

AGEING & GENDER IN EUROPEAN CINEMA

AGE-C Project - International Conference

September 8 & 9, 2026



Sorbonne Nouvelle University
Maison de la recherche
4 rue des Irlandais
75005 – Paris

Organizers
Raphaëlle Moine
Adrien Valgalier

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 8

Maison de la recherche – Athéna Room

9.00 – 9.15

Welcome and Introduction

Panel 1 (9.15 – 10.45)

Performing Age on Screen: Stardom, Embodiment, and the Making of Old Age

Chair: Belén Vidal (King's College London)

Deborah Jermyn (University of Roehampton): “I am in my body cinema era”: Emma Thompson’s Ageing Stardom

Alexandre Moussa (University of Poitiers): Two Ages, One Body: “Grayface” and the Performativity of Age

10.45 – 11.00

Break

Panel 2 (11.00 – 12.30)

Stereotypes, Visibility, and Hierarchies of Ageing Bodies

Chair: Adrien Valgalier (Sorbonne Nouvelle University)

Gloria Dagnino, Francesco Pitassio (University of Udine): The Old, the Bad, and the Ugly: Reflections on Ageing as Cultural and Aesthetic Norm

Boglárka Angéla Farkas, Andrea Virginás (Babeş–Bolyai University): Stereotypical Representations of Older Adult Men and Women in Contemporary Romanian and Hungarian Cinemas: Is There Hope for Leading Roles and Stardom in Later Age?

12.30 – 14.00

Lunch Break

Panel 3 (14.00 – 15.30)

Synthesis and Main Outcomes for Each National Team

Vinzenz Hediger, Asja Makarević (Goethe University Frankfurt)

Luis Freijo, Belén Vidal (King's College London)

Gloria Dagnino, Francesco Pitassio (University of Udine)

Raphaëlle Moine, Adrien Valgalier (Sorbonne Nouvelle University)

Boglárka Angéla Farkas, Andrea Virginás (Babeş–Bolyai University)

15.30 – 15.45
Break

Panel 4 (15.45 – 17.15)
Ageing, Work, and Social Value

Chair: Francesco Pitassio (University of Udine)

Luis Freijo (King's College London): Ageing Hitmen and Retirement Anxieties in *Dead in a Week or Your Money Back* and *El muerto y ser feliz*

Olena Gepper (Goethe University Frankfurt): Who Cares? Migrant Care Workers and the Limits of Representation in European Cinema

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9

Maison de la recherche – Athéna Room

Panel 5 (9.30–11.00)
Screening Desire in Later Life: Gender, Queerness, and Ageing

Chair: Raphaëlle Moine (Sorbonne Nouvelle University)

Charles–Antoine Courcoux (University of Lausanne): Notes on a Scandal (of Anachronism): About Age–Hypogamous Heterosexual Relationships Among Middle–Aged Women in Contemporary French and British Cinema

Raquel Medina (Aston University/IES Abroad Granada Center): Cruising and Closeting at 76: Queer Aging in José Mari Goenaga's and Aitor Arregi's Film *Maspalomas* (2025)

11.00–11.15
Break

Panel 6 (11.15 – 12.45) Ageing Between Dependency and Creativity

Chair: Laurent Guido (Sorbonne Nouvelle University)

Asja Makarević (Goethe University Frankfurt): Ageing with an “Alien”: Comic Relief and Ethical Attentiveness in German–Language Cinema of Live–in Care

Belén Vidal (King’s College London): Ageing and creativity: Projecting Transcendence, Performing Contingency

12.45–14.15
Lunch Break

Professional Roundtable (14.15–15.45) Challenges and Industry Perspectives

Moderation: Andrea Virginás (Babeş–Bolyai University)

Participants:

David Bertrand (Casting Director)

Manon Cerdan (Fiction consultant on the series *Septième Ciel*; PhD Student in Media Studies, Université Paris–Panthéon–Assas)

Solène Edouard (Talent Agent)

Vinzenz Hediger (Director of the Cinémathèque suisse)

Sophie–Anne Lecesne, Delphine Lalizout (Actresses; Co–Lead and member of the AAFA “Tunnel de la comédienne de 50 ans” Commission)

Abstracts

Deborah Jermyn (University of Roehampton): “I am in my body cinema era”: Emma Thompson’s Ageing Stardom

Having made her big-screen debut in *The Tall Guy* in 1989 and most recently starred in 2025 in *Dead of Winter*, 67-year-old British actor Emma Thompson is that rare creature – an acclaimed woman performer who has sustained a high-profile cinematic career for over three decades, across starring roles in both modest European and big-budget US productions. Ageing in the public eye in this way and moreover bucking the trend which still so frequently sees women stars fade into cameos at mid-life, it is thus somewhat surprising that she has not merited attention from ageing star studies in the way her small coterie of peers has.

This paper reflects on why Thompson has largely seemingly sidestepped this scholarly interest and finds she constitutes an enormously generative archive through which to explore cinema, ageing, and gender particularly as informed by ideas of “Britishness”. Throughout her accomplished career, Thompson has been afforded admiration by critics for operating as a talent outside of conventional standards of female beauty. In a 2005 *Guardian* profile, Kellaway remarked that “Emma Thompson's face is rather like a stage: bare, receptive,” an interview in which Thompson tellingly said of herself, “I can do invisible.” Striking here also is Christine Geraghty’s 2002 analysis examining Thompson’s performance in *Sense and Sensibility*, and the enduring sense that British women actors lacking their US contemporaries’ perceived “glamour” must “do something else to get approval”, where her expert acting mitigates her presentation of “plainness.”

My analysis traces how this persona/body/presentational style, often operating outside of conventional models of femininity, has enabled Thompson to age quite consummately and seamlessly into roles providing unusually rich and intriguing material as an older woman. Particularly considered are the European/international co-productions, *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande* (2022), where she plays a retired teacher who hires a sex-worker, and *Dead of Winter*, an action-thriller in which her working-class widow stranded in a snowy wilderness foils a kidnap. Here I explore how Thompson has deftly retained and leveraged a certain kind of British star persona, managing to both discuss her ageing process with enormous candour and evade professional marginalisation for getting and looking older.

Alexandre Moussa (University of Poitiers): Two Ages, One Body: “Grayface” and the Performativity of Age

In the last chapter of *Contemporary Cinema and Old Age: Gender and the Silvering of Stardom* (2017), British scholar Josephine Dolan is highly critical towards prosthetic or CGI-assisted performances of old age, eloquently referred to as “grayface” by Timothy Shary and Nancy McVittie (2016). According to her, their grotesque aspect tends to strengthen a fourth age imaginary that associates old age with social and personal waste; moreover, she highlights the paradox between rewarding younger actors and actresses for performing the artifice of prosthetic ageing and the obligation for stars actually reaching old age to protect their image from any association to fourth-age abjection. In this paper, I want to suggest that if “grayface” performances do insist on the biological aspect of the ageing process, their excessive and ostensibly artificial nature also emphasizes the “performativity of age” (Barnes Lipscomb & Marshall, 2010). This analysis will rely on the comparison between canonical uses of ‘grayface’ performances in the biopic and comedy genres and more unorthodox practices such as Tilda Swinton’s double performance in Joanna Hogg’s *The Eternal Daughter* (2022). It will highlight that while films often rely on the opposition between an artificially aged body and its younger incarnation for melodramatic or comical effect, reinforcing the depiction of old age as a radically distinct period from youth, ‘grayface’ can also be used in more subtle ways in order to investigate the continuity between younger and older states of being.

Gloria Dagnino, Francesco Pitassio (University of Udine): The Old, the Bad, and the Ugly: Reflections on Ageing as Cultural and Aesthetic Norm

This paper explores and discusses the relationship between ageing, as portrayed in contemporary European cinema, and the broader aesthetic and cultural notion of “ugliness.” After decades of serving as a bastion of a “patriarchal and youth-dominated visual culture” (Liddy 2023: 79), mainstream cinema has, in recent years, begun to open to a more age-diverse spectrum of representational models. Older actors, and notably actresses, seem to enjoy unprecedented visibility and recognition: in Italy, an exemplary case can be found in the awarding of the 2026 David di Donatello for Best Actress to 85-year-old Aurora Quattrocchi, which prompted her first appearance on the cover of fashion magazine *Elle Italia*. At the same time, advances in CGI and prosthetic make-up techniques have facilitated a surge in “grayface” performances (Shary & McVittie 2016) that accentuate the most common outward features of old age – such as wrinkles, stooped posture, hair thinning – either for derision or aversion-inducing purposes. Combining film and age studies (Gilleard & Higgs 2014; Jermyn & Holmes 2015; Dolan 2017) with a selection of theoretical and conceptual frameworks from aesthetics (Rosenkranz 1853; Eco 2007; Giordanetti, Mazzocut-Mis & Scaramuzza 2011). By analysing a series of representative film cases, drawn from the AGE-C database, the paper examines how the “old, bad, and ugly” trope has not disappeared from popular culture. Rather, it has taken on new forms as it adapts to different genres and aesthetic categories such as the “elder kitsch,” the “old crone,” or the “ageing monster” – all of which share a common ageist root. The paper also reflects on the (gendered) implications that such representations carry for the cultural and social understanding of older individuals.

Boglárka Angéla Farkas, Andrea Virginás (Babeş–Bolyai University): Stereotypical Representations of Older Adult Men and Women in Contemporary Romanian and Hungarian Cinemas: Is There Hope for Leading Roles and Stardom in Later Age?

When mustering the critically acclaimed and/or popular Romanian and Hungarian fiction films from the 21st century, one might have the presumption that older adult characters appear rather often on the silver screen. Many of the great successes of the Romanian New Wave – including *Child's Pose* (*Poziția copilului*, Călin Peter Netzer, 2013), *Graduation* (*Bacalaureat*, Cristian Mungiu, 2016) and *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (*Moartea domnului Lăzărescu*, Cristi Puiu, 2005) – offered leading characters in their late Second and Third Age, while Hungary seemingly had its own share of leading older adult characters with titles such as *Final Report* (*Zárójelentés*, István Szabó, 2020), *Aurora Borealis: The Northern Light* (*Aurora Borealis: Északi fény*, Márta Mészáros, 2017) or *Some Birds* (*Valami madarak*, Dániel Hevér, 2023).

However, by taking a closer, data-driven look at these small national industries (Dagnino et al. 2025), all these provisional assumptions prove to be heavily distorted. Out of the 172 Romanian fiction films considered (released between 2014 and 2023), only 27,90% of them have leading characters above 50, and out of 155 Hungarian fiction films (from the same period), only 25,80% of them fit this same criterion, overall suggesting that the respective Central and Eastern European film industries share similar tendencies. Although a large-scale overview of these industries from the intersectional perspective of age and gender is definitely needed and should be carried out in the future, this paper dedicates itself to a predominantly qualitative investigation that turns to the most prevalent role type assigned to older adults: supporting roles.

Often portraying the family members of younger characters and concurrently serving as the breathing traces of cultural trauma and memory, Romanian and Hungarian supporting roles epitomise various archetypical and stereotypical representations from “grandchild-demanding” mothers, eccentric crones (Virginás 2025), to grumpy, hedonistic and/or absent fathers. Interestingly, even these supporting roles can offer a road to popularity and national stardom. As two illustrative examples, one might think of Hungary's Zoltán Mucsi – who has been portraying the “grumpy old man” in a plethora of audiovisual content (including advertisements) – or Romania's “Auntie Lenuța” (Lenuța Moldovan) – who has been playing the straightforward, traditionalist grandmother both in film and on social media platforms. Consequently, we'd argue that these cultural representations of ageing femininities and masculinities – albeit coming from supporting roles – are relevant, revealing how one is “aged by culture,” as Margaret Gullette (2004) formulates it.

Luis Freijo (King's College London): Ageing Hitmen and Retirement Anxieties in *Dead in a Week or Your Money Back* and *El muerto y ser feliz*

This paper discusses films about ageing hitmen in European cinema in relation to masculinity, retirement and neoliberal politics. The 2008 crisis intensified a process in Europe in which redundancies and long-term unemployment disproportionately affected workers over 50 (Gregg and Wadsworth, 2010: 67). At the same time, governments started extending the minimum age of retirement into the mid- to late-60s, which left that segment of the population unable to find employment, but ineligible to retire. Within the current emergency discourse about the ageing of the European continent, retirement and pensions have become one of the central issues of contention. The question of whether the new generations of older people, especially those born in the baby boom years, will be able to fully retire, and how those pensions will be paid if the population pyramid keeps shrinking in its base, occupies media discourse, parliamentary negotiations and day-to-day conversations. Consequently, cultural gerontology research has focused on the economic, psychological and identitarian complexities of retirement in contemporary European populations, with specific focuses on the anxieties that surround retirement for male employees (Leontowitsch, 2024; Pietilä et al., 2020), and on the role that work plays in managing fears for the proximity of death (Segel-Karpas and Bergman, 2022).

In this context, a cycle of films has appeared in European cinemas which offer different iterations of professional hitmen negotiating anxieties about personal meaning after retirement. This paper analyses *Dead in a Week or Your Money Back* (Edmunds, 2018) and *El muerto y ser feliz* (Rebollo, 2012) in relation to how ageing masculinities navigate post-2008 neoliberal ideology. In these films, neoliberalism manifests through an economy in which bodies are the main source of capital and their survival or destruction determines the longevity of the protagonists' careers (Martin-Jones, 2019). While *Dead in a Week* combines the comedy and the action thriller to reinforce middle-class family values in post-Brexit Britain, *El muerto y ser feliz* portrays a terminally ill hitman who refuses to kill and embarks on a fragmented road trip in order to reject a “neoliberal political rationality” (Parvu, 2017). Ultimately, these films navigate and expose the consequences of becoming “citizens as consumers” (Price and Livsey, 2015) of job markets in older age.

Olena Gepper (Goethe University Frankfurt): Who Cares? Migrant Care Workers and the Limits of Representation in European Cinema

Migrant care workers have become essential to Europe's ageing societies, yet they remain strikingly underrepresented in contemporary European cinema. While films increasingly explore ageing, dementia, loneliness, and family relations, the labour that sustains elderly care often remains invisible or marginalised.

This talk examines how contemporary European cinema represents migrant care workers and what these representations reveal about broader cultural attitudes toward dependency, care, and social belonging. Drawing on selected films from Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, including *The Forgetfulness of the Squirrels* (2021), *Le Badanti* (2015), *The Carer* (2016), *Rival* (2022), and *Raging Grace* (2023), the presentation explores recurring patterns in which migrant caregivers appear as emotional helpers, outsiders, or symbolic figures rather than as full subjects of their own stories.

Combining film analysis with perspectives from care ethics, migration studies, and cultural theory, the talk argues that European cinema continues to struggle with representing care work and interdependence openly. At the same time, recent films such as *Raging Grace* begin to challenge these conventions by exposing the hidden inequalities and power structures behind domestic care labour.

By focusing on the tensions between visibility and invisibility, the presentation highlights the cultural and political limits of how contemporary Europe imagines care, ageing, and belonging.

Charles-Antoine Courcoux (University of Lausanne): Notes on a Scandal (of Anachronism): About Age-Hypogamous Heterosexual Relationships Among Middle-Aged Women in Contemporary French and British Cinema

In 2024, a study on the interplay between age differences and educational levels (Trimarchi, Pardo, Toulemon) highlighted the rise in relationships where older women are in couples with younger men, despite the fact that such relationships remain in the minority. This phenomenon, known as age-hypogamous sexual relationship among middle-aged women, is all the more interesting as it echoes several findings from the recent major survey “Contexte des sexualités en France” (CSF 2023). Indeed, such an increase would be difficult to conceive without several changes reported by the survey: a general diversification of life trajectories and partners; relative convergence of behaviors between men and women; and a pluralization of forms of sexuality, among others. Although not statistically verified, numerous dating platforms report changes that resonate with this situation: a broadening of age preferences; more contacts initiated by younger men; growing appreciation for older women; and an increase in intergenerational relationships. This phenomenon, even if it does not challenge the traditional order that remains in place, raises the question of its depiction in films. In other words, what place does contemporary French cinema give to age-hypogamous sexual relationship among middle-aged women? Where does the symbolic cursor lie in relation to this shift in social behavior? This question, with its emphasis on how cinematic representations articulate norms of age, gender, and sexuality, has become more pressing due to the recent release of a whole series of films—both in Great Britain and in the United States—that have addressed this issue, with *Film Stars Don't Die in Liverpool* (2017), *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande* (2022) or *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* (2024) in the UK, and *May December* (2023), *The Idea of You* (2024), *Babygirl* (2024), *A Family Affair* (2024) or *Lonely Planet* (2024) in the US.

To address this issue, I will focus on analyzing the discourse of French productions that, since the 2010s, have depicted such relationships, namely: *Les Beaux Jours* (2013); *Souvenirs* (2016); *Celle que vous croyez* (2019); *Les Jeunes Amants* (2022) and *L'Été dernier* (2023). My analysis will draw on Mary Russo's concept of the “scandal of anachronism,” i.e., the danger of social disqualification involved, in this case for white women, in deviating from what is constructed as an age-appropriate sexual behavioral model. Within this framework, I shall conduct a comparative analysis of these films centered on female characters over the age of fifty with British and, to a lesser degree, American productions, as well as French films centered on women in their forties, like *20 ans d'écart* (2013) and *MILF* (2018), focusing on the narrative, generic, and national specificities of these productions. In this regard, we will see that the “scandal of anachronism” is clearly not limited to middle-aged women.

Raquel Medina (Aston University/IES Abroad Granada Center): Cruising and Closeting at 76: Queer Aging in José Mari Goenaga's and Aitor Arregi's Film *Maspalomas* (2025)

This paper examines the limited representation of aging, sexuality, and LGBTIQ+ identity in mainstream cinema, linking this absence to ageism, the desexualization of older bodies, and the marginalization of queer lives within family and institutional care settings. Drawing on queer aging studies, queer temporality, and theories of sexual citizenship, it argues that older queer subjects have often been rendered either invisible or narratively acceptable only through depictions that privilege emotional intimacy at the expense of sexual agency. Although films such as *Beginners* (2010), *Love Is Strange* (2014), and *Supernova* (2020) engage with queer identity in later life, they largely leave the politics of desire in old age unexamined.

Against this backdrop, the Spanish film *Maspalomas* (2025), directed by José Mari Goenaga and Aitor Arregi, offers a compelling counterpoint. The film follows Vicente, a 76-year-old gay man who embraces a long-imagined life of freedom in Maspalomas—marked by cruising, nightlife, and bodily pleasure—after the end of a long-term relationship. This queer utopian space, however, is disrupted when Vicente suffers a stroke and is forced to return to San Sebastián, where he is placed in a nursing home and reunited with an estranged daughter.

The paper argues that *Maspalomas* frames queer aging as both a delayed coming of age and a second coming out, positioning it between the opposing logics of cruising and closeting. In foregrounding the tension between queer freedom of Maspalomas and institutional care, the film exposes the ageist, heteronormative, and gendered norms that regulate sexuality, autonomy, and visibility in later life, offering a critical analysis of cinematic representations of queer aging.

Asja Makarević (Goethe University Frankfurt): Ageing with an “Alien”: Comic Relief and Ethical Attentiveness in German–Language Cinema of Live–in Care

This paper explores the intersections of ageing, gender, and live–in care in contemporary German–language cinema. Using a dataset of films from nine European countries produced between 2014 and 2023, which feature actors and documentary subjects over 50 (in Eastern Europe) or over 55 (in Western Europe), and/or engage with ageing, the analysis surveys 17 German national and majority (co–)productions that address caregiving in domestic settings.

Despite the demographic significance of population ageing and the increasing reliance on migrant care labour across Europe, particularly in Germany (Lutz and Palenga–Möllenbeck 2010, 2012), these issues remain marginal in German cinema. When they are addressed, they are mediated through established genre frameworks: comedy (Brockmann 2000) and observational documentary (Nichols 2017), as seen in *Die Vergesslichkeit der Eichhörnchen* and *Family Business*. The first film centres on Marija, a young Ukrainian live–in carer employed to look after Curt Wieland, a patriarch suffering from dementia, while navigating unresolved tensions within the household. The second follows Jowita, who leaves her family in Poland to care for sceptical Anne, who has dementia, in order to fund the construction of a house back home. As both films suggest, comedy tends to portray migrant care workers as figurative “alien” figures, emphasising cultural difference within domestic spaces, whereas observational documentary offers more ethically attentive portrayals.

Comedy has become one of the most popular film genres in 21st–century Germany, with transcultural or “culture clash” comedies proving particularly successful (Twark 2020; Gordon 2025). As Twark argues, more recent German comedies are rooted in historical and political contexts and can be categorised into East–meets–West reunification comedies, “Hitler humour” parodies, transcultural comedies, and contemporary film comedies that reference past events. Through comparative, close textual and formal analysis, the article demonstrates how German–language comedies about live–in care can make complex social issues relatable to local audiences while partly obscuring structural inequalities and depoliticising the lived experiences of care. Such representations may either perpetuate or challenge stereotypes, thereby promoting inclusion or segregation.

Situating *Die Vergesslichkeit der Eichhörnchen* and *Family Business* within debates on “greying Europe,” transnational domestic labour migration, and cinematic form, and comparing them with the Swiss–produced comedy *Wanda, mein Wunder* and the Austrian observational documentary *24 Stunden*, the article investigates the ambivalent role of humour, shaped by corresponding historical and social contexts, as it oscillates between deflection and ethical attentiveness.

Belén Vidal (King’s College London): Ageing and creativity: Projecting Transcendence, Performing Contingency

In this paper, I connect my long–term interest in biographical screen fictions (e.g. see Vidal on the biopic, 2014) with a continuum of screen narratives that foreground creative lives through the lens of ageing. This article thus seeks to align film production and cultural representation in European film with the concerns of cultural gerontology around artistic creativity in later life.

Narratives of artistic creation are ubiquitous in European films of the last decade, offering multiple opportunities for the older actor in European cinemas (cf Freijo et al, 2025). The portrait of famous historical figures mobilises casting as symbolic capital; in other words, performers with substantial “histories” are also ideal carriers of History: Judi Dench as Iris Murdoch (*Iris*, 2001); Jeanne Moreau as Marguerite Duras (*Cet amour–là*, 2001); Barbara Sukowa as Hannah Arendt (*Hannah Arendt*, 2012); Timothy Spall as William Turner (*Mr Turner*, 2014); Bruno Ganz (*The Tobacconist*, 2018) or Anthony Hopkins (*Freud’s Last Session*, 2023) as Sigmund Freud are examples of casting that uses a star performer (often as part of an adaptation of a previously existing IP) as point of access to the cultural past, reinforcing the alignment between start text, historical event, and transcendental narratives in biofictions of artists, writers or philosophers. The ageing performer acts as the cornerstone of accessible bio–historical dramas that contribute to the resilience of popular national cinemas in Europe through shared collective memory and cultural heritage (cf Higson 2021).

However, by re–centering artistic creation in later life, these films also spell out contemporary anxieties about productivity, self–sufficiency and gendered identities in the third and fourth ages in dynamic relation to European cultural narratives and generational myths. In this regard, Edward Said’s “Timelines and Lateness” (in *On Late Style*, 2006) speculates about “late style” as a distinctive period of creativity fraught with difficulty, tension and “unproductive productiveness” (2006: 4). Said’s characterisation of late style in terms of unresolved contradiction has been rebuked for its romantic exceptionalism, on the verge of ahistoricism (e.g. Michael and Linda Hutcheon 2016). Yet Said’s preoccupation with lateness (*On Late Style* is the title for an unfinished collection of essays published posthumously) as a form of artistic transcendence also opens the door to adjustments that impinge on creativity in later life (McMullan and Smiles, 2016) as well as the material conditions that affect such processes (Katz 2018).

The second part of the paper brings the two strands of argument together by looking at *All is True* (2019) and *Pain and Glory* (2019). Though subject to genre variation (biopic or biofiction, versus autofiction) and differing casting and metafictional strategies, both films draw engage with creativity and the onset of old age through scenarios of creative dearth (a state of *unproductive productiveness*) motivating retreats into what Amelia DeFalco calls later–life review narratives (2009: 21–52). Outside the transcendent narrative of artistic creation favoured by the biopic, my analysis reads creativity through these contingent performances of ageing and, in line with Lackey and Cernat’s consideration of biofiction as an “existential map for meaningful living for the future” (2023: 176) re–assesses their place in the broader landscape of an “ageing” European cinema.