

## **The Double Standard of Screen Age: An Exploration Through Cultural Gerontology and Production Studies\***

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This article investigates the underexplored concept of "screen age" within the Italian film industry, situating it at the intersection of cultural gerontology and production studies. By analysing screen age as a distinct construct from chronological, biological, social, and psychological age, the article aims to illuminate how age is understood and operationalized in casting practices. Drawing on Susan Sontag's concept of the double standard of ageing, the study focuses on the gendered biases that systematically marginalize older actresses, contributing to their underrepresentation and typecasting. Through an exploratory qualitative analysis based on semi-structured interviews with Italian casting directors, the article reveals the gatekeeping role of casting professionals and the socially-determined nature of assigning screen age, which often results in privileging youthful femininity over age diversity. The research also reflects on the evolving practices of diversity casting, questioning whether race- and gender-inclusive strategies might be extended to age-inclusive approaches. Although international practices such as digital de-ageing are emerging, they still remain peripheral in the Italian context. The paper argues for the need to integrate screen age more rigorously into academic and industrial discourse and proposes a rethinking of diversity paradigms to encompass age as a critical identity marker. The findings highlight both challenges and possibilities for inclusive representation in contemporary audiovisual media, advocating for systemic change in both creative and industrial spheres to counter entrenched ageist and gendered norms.

**Keywords:** Casting, Blind casting, Screen Age, De-ageing, Double standard

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## Introduction and methodology

At least half a century has passed since Neorealism icon and first Italian female Oscar winner Anna Magnani reportedly uttered these famous lines to her make-up artist: “Please don’t retouch my wrinkles. It took me so long to earn them”. Since then, despite being far from a de facto equality, the status of women in Italian cinema and, more broadly, in Italy’s legal, economic and social system has improved substantially. Yet, to date, the valorisation of mature actresses remains an open challenge for the Italian film industry, which overall offers fewer and less prominent roles to actresses over 55 than to their male counterparts.<sup>1</sup> However, this is a widespread issue affecting the European film industry overall. As major English actress Emma Thompson a few years ago declared in an interview with *Vulture*:

The age thing is insane [...]. It was ever thus. I remember saying years and years ago, when I was 35, that they’d have to exhume somebody to play my leading man... Nothing’s changed in that regard. If anything, it’s got worse [...]. I remember somebody saying to me that I was too old for Hugh Grant, who’s like a year younger than me, in *Sense and Sensibility*. I said, ‘Do you want to go take a flying leap?’ (Buchanan, 2015).

The same goes for American film and media production, as the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media surveyed in detail: in 2021, among film characters aged 50 and over, 4 out of 5 are men (Geena Davis Institute, 2021). In this paper we explore the “double standard” that affects female ageing actors in Italian contemporary film production. In her seminal contribution, Susan Sontag observed that:

Growing older is mainly an ordeal of the imagination – a moral disease, a social pathology – intrinsic to which is the fact that afflicts women much more than men. It is particularly women which experience growing older [...] with such distaste and shame. [...]. Being physically attractive counts much more in a woman’s life than in a man’s, but beauty, identified, as it is for women, with youthfulness, does not stand up well to age. (1972: pp. 29-30)

We first examine the multifaceted nature of the very notion of age, which, depending on the disciplinary fields of application, extends beyond the chronological record. In the case of the film industry, a critical, but under-scrutinised notion is that of “screen age”, which refers to the age that an actor is perceived to credibly portray on screen. In the following pages, we argue for screen age to be regarded as a distinct categorization of the age construct, and we critically examine how its conceptual and operational framework in the Italian film industry adds to the under-representation of mature (female) performers. Drawing on cultural gerontology’s view of age as “one of the master identities, a key dimension of difference” (Twigg 2013, p. 2), we then turn to analyse whether existing practices of diversity casting may effectively contribute to improve the employability of older actresses, and under which conditions. Thirdly, we test these assumptions by means of an exploratory qualitative study conducted through semi-structured interviews with seven Italian casting directors. Six of the seven interviewees are members of the Unione Italiana Casting Directors (U.I.C.D.),

the non-profit trade association established in Rome in 2015 with the aim of promoting “the development, qualification and upholding of the principles underpinning the [casting] profession.”<sup>2</sup> The interviewees have been selected using a mix of personal contacts and snowballing technique. Interviews have been conducted between February 2023 and October 2024 through a combination of in-person meetings, videoconferences, and telephone calls, depending on the interviewees’ availability. Interviews were conducted in Italian, and the excerpts reported in this article were translated by the authors. Interviews were designed to explore four main themes covering a range of research interests that incorporate and exceed the focus of this contribution: the casting directors’ educational and professional career; their work process; their definitions and, more generally, their operational experience with the concept of screen age; and their view and experiences with diversity casting. The authors’ decision to conduct the interviews on these relatively broad and diverse topics goes back to two guiding principles of production studies: firstly, the general complexity in gaining (and re-gaining) access to industry professionals (Ortner 2009; Barra, Bonini & Splendore, 2016), and secondly, the intent to reconcile meso- and micro-level-focus in the analysis of production cultures and practices (Szczepanik & Vonderau, 2013).

## Age beyond numbers

The turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen an acceleration in the shift of the age composition of the population towards the older age segments. Increasing life expectancy and decreasing birth rates are the main factors behind this trend, which is no longer limited to Western and high-income countries, but now concerns nearly every country in the world. The share of the global population aged 65 years or over is expected to increase from 9.3 per cent in 2020 to around 16.0 per cent in 2050 (United Nations, 2020). According to Eurostat data, with a population four years older than the European median age, Italy is currently the second oldest country in the world after Japan. After having long remained the preserve of medical, social work, and public policy research, over the past two decades, the subject of ageing has also been embraced more systematically by social scientists and humanities scholars, who have contributed to the “cultural turn” of gerontology studies (Twigg and Martin 2015, p. 2). One of the tenets of the cultural approach to the study of age and ageing is a critical stance, and ultimately deconstruction, of the very notion of age, “challenging earlier modernist accounts based on medical or chronological definitions of age, and the explicit normativities contained within them” (*Ibid.*) Chronological age (CA), i.e. the time passed since an individual’s birth, is a recurring variable not only in scientific research of any discipline, but in the very organisational structure of society that public institutions enact (for example, to determine who has the right to vote, drive, or drink alcohol). The ubiquitous presence of CA in many aspects of everyday life, though, contributes to conceal its theoretical opaqueness. CA is essentially “*a proxy variable*” (Schwall 2012, p. 2), a placeholder for further biological, psychological, cognitive, social, and cultural traits and

processes that are influenced, but not exclusively determined, by the passage of time. Given its perceived atheoretical nature, CA is often conflated with the very traits and processes it should help to analyse. Thus, scholars across a variety of disciplines have elaborated additional categorizations of age, to better account for the actual phenomena connected to CA, as well as for the multidimensionality of the ageing process. We now proceed to illustrate some of these alternative measurements, before turning our attention to the one that is of specific pertinence of the film industry, screen age.

### ***Alternative categorisations of age***

Ageing is a process that affects individuals at the biological, social, and psychological level (Mathur & Moschis, 2005). Biological ageing – also referred to as senescence – refers to the changes affecting an individual's body over time. A common feature of biological ageing is the decrease in muscular strength, while other phenomena are sex-dependent, such as the end of reproductive capacity associated with the menopause. Conversely, social ageing is closely connected to the social norms that govern the society to which an individual belongs to. Such norms may vary greatly over time and across cultures and affect how an individual perceives their positioning with respect to life-defining transitional events, such as marriage, parenthood, or retirement (Séguy et al., 2019). Psychological ageing, instead, indicates the process whereby an individual psychological and emotional abilities evolve over time, particularly to adapt to changing expectations from their environment (Schwall, 2012). For instance, people with older psychological age are generally expected to have lower memory skills and higher ability to regulate their emotions. The biological, social and psychological age of an individual is determined by a combination of objective factors, self-perceptions and perceptions by externals. These may converge or diverge between each other, as well as they may or may not show a direct correlation with chronological age. For example, whereas a professional gymnast with a CA of 28 may be considered biologically young, their social and psychological age would probably be (self-)perceived as old, even close to retirement, given the particular norms governing that sport. In a different professional context, an early middle-aged man like Emmanuel Macron made headlines in 2017 for being the youngest President elected in France's history. What about the film industry? How does an actor's CA impact the way he/she is perceived socially and professionally? How is an actor's CA related to the age of the character he/she is (allowed) to play on screen? Is there any relation at all in a time of digital (de)ageing technologies and AI-generated human replicas? To try and offer some tentative answers to these questions we need to take a closer look at casting practices and the concept of screen age they inform.

## Casting, Diversity, and Much Ado About Something

Casting plays a non-negligible role in designing characters, the visibility of age, and reducing gender inequalities in the selection of performers. However, it is one of the least acknowledged professions within the film and media industry, and an undertheorised one. To date, most of American and European professional recognitions do not include this activity. Neither US Academy Awards comprise this category, nor do French César, Spanish Goya, or German Deutsche Filmpreise. However, recent signs of change can be spotted: since 2020 British Film Academy Awards (BAFTA) bestow an award to the best casting, from 2025 onward the same will happen with the Italian David di Donatello (Renga, 2024) and the Academy Awards recently announced the introduction of the Best Casting category from 2026 (Academy 2024). But what kind of action does casting perform and how can it contribute at mitigating such disparities?

The *Collins Dictionary* enumerates many meanings for the verb “to cast”; most of them refer to an intentional action, which expresses a political orientation (to cast a vote), visually scrutinizes something (to cast a look), questions an assumption (to cast a doubt), projects a light or a shadow (to cast a shadow), or tosses a line to fish (to cast a fishing line). However, one meaning is closer to what is at stake in casting for a film production, as the verb also describes the production of an artifact, by pouring a liquid material into a mould (to cast an object) and therefore bringing together intention (the mould) and unpredictability (the liquid material). In fact, when selecting performers for a role, apparently casting directors pour human material into the container that the character is; though, selecting performers is itself an act of determination of what an abstract character is, which brings about a unique entity, previously existing only in a virtual mode. As a recent handbook on casting practice puts it: “Casting is about defining the character to tell a story [...]. To cast an actor to type, means to cast them in a type of role that they are known for playing” (Catlif and Granville 2013, p. 6).

In an article published at the height of semiotics craze, in the late 1970s, John O. Thompson attempted at applying to the movies the commutation test structural linguistics refer to, for determining whether a component at the level of expression is relevant for the level of content, to discover that when changing lead actresses and actors the content is altered, too, but the same doesn't go for minor roles, such as stunts or extras. Which led the author to solicit a thorough survey of past and actual casting practices (Thompson, 1978). As regards our concerns, this attempt proves that casting, notably for major roles, determines the meaning of the film and orientates its understanding.

Casting practices, notably in US and European film productions, need to balance the individual actors – sets of bodily features, professional skills, and their persona, i.e., the coalescence of their public appearances and fictional roles – with a set of types that underpin the selection – a common knowledge associating bodies to social and individual functions, no matter how this association is questionable. Typecasting is, in some way, the dark side of stardom as a narrative of individual self-fulfilment and personal achievement, because it

roots the professional selection in preestablished, although mostly unconfessed, gender, class, ethnic, and racial categories. As Pamela Robertson Wojcik remarked, casting is “political practice, not only as a labour issue, but as touchstone for ideologies of identity.” At the same time:

Typecasting in film is, to a large degree, inescapable, insofar as the business of film acting, and especially the star system, relies on recognisability, marketability, and the necessity for known commodities. (Robertson Wojcik 2004, p. 170).

Thus, beyond an obvious assessment of acting skills and professional reliability, casting is based on the face and, more generally, on physical appearance. To sum up, typecasting brings about an embodiment, i.e.:

The actions performed by the body, on the body and through the body which are oriented toward the social and which are both subject to and made salient by the reciprocal actions and expectations of the self and others. (Gilleard and Higgs 2013, p. ix).

Accordingly, the embodiment of an abstract character into a physical appearance and demeanour which casting brings about orientates a social response to said character.

In some way, casting practices seem to perpetuate stereotypes and look for bodies which reinforce received wisdom as regards gender, race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and... age. Richard Dyer reflected on the same notion of stereotype, clarifying its function in designing boundaries across social groups and, therefore, making distinctions which reinforce structures of power:

Stereotypes do not only, in concert with social types, map out the boundaries of acceptable and legitimate behaviour, they also insist on boundaries exactly at those points where in reality there are none. Nowhere is this more clear than with stereotypes dealing with social categories that are invisible and/or fluid. Such categories are invisible, because you cannot tell just from looking at a person that she or he belongs to the category in question. (Dyer, 2009, p. 211)

Age is certainly visible, but definitely fluid. Therefore, enforcing stereotypes in its representation as related to gender, and accordingly selecting bodies and demeanours to incorporate said stereotypes is a way to maintain power structures, no matter how inadvertently. Is there any space for innovation and transformation? And how could such changes happen, since casting relies on corporeality, i.e. the materiality of the body, to produce the embodiment?

Amy Cook describes casting as an *act of compression*, as typification enhances some features, while neglecting or downplaying others. Basically, through a cognitivist approach, the American scholar claims that casting brings to life characters by creating categories:

Casting, like trailers, works to reduce the possibilities of a character. This takes advantage of the cognitive process of compression: the same shorthand I rely on when I see a line drawing and know it represents

a face. I argue that we use compression in casting, in naming, and in perceiving faces to efficiently make sense of the present and anticipate the future. (Cook, 2018, p. 35)

However, bodies mostly in and for themselves provide the audience with an information which cannot be entirely concealed or suppressed: “[S]ome information is more visible than others. This is the information that the actor doesn't need to act and often cannot mask” (Cook, 2018, p. 65).

In the US, pleas for change in casting practices and opening opportunities for performers not belonging to the white majority have been made since the mid-1940s, and notably with the rise of the civil rights movement. The Non-Traditional Casting Project, which dates back to 1986, and later tellingly changed its name to Alliance for the Inclusion in the Arts, advocated and fought for more equitable access to the roles in the American theatre, cinema, and media overall. The movement created around non-traditional casting or, as recently renamed, multicultural casting led to a number of practices enhancing extant stereotypes and taken for granted characters and roles, mostly bestowed on the white majority. Among them, upon Angela Pao, we might mention ‘*colour-blind casting*’, which implies assigning roles regardless of race, ethnicity, disabilities, or, if possible, gender – as is the case of Jeffrey Wright as Commissioner Gordon, in *The Batman* (M. Reeves, 2022) or Judi Dench incarnating M in *007 Skyfall* (S. Mendes, 2012); ‘*societal casting*’, when performers embody the race, ethnicity, gender, or disability they perform in society as a whole – for instance, this is the case of Tony Cox in *Bad Santa* (T. Zwigoff, 2003) or in *Oz the Great and Powerful* (S. Raimi, 2013); ‘*conceptual casting*’, when the race, ethnicity, gender, or disability of the performer are enhanced to give resonance to the production – as is the case in recent Italian TV series *Zero* (P. Randi, I. Silvestrini, M. Ferri, M. Hossameldin, 2021), with a cast mostly made of second-generation Italians, unfortunately discontinued after the first season; and, finally, ‘*cross-cultural casting*’, when the story is dislodged from its initial setting and relocated into a different framework, may this be racial, ethnic, etc. – say, Omar Sy in recent French TV series *Lupin* (L. Leterrier, M. Said, L. Bernard, 2021-23), which Gaumont produced and Netflix released, which reconfigures through a second-generation Frenchman of African descent the renowned adventures of the gentleman thief created in 1905 by Maurice Leblanc (Pao, 2010). This taxonomy of non-traditional casting practices fits better in theatre production, where a canon of characters and stories is well established and innovation by casting is measured against the background of decades or centuries of previous productions of the same play. However, we all experience in our social and private lives making assumptions with regard to gender, class, race and ethnicity. Casting against these assumptions contributes at reshaping our expectations and how we experience society and individuals (Syler, 2019). To summarise, casting can reinvent the categories we rely upon and create working opportunities for those performers which extant categories and assumptions neglected for racial, ethnic, gender, or disability reasons, and still neglect. Innovative casting can foster opportunities for an alternative and new understanding of the society we live in and the individuals we live next to.

Can we also think of an age-blind casting? Apparently, age is not a binding factor on the stage, since performers can incarnate characters beyond or before their biological age, which might be a reason why non-traditional casting has barely theorised ageing in theatre. However, film and TV productions and their celebration of youthfulness and beauty are less keen in doing so. As an Italian casting director posited, when comparing film and theatre casting: “We might define film casting as the quest for closeness between performer and character [...]. To determine a performer most of the times one starts from physical and social features: race, sex, age, physical complexion, social class, character’s features...” (Boccardi, 2012, p. 84). Furthermore, stars bring into films their persona, which orientates the narratives of their age – for instance, in the early 2000s Jack Nicholson repeatedly incarnated an ageing white man, but his persona shifted away his characters from the representation of physical decay and solitude, and tinted them with vitalism, lust, and an outsider’s acute look onto social and human misery. The same goes, more recently, for Italy, where celebrated actor Sergio Castellitto embodied an embittered retired orphan aged 100 years, with all the vital strength of his youth, and the wisdom of his age in *Il più bel secolo della mia vita* (A. Bardani, 2023). These examples, as the previous ones, indicate that innovation is possible, and that CA can differ from representation. However, if colour-blind casting is now a well-established, albeit questioned, practice, the same doesn’t go for age-blind casting.

Awards increasingly acknowledge aged performers, as compared to some decades ago, and therefore substantiate a shift toward a more accurate representation of our ageing societies. Though, as Emma Thompson ironically pinpointed, opportunities are not the same for different genders. Does European, and more specifically Italian, film production implement strategies to mitigate the effects of inequality in casting? The following section provides preliminary answers by relying on semi-structured interviews with Italy-based casting directors, who work across national and international films, scripted shows, and advertising productions.

## Screen age and diversity casting

Screen age (SA) is a key concept in film and television production, which has received limited attention from media industry scholars; possibly due to the same perceived a-theoretical nature of age, which we previously discussed. SA is an industry term that casting directors routinely use when looking for an actor to attach to a particular role. Whereas a character in the script is given an age, the actor to embody that character is scouted and ultimately selected not so much for her/his CA, as for the age she/he can *convincingly* portray<sup>3</sup>. Narrative factors such as the character profile and its positioning within the film plot, as well as stylistic factors such as the film’s genre and the director’s vision determine which age categorisations bear the greater salience for making an association with a particular performer. In some cases, casting director may look for certain outwardly markers

of biological ageing (e.g. hair colour, skin texture, posture, etc.), while in others they may privilege attributes that are indicative of a certain social age (e.g. a male actor above 50 would probably be the best candidate to play a corporate CEO). Since it is SA age that drives the decision to allocate a screen role, actors tend to publicise this information, rather than their CA, in the personal profiles that they manage on popular websites perused by casting directors, such as the American IMDb, the German e-Talenta and the Italian RB Casting. Another reason for doing this is to reduce the risk of becoming subject to ageist discrimination on the part of casting directors, given the film industry's historical youth-oriented bias (Morin 1957). In this sense, a momentous step occurred at the end of 2022, when Amazon-owned leading industry website IMDb introduced the possibility for users to remove their CA, as well as other personal information, from their pages. The update followed a decade-old dispute between IMDb and some of the US main industry associations, including SAG-AFTRA. The dispute had been initiated in 2011 by an (unsuccessful) lawsuit brought by American actress Junie Hoang who claimed to have missed auditions and job opportunities after IMDb revealed that she was in her forties:

If one is perceived to be 'over the hill', i.e. approaching 40, it is nearly impossible for an up-and-coming actress, such as the plaintiff, to get work as she is thought to have less of an 'upside'." (Excerpt from the actress complaint reported in Child, 2012)

The US actress' legal case and the change in IMDb's policy that ensued suggest that the currency of SA, rather than CA, within the film industry does not exempt this latter from ageist biases, and that such biases continue to primarily affect women. This phenomenon also emerges in the Italian context, as reflected by the accounts of the casting directors interviewed by the authors. We now present and discuss some of the findings of our interviews. Besides confirming, as previously mentioned, the persistence of a double standard of ageing towards actresses – a concern that unites the Italian film industry and Hollywood – the results of our interviews also point to some country-specific facets.

### ***Screen age is the eye of the beholder***

To a film's director, as well as to the audience, SA functions as a visual signpost that positions the character in the age spectrum, thus contributing to a representation that derives from artistic and narrative choices. Casting directors are responsible for pre-selecting actors that meet the artistic and narrative choices dictated by the director. To screen actors, SA functions as a category of segmentation of the labour market, in that it serves to circumscribe groups of performers who can aspire to and compete for certain types of acting jobs. This twofold function of SA frequently engenders a tension between the film's narrative requirements, the director's artistic vision, and the actor's occupational interest, which ultimately falls on the casting director to solve. In this sense, our interviewees stress that attributing SA is their prerogative, rather than the actors' themselves, whose judgment in this regard cannot be trusted.

Screen age is something that some actors self-define, if you see their resumes or get on e-Talenta. And this is not a good thing, in my opinion, from an actor. In what sense? In the sense that screen age is not something one can establish him or herself. The person looking at you determines how old you are. (Adele Gallo)

In the online databases it is the actors who put their [screen] age range and sometimes they are very unreliable because they see themselves as much more... “flexible” than they actually are. (Lilia Hartmann Trapani)

You can't imagine how many times I receive pictures of 50-year-old actresses that say “Screen Age: 35” Thirty-five? Come on! They write it down themselves, you know? You cannot rely on what actors write because they always indicate younger ages. So, screen age is for you [the casting director] to decide. (Antonella Perrucci).

These excerpts point to the gatekeeping role that casting directors play in assuring that the actors' selection conforms to the artistic choices of the director and, at the same time, in controlling the access to the very possibility of competing for an acting job via auditions. In this sense, casting directors perform a complex and critical work in replicating or challenging (gendered) ageist stereotypes.

### ***Screen age is gendered***

Our interviewees generally confirm the scarcity of screen roles for older actresses compared to older actors, thus empirically substantiating the persistence of Sontag's double standard of ageing, particularly in the film industry. However, their accounts differ in the ways they make sense of such disparity, and in the awareness they show of their own potential part in it.

As usual, women pay their ageing a bit more dearly than men. If there's a story where husband and wife are of the same age, you almost always search for a younger actress. Unfortunately, that's the way it is. Why is that? That I can't tell you. There is by now a fossilized habit of doing this, which leads in a stereotypical way to say, “The wife must be younger than the husband.” (Eleonora Barbiero).

There are very good ageing female actors. If you go to the theatre, you see them perform. The problem is that there are not many screen roles for them. Or the ones that are there, are clichés, like the grandma. It is difficult for there to be the role of, say, a female business leader. (Lilia Hartmann Trapani).

Things have been changing lately. If, in the screenwriting, the default is still to portray some characters as men, sometimes we suggest to the directors “Shall we try to change the character to female?” And there's an openness, if you will, towards portraying some jobs, which used to be more male-dominated, such as the lawyer, the doctor...to having them played by actresses. (Adele Gallo).

One of our interviewees mentioned the positive effect that the spread of SVOD platforms has had on the volume and diversity of screen roles available to older actors, and especially on the opportunity for them to boost their career at a later stage.

If there is one good thing that streaming platforms and this whole endless string of series brought, is that they created a constant need for new characters, some of whom were older and had a role that grew over time. (...) This allows actors to emerge even if they weren't known to the audience since they were in their 20s. I see this as a positive thing. (Eleonora Barbiero).

However, when asked about examples of this positive trend, Barbiero mentioned a male actor, 1967-born Tommaso Ragno.

### ***Screen age-ing is not (yet) digital***

In Hollywood, digital post-production has been used to alter an actor's age appearance ever since the early 2000s. However, it is from the second half of the 2010s that the technology has started to be employed throughout entire films, as opposed to being restricted to individual scenes, particularly flashbacks. Whereas most examples concern superhero and science fiction blockbusters, like *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *Captain Marvel* (2019), *Gemini Man* (2019), digital de-ageing has also been used across other genres, such as Martin Scorsese's epic crime *The Irishman* (2019); the fourth sequel in the eponymous slasher franchise *Scream* (2022); and the fifth installment of the action-adventure franchise *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* (2023). The spread of digital de-ageing techniques has been increasingly interrogating "how the youthening of aged bodies via engineered high-definition likenesses represents a possible future for, and an increasingly pervasive substrate of, digital stardom" (Holliday 2021, p. 211). In Italy, very little has been reported on the use of this type of technology on national film productions: an exception is constituted by Gabriele Muccino's *Gli anni più belli* (2020). In that film, 1969-born Kim Rossi Stuart and Pierfrancesco Favino, 1974-born Claudio Santamaria and 1979-born Micaela Ramazzotti play a group of friends in a drama that spans four decades. We asked our interviewees if they have encountered digital de-ageing, and whether and how the possibilities afforded by this technology come into play when casting actors for screen roles. None of our interviewees had had direct experiences of the use of digital de-ageing in the projects they had been working on.

So, digital de-ageing per se...no, I've never encountered that directly. I have always seen prosthetic make-up and look modifications done manually. Which is still the best way, in my opinion. (Eleonora Barbiero).

I can't think of any examples in my experience. Ageing or de-ageing is mostly done through make-up, or otherwise we cast multiple actors of different ages. Also, [digital de-ageing] is very expensive. (Marita D'Elia).

One of our interviewees, who frequently works on international co-productions, mentioned that whilst the digital manipulation of an actor's likeness has been discussed within international industry associations, in Italy it has not yet been operationalized in contracts, or other film industry practices.

With digital technology they can do incredible things. We had a meeting with our colleagues from the International Casting Directors Association to discuss how AI may or may not affect our work. They showed us a clip with an actress speaking in English, and not only she was dubbed in other languages with her own voice, but her whole face and mouth movement were changed! This is something that is not yet addressed in Italy. Maybe in the US, following the recent strikes, they will do something about it. (Lilia Hartmann Trapani).

Indeed, the Italian film sector has been relatively slow to address the topic of AI. Following the approval by the EU of the AI Act, a position paper has been published in July 2023 by Confindustria Cultura Italia, the umbrella association representing the Italian cultural and creative sector, including the film, audiovisual and digital industries grouped in ANICA<sup>4</sup>. However, no further guidelines or recommendations have so far been issued by industry associations, including the Unione Italiana Casting Directors, on how to concretely deal with AI in relation to screen performance and the regulation of acting labour.

## Concluding remarks

In this paper, we analysed screen age, an important yet under-scrutinised and under-theorised concept within film and media industry studies. We have done so by drawing on the work of cultural gerontologists, whose reflections on age as a cultural and social construct have provided the basis for our own empirical examination of how screen age is operationalised in casting practices. We especially wanted to test one of the seminal ideas driving age studies, i.e. the existence of a double standard of ageing (Sontag, 1972) that discriminates women more severely than men. In sum, we attempted at bringing together theoretical reflection originating in cultural gerontology, with a more empirical survey provided by interviews with a selected sample of casting directors, to understand how these latter implement their assumptions as regards diversity and act as gatekeepers.

We focused on how casting practices substantiate characters by selecting distinct actresses/actors and, by doing so, implicitly orientate their reception, since they reinforce or counter stereotypes. In fact, whilst casting practices have contributed to foster more inclusive representations within other dimensions of diversity, notably 'race' and ethnicity, gendered biases appear to affect older actors to this day. Individual Italian casting directors seem aware of this disparity, and willing to act to correct that; however, findings from our production studies examination suggest that we are still far from overcoming long-established gendered ageist practices, such as the default casting of younger female actors to be paired with older male ones. Whereas diversity casting strategies may – and should – start to more systematically consider old age as an under- and mis-represented identity dimension, the lack of meaningful roles for older actresses also needs to be addressed on the part of Italian screenwriters. In this sense, the surge of screen productions connected to the spread of streaming platforms may create new opportunities for older performers, similarly to what has been happening for non-White and second-generation Italian actors (see for instance Netflix original series *Zero* and *Summertime*), as well actors with disabilities

(as in *Prisma*, produced by Amazon Prime Video). However, as the aforementioned examples confirm, streaming platforms have so far shown interest mainly in young audiences. If we consider the traditional “masculinised and youth-obsessed” nature (Jermyn 2012, p. 3) of commercial cinema, epitomised by Hollywood, as well as the persistence in Western societies of a widespread anti-ageing sentiment, fueled by a profitable industry, we should not underestimate the specific challenges connected to the cultural meanings attached to old age. Furthermore, albeit still distant from the practices (and budgets) of Italian film production, AI applied to the rejuvenation and ageing of screen actors holds the potential to disrupt the practices and the market of acting labour, as well as the professionals around it, starting with casting directors. This is bound to become one of the key nodes of future research into the theoretical and industrial notion of screen age. We acknowledge the limited scope of our study, which, given the existing research gap, had a primarily an exploratory purpose. In future research, we intend to expand our use of production studies methods, to better illuminate the social and cultural conceptualization of (old) age in its interplay with film production practices. Prospective areas of inquiry are agents representing older actresses and actors, screenplay writers, producers. And, it almost goes without saying, performers themselves, both in main and side roles, for a thorough understanding of the intersectional nature of ageing, which affects in different ways distinct categories of performers.

## Biographical Note

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Data from the AGE-C Ageing and Gender in European Cinema project show that of all the over-55 leading characters featured in Italian films released between 2014 and 2023, 80.5% are men and only 19.5% women. The AGE-C project (2023-2027), to which the authors of this article collaborate, is led by the University of Frankfurt and funded by the Volkswagen Foundation: <https://age-c.eu/>

<sup>2</sup> This is stated in the “About us” section of the U.I.C.D. website: [www.unionitalianacastingdirectors.it/what-is-the-uicd/?lang=en](http://www.unionitalianacastingdirectors.it/what-is-the-uicd/?lang=en) (last accessed 22 December 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Prominent age studies scholar Kathleen Woodward has written extensively on age as performance (see Woodward, 1999; 2006), a concept that echoes that of gender as performance theorised by, among others, Judith Butler.

<sup>4</sup> See ANICA's press release on this matter: [www.anica.it/news/news-anica/cci-su-intelligenza-artificiale-come-settore-abbracciamo-questi-progressi-tecnologici-ma-all'interno-di-un-contesto-regolatorio-che-tenga-conto-del-rispetto-del-diritto-daut](http://www.anica.it/news/news-anica/cci-su-intelligenza-artificiale-come-settore-abbracciamo-questi-progressi-tecnologici-ma-all'interno-di-un-contesto-regolatorio-che-tenga-conto-del-rispetto-del-diritto-daut) (last accessed 23 December 2024).