps in part that of the filmmaker)?

I'm just excited that my life is, like, finally about to start. Um ... I don't know. Even though the world is, like, literally on fire and ... full of uneducated racists, I'm just, like, trying to force myself to have hope. And I just feel like moving to Toronto and, like, living in the city and going to school, like, it all just feels right, you know? ... I can't be a third-generation cranberry farmer and, like, live in a town with 300 people.

As the reader may gather, Elliott is largely self-involved and somewhat pleased with herself (as are her friends). The "fantastic" feature here is the sudden appearance, while Elliott and her pals are high on mushrooms, of herself 20 years older (Aubrey Plaza). Her future self offers various kinds of counsel, primarily directed toward Elliott's drawing closer to her family members during the short time she has left in the area.

One of older Elliott's most forceful pieces of advice is to "avoid anyone named Chad." She initially refuses to explain

why. Needless to say, shortly afterward, young Elliott meets a "Chad," and, despite her best efforts, falls strongly for him. As she tells the future Elliott:

Everything about him ... like, feels so right. I'm sorry, but I've tried so hard to find one bad thing about him, and I literally can't.

She cannot understand why she has been warned away from Chad. The reader who doesn't want to know the answer should avert his or her eyes.

Finally, in response to her younger self's imploring, older Elliott explains:

He died. That's what he did. Chad dies. And he dies after you have fallen so madly in love with him that you can't see straight, okay? After you can't imagine loving anybody else ever again.

The sequence in which the 39-year-old Elliott encounters young Chad—she is introduced mischievously as young Elliott's "Uncle Michelle—is genuinely touching. To give the filmmaker credit, it is a highly unusual moment when the older woman wraps her arms around her former great love (of course, he has no idea who she is). Plaza, for all her usual impudence and even cynicism, throws herself into the prolonged embrace and conveys considerable emotion.

My Old Ass is less successful in other scenes and in certain of its other aims. There are several points that could be made.

First, the writer-director tries far too hard to be "at one" with her youthful characters, especially in those sequences in which 18-year-old Elliott spends time with her friends and lovers, Ruthie (Maddie Ziegler), Ro (Kerrice Brooks) and Chelsea (Alexandria Rivera). The dialogue is fashionably clever, smug and occasionally has such an "insider" feel to it that is both annoying *and* almost incomprehensible to the spectator. At times, the film's breezy vulgarity (reflected in its title) is

refreshing; at other times it simply seems a type of pandering.

In other words, Park insufficiently challenges her audience.

Second, the advice offered by the older Elliott is largely trivial.

You are so lucky. Life will never be the same as it is right now. ... You're gonna go to the city and everything's gonna be exciting and busy and ... You don't even go home for Thanksgiving this year. You stay in the city. You should go home. The only thing you can't get back is time. When you get older, it goes by so fast, dude.

In the end, the older woman comes to understand that her younger self was right to plunge into even a doomed love affair:

You shouldn't live your life for me or for the future or get stuck in the past, because that is not living. I'm so happy you fell in love with Chad. Because ... loving Chad is a gift. And being loved by him ... it's the best f----- thing in the world. So ... just keep being the naive, dumb, pore-less, smart ... Happy, confident, brave, self-centered optimistic idiot that you are because ... it's perfect.

The film ends on that essentially complacent note.

Third, bound up with the banality (and sentimentality) is the homogenous and claustrophobic social atmosphere, with no suggestion of another world where struggle and economic hardship and suffering exist. Elliott and Chad turn out to be future schoolmates. Moreover, he proves to come from a line of "the original cranberry farmers in the area. ... His grandfather was close friends with your grandfather. You two are practically blood." The characters' situations and thoughts and feelings are largely indistinguishable. It's a cocoon, and not all that interesting. "The world is literally our f----- oyster."

It doesn't take *that* much to be *more* interesting. Simply a certain social insight and sympathy. Contemporary cinema is capable of that too.

Last year's *Heartless* (*Sem Coração*) from Brazil, for example, is not a flawless film, but it takes into account "social differentiation," as we explained.

In that work too, a girl, Tamara (Maya de Vicq) is spending her last days at home before she goes off to continue her studies in a large city. Tamara has certain problems in her life, but she encounters someone whose conditions are far more difficult, even tragic, the daughter of an impoverished fisherman. The

girl is known as "Heartless" because of scars on her chest from a cardiac operation.

The scenes between Heartless and her (real-life) widowed father are the strongest, most moving in the film. When he sees her attempting to mend a net, he grabs it out of her hands. Not because he's unkind, but because this unforgiving life is the opposite of what he wants for her.

She says, "You said you'd teach me how to make a net." He rejects the idea. "Let me fish with you," Heartless implores. He answers simply, but with decades of experience behind his earnest words, "Fishing is no life." He desires "something better" for her, although he inevitably gives in to her wishes.

One of the co-directors, Nara Normande, responded to an interviewer's comment that "*Heartless* is, above all, a film about class; which is perhaps one of the defining themes of contemporary Brazilian cinema" in the following manner:

Yes, the main story of the film is indeed interwoven with class themes. Especially for those of us who come from small places like where I grew up near the beach, we're constantly exposed to different social circles. As kids, we don't really notice these differences. It's only as we grow up that we realize the disparities. And understanding that the people you've spent so much time with have different realities, without the privileges you had, or that you might never see them again ... it's really tough.

The "banishment" from official North American culture "of any understanding of the predominance of *class* in the construction of social reality" continues to be a serious intellectual and *artistic-dramatic* problem. The "deepest and most persistent conditions" of humanity's "soul" are excluded from this type of work, making it less compelling and moving, and, in the end, somewhat forgettable.



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