When Stars Grow Old – Cultural and Media Processes of the Celebrity/Ageing Nexus: An Introduction to the Special Issue[*]

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Celebrities constitute a particularly relevant phenomenon in the media and sports contexts of contemporary society. As central figures in the cultural public sphere, they exemplify what John B. Thompson (1995) describes as mediated "quasi-interaction", where individuals form non-reciprocal relationships with distant personalities who appear familiar through repeated media exposure. They occupy public space through the emotions they arouse in an ever-widening public. Celebrities are not only media products but also emotional and symbolic figures who evoke affective investments from audiences (Marshall, 1997; Dyer, 1979). Their visibility enables para-social interactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956) and contributes to the creation of a shared emotional experience across dispersed publics.

However, screen stars and sports stars are transformed into myths and heroes only when they embody collective values and symbols, whether on a local, national, or global level. As Richard Dyer (1979) argued, stars function as ideological texts that crystallize cultural contradictions and desires. In the case of sports stars, David Rowe (1995) emphasizes their

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role as national icons or global commodities, whose performances become vehicles for projecting broader social narratives such as heroism, discipline, and nationalism.

The media play a crucial role, both in telling celebrities' stories and in providing them with stages through which they can self-represent themselves and communicate directly with fans and audiences, especially in the digital age – we may consider the relevance of social media within these processes. Contemporary celebrity is inseparable from processes of mediatization (Hjavard, 2008), where media logic shapes public life. In the digital context, social platforms have enabled a new kind of presentational media self (Marshall, 2010), allowing celebrities to perform authenticity and manage their image continuously, while fans engage in participatory co-construction of fame (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

Through their biographies and different modes of storytelling, celebrities accumulate celebrity capital, that is, the capital that has been accumulated through visibility on the media scene and that can be exchanged for other forms of capital (social, economic, cultural). This concept builds on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital (1986), and has been adapted by Olivier Driessens (2013) as celebrity capital: a form of symbolic capital that is accumulated through media visibility and convertible into other resources. Celebrities can spend their celebrity capital – over the years and, therefore, also in the post-career – in other social spheres (politics, business, entertainment, etc.). Former athletes and actors often leverage their fame to reinvent themselves as media personalities, entrepreneurs, or political figures (Turner, 2004). Their trajectory illustrates the fluidity of celebrity status, which can persist beyond professional activity.

This special issue hosts contributions about celebrity and ageing, devoted as much to celebrities mainly from the audiovisual entertainment system (film, television, social media) as to sports stars. The intersection of celebrity and ageing has emerged as a critical area of inquiry within media, cultural, and gerontological studies. Ageing challenges traditional ideals of youth, beauty, and physical vitality that are central to celebrity culture, revealing deeper social anxieties about the body, time, and visibility. For screen celebrities, ageing disrupts their image that is often constructed around youthful allure and sexual attractiveness – especially for women. As Chris Holmlund (2005) argues, older female stars are often rendered invisible or cast into reductive roles (e.g., the "matriarch"), reflecting broader patterns of gendered ageism in the media. Conversely, older male stars (e.g., Clint Eastwood, George Clooney) may retain or even gain cultural capital, reinforcing the double standard of ageing (Sontag, 1972). Stars can use ageing to craft more complex public personas, embracing maturity, legacy, or decline as part of their brand. This process is often managed through controlled media performances, including interviews, memoirs, and social media narratives that emphasize authenticity or resilience. In the world of sports celebrities, ageing is especially pronounced due to the early peak and decline of athletic performance. Ageing athletes face retirement dilemmas, body deterioration, and shifting public roles – from hero to commentator, coach, or brand ambassador. This transition reveals how celebrity in sport is closely tied to physical excellence, and how post-retirement visibility often depends on personality, media savviness, and commercial appeal (Rowe, 2004). Media narratives often romanticize ageing athletes as symbols of endurance or nostalgia,

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especially in retrospective coverage and Hall of Fame tributes (Wagg, 2012). However, such portrayals may obscure the lived realities of ageing bodies, including chronic injury or identity loss. In the digital age, ageing celebrities increasingly use social media to negotiate age in public, often challenging stereotypes by remaining culturally relevant or advocating for active ageing. Marshall (2014) argues that this visibility can destabilize traditional notions of ageing as decline, promoting alternative models of ageing with agency – though often within neoliberal logics of productivity and self-care. Ageing complicates celebrity identities across domains, from the glamour of the screen to the ephemeral heroism of sport, while also offering sites of resistance, nostalgia, and reinvention.

The papers about celebrity and ageing included in this special issue engage with at least three disciplinary perspectives: Film Studies and the history of audiovisual media; Sociology of Communication and Culture; and Media Studies. The dialogue and interweaving of different approaches makes it possible to provide a rich, varied and complex picture of the various possibilities for investigating the relationship between contemporary celebrity forms and ageing processes.

Moreover, the field of Celebrity Studies itself has always been multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary: this attests to the productivity of employing multiple frameworks, perspectives, and concepts in the analysis of a multidimensional and multifaceted phenomenon such as celebrity. This field explores how fame is produced, circulated, and consumed, with particular attention to the role of media systems, audiences, and cultural practices. Movie stars have historically been at the center of this discourse, serving as key figures in the cultural imagination and in media economies. In the 1960s, the Hollywood studio system—which had tightly controlled star images—was in decline, leading to a shift in how stars were perceived and constructed. The rise of New Hollywood (e.g., actors like Jane Fonda or Dustin Hoffman) marked a transition from idealized glamour to more fragmented, politicized star images reflecting cultural and generational change (Dyer, 1979). Richard Dyer's foundational work, *Stars* (1979), argued that movie stars are not merely performers but textual constructs, embodying contradictions in social values and ideologies. His approach laid the groundwork for analysing stardom as both a cultural product and a site of ideological struggle. With the advent of postmodernism in the 1980s and 1990s, the line between public and private personas became increasingly blurred. Scholars like Joshua Gamson (1994) analysed how stars were constructed through both media narratives and audience participation, anticipating today's "celebrity economy" shaped by reality TV and tabloid culture.

A first block of papers focuses, precisely, on movie stars. These articles detect both the structural dimensions of the celebrity/ageing relationship (with particular reference to actresses) (see the detailed work by Dagnino and Pitassio), and the strategies and agencies of individual celebrities – such as Isabella Rossellini (studied by Pesce) and Gilbert Roland (analysed by Salvi) – successfully crafting original image managements in the late stage of their careers, respectively embodying an ecological mindset and advocating ethnic identity.

Gloria Dagnino and Francesco Pitassio examine how age, beyond a simple chronological measure, functions as a complex "master identity" in casting. It introduces the critical

concept of "screen age", defined as the perceived age an actor can credibly portray, and argues that its operational framework contributes to the under-representation of mature female performers. Drawing on cultural gerontology, the authors empirically test Susan Sontag's seminal idea of a "double standard of ageing" that disproportionately affects women. Through semi-structured interviews with Italian casting directors, the study confirms that older actresses receive fewer and less prominent roles than their male counterparts, a widespread issue across the European film industry. The research highlights the gatekeeping role of casting directors in assigning screen age and explores the potential, yet limited, impact of diversity casting and digital de-ageing technologies on these ingrained gender biases. This issue offers a timely analysis of how casting practices perpetuate or challenge ageist stereotypes, urging a broader conversation on the representation of ageing in media.

Sara Pesce explores how ageing celebrities, as they move from cultural centrality to marginality, can offer insights into both sustainable personal management and environmental resilience. By analyzing Isabella Rossellini's career, the scholar examines how older celebrities navigate production systems and beauty standards while challenging societal norms. The research argues that the experimental behaviors prompted by ageing can reflect a broader ecological mindset. The analysis draws parallels between individual adaptation to ageing and the principles of environmental justice, such as resource scarcity, unequal distribution, and disposal, whether of attentional capital or natural resources. Rossellini's career in the new millennium serves as a case study for "assertive marginality", where she transforms her cultural obsolescence into innovative and inspirational narratives. The study highlights a connection between the behavior of certain ageing celebrities and the principles of environmental justice, demonstrating how public figures can influence societal attitudes toward sustainability. The research situates these dynamics within frameworks of environmental heterogeneity, salvage capitalism, and sustainable ecosystems. The discussion centers on three key elements of Rossellini's adaptability: her mobility and peripherality, her authenticity as it relates to biodiversity, and her engagement with social networks to promote an ecological stance. The author concludes that the entertainment produced by some ageing celebrities, like Rossellini, promotes an ideal of functionality that embraces reuse, resilience, and connectivity.

Costanza Salvi analyses the career of Gilbert Roland. Her article highlights how Roland's career, spanning from the 1920s to 1982, was less a result of his unchanging nature and more a testament to his ability to adapt to Hollywood's evolving trends and global expectations. The scholar argues that the turning point in Roland's career occurred after World War II, when he began to embrace his Mexican heritage to portray more confident and assertive characters. He implemented two key strategies: presenting a positive role model and engaging with audiences across the US-Mexico border, securing a transnational and transgenerational understanding of his message. Moving beyond the common portrayal of Roland as only a "Latin Lover", this study offers a new perspective on how a self-aware ethnic identity enabled him to succeed as an ageing actor and adjust to new sensibilities in post-war Hollywood.

In the digital age, movie stardom has undergone further transformation. Social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok) allow stars to directly curate their public images, challenging traditional gatekeeping by studios or press. Marshall (2010) introduced the concept of the "presentational media self," where celebrities engage in a continuous, self-authored performance online. Today's stars are often multi-platform personas, blending acting roles with lifestyle branding, activism, and fan interaction. This shift has led scholars to study "microcelebrity" practices (Senft, 2013) and "para-social engagement" (Marwick & boyd, 2011), blurring the lines between stars and influencers.

Although not dedicated to movie stars, the work developed by Miriam Ferraro, Marco Pedroni and Donatello Bramante focuses specifically on this particular phenomenon of contemporary celebrity culture. The scholars examine how social media platforms are changing the cultural representation of ageing, with a specific focus on the rise of elderly influencers. The study moves beyond the typical focus on digitally native youth by exploring the case of Gabriella Tupini, an octogenarian psychologist with a popular YouTube channel. The authors use a qualitative case study approach, combining content analysis and netnography, to investigate how influencers like Tupini reconfigure the dynamics of influencer culture through alternative strategies like expertise, emotional resonance, and narrative intimacy. This analysis addresses how elderly influencers contribute to reshaping ageing narratives, the strategies they use to build authority and foster intergenerational intimacy, and how their practices challenge ageist stereotypes. The findings show that Tupini's unscripted videos promote cognitive participation and emotional identification across different generations, creating a unique form of "intergenerational digital intimacy". Her approach, which rejects commercial strategies and emphasizes introspection, contrasts with the metrics-driven practices common among other influencers. The article introduces the concept of "intergenerational influence culture" to describe how older adults are not just participating in digital spaces but actively reshaping them. This shift has emancipatory potential, but it may also obscure structural exclusions and reinforce neoliberal ideals of "productive ageing".

The second block of papers focuses on the multiple forms and dynamics of sports celebrity, including ~~through~~ the study of the narratives and self-narratives on which it is built. Sports celebrity is, primarily, a celebrity forged on the playing field, through the tactical, technical, athletic and character qualities, expressed by famous athletes (Rojek, 2001). Part of the articles included in this special issue concerns the study of celebrities who have become famous in the past, or in recent years, either in mainstream or élite sports (Schmid *et al.*, 2024). The authors present original research, using qualitative methodological approaches and interdisciplinary references ranging from the well-established literature on celebrity studies (Marshall, 1997; Van Krieken, 2012), along with sociological, narratological, and marketing perspectives, touching on specific issues and reasoning about substantive differences between celebrity, sport, age, and gender (Lines, 2001). There are, however, two issues that run through all the articles: one has to do with the process that leads the sportsman toward the post-career, a period of life that in most cases takes the form of a new beginning. The other has to do with the spectacularization of sport, through its 'characters',

heroes, myths. Sport as a spectacular form increasingly exploits media logics, using on the one hand the spaces traditionally set up for it, such as newspapers or dedicated radio and television programs, and on the other hand becoming the protagonist of genre innovations ("sportainment," Castellano in the volume), particularly in the serial sphere of celebrity.

A first example presented in this special issue concerns the docu-series *Maradona in Mexico* (2019), analyzed by Luca Bifulco, which recounts the exploits of the great soccer player grappling with the role of coach of a Mexican lower league team. What characterizes the audiovisual product is undoubtedly the charisma of Maradona, an undisputed global soccer leader, capable of arousing deep emotions in a wide and devoted audience, although physically fatigued and probably already ill a year before his death. It is precisely on charisma that Bifulco dwells, taking the foundational aspects of the concept from the studies of Max Weber (1978) and Randall Collins (2020) to use it in defining the type of celebrity to which Maradona can be traced.

Simona Castellano also in her article on Louis Hamilton, along with a study of the industry press and the champion's self-promotion via social media, considers the analysis of the docu-series *Formula 1: Drive to Survive* (Netflix, 2019 -) featuring the driver in the fourth season (world championship 2021).

And again in Ylenia Caputo's article, the docu-reality *Ginnaste – Vite parallele* (MTV, 2011 - 2016) and the TV series *Corpo Libero* (Paramount+, 2022) are analyzed as representative narratives of broad transformations of the depiction of female athletes and the female sports body in the context of artistic gymnastics.

Thus, docu-series – and media narratives more generally – influence the persistence and reconfiguration of celebrity capital, which appears increasingly linked to the redefinition of the visibility of individual subjects. The different and innovative forms of sportsmen's self-narration (see the case of social media, Tirino and Castellano in the volume) and the spaces that the media devote to them function according to multi-perspective and multioriented logics, especially in the post-career phase. The maintenance, or reconstruction of para-social relations (Rojek, 2016) between sports celebrities and their audiences may in fact mutate, transform, and draw closer in that space of pseudo-intimacy so much evoked by digital media (Gupta and Nair, 2021).

Television seriality, therefore, seems to be a narrative device particularly well suited to restore the symbolic richness of the social and cultural processes activated and/or connected to sports celebrity. In this perspective, the analysis conducted by Antonella Mascio on the docu-series *Beckham* (Netflix, 2023 -) explores David Beckham's transition from a football star to a global celebrity and brand. Using a narrative structure that draws on Vladimir Propp's functions, the docu-series portrays Beckham as a mythical hero navigating the rise and fall of his fame. Through a blend of archival footage and interviews, the production creates an "authenticity effect" and presents a complex and dynamic view of celebrity. According to the scholar, this approach makes the story accessible to a wide audience, including those who are not football fans, by framing the events in a dramatic and emotional way. The analysis delves into the docu-series' directorial choices and storytelling,

showcasing how Beckham's public and private life are intertwined to establish him as a "spreadable" media phenomenon.

The dimensions and processes of the post-career are also extensively discussed in Lorenzo Di Paola's article on the great champion Primo Carnera, the first Italian to win a world boxing title in 1933. Di Paola's analysis highlights the physical characteristics of the champion that would transform him into a symbol of strength in the fascist period and enable him to achieve a successful post-career and subsequently occupy prestigious positions in the media productions of the time, dominated by cinema and only later by television. The study explores both the duration and the ways in which *he sports figure engages in strategic fame managment, transforming himself from celebrity into myth, starting from the world of sports and landing in the world of entertainment.

Mario Tirino's article is also dedicated to the delicate transition from career to post-career. The author addresses the complicated management of the renegotiation of celebrity capital (Driessens, 2013; Gunter, 2014) accumulated by the sports stars during their competitive career, in order to reinvest it in the same or other spheres (politics, entrepreneurship, etc.). Such renegotiation appears particularly delicate because of its effects on the sports star's target audience. Using the case of Gigi Datome, Tirino analyzes the practices and processes through which celebrities restructure their public role by assuming the role of influencer and influ-activist, while continuing to exercise the role of seasoned sportsmen. By acting as influencers in the transition to a new public image in the post-career, Datome and sports celebrities more generally, aware of their communicative potential, can thus inspire people, consolidate their reputations and maintain a space of credibility and trustworthiness through the civic, social and cultural causes they promote.

Celebrity capital thus emerges as the central focus of the different articles, transforming and migrating from a purely sports context to others that nevertheless contemplate media logics, emphasizing the cultural, economic and political dimensions of the celebrity device.

As a whole, the contributions selected in this special issue provide a rather stimulating overview of the issues inherent in contemporary celebrity culture. Our goal was to present problems, questions, critical elements of the phenomenology of celebrity at the intersection of multiple social worlds and cultural contexts (cinema, TV, social media, sports, etc.) that often interconnect in unprecedented ways, and with the help of different theoretical models and disciplinary approaches. We hope that the articles presented here can contribute to further explorations of the field and build other occasions and platforms through which scholars can engage with each other in the near future as well.

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Biographical Notes

Antonella Mascio (antonella.mascio@unibo.it) is Associate Professor in Sociology of Cultural and Communicative Processes at the University of Bologna, for the Department of Political and Social Sciences. In recent years, her research has focused primarily on online social relations and the interaction between television series and audiences, using a sociological and media perspective that includes research on fandom, fashion and celebrity culture, and studies on nostalgia. She collaborates with Henry Jenkins on the *Pop Junctions* project (http://henryjenkins.org/). Her latest publications include: *Serie di Moda* (FrancoAngeli, 2023); 'Streaming Audiences: Deconstruction of Fashion Gender Stereotypes Through the Imitation of TV Series Outfits' (in *The Routledge Companion to Media Audiences*, Routledge, 2024); 'Media Convergence, Fashion and TV Series' (in *The Routledge Companion to Fashion Studies*, Routledge, 2021); 'Sponsored Things: Audiences and the Commodification of the Past in Stranger Things' (in *Investigating Stranger Things Upside Down in the World of Mainstream Cult Entertainment*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

Roy Menarini is Full Professor at the University of Bologna, where he teaches Cinema and Cultural Industry. He is a senior editor (and former editor-in-chief) of the academic journal *Cinergie – Il cinema e le altre arti*. He co-directs the international research centers CFC (Culture, Fashion, Communication) and INC (Italian Research Network in Celebrity Studies). He has published extensively on contemporary cinema and topics such as film criticism methodology, cinephilia theory, and film analysis.

Sara Pesce is Associate Professor of cinema at the University of Bologna, where she teaches film history, cinema and literature, and performance studies in audiovisual media. She was a Fulbright scholar at New York University, Tisch School of the Arts, and at Columbia University, at the Department of English. She has undertaken research on the cultural roots of the Hollywood film industry, on cultural memory and digital culture in the contemporary global context, and on screen acting, stardom, celebrity culture, and fashion. Her research is published in journals and edited collections. She is the author of books: on Hollywood Jewish founders (2005. *Dietro lo schermo. Gli immigranti ebrei che hanno inventato Hollywood*), on World War II and Italian Cinema (2008. *Memoria e immaginario. La seconda guerra mondiale nel cinema Italiano*), and on Laurence Olivier (2012 *Laurence Olivier nei film*). She is editor and author of a book on film melodrama (2007. *Imitazioni della vita. Il melodrama cinematografico*) and of one on time, memory, and paratextual media (2016, *The Politics of Ephemeral Digital Media*. *Permanence and Obsolescence in Paratexts*). She is co-founder of INC, the Italian Research Network on Celebrity Culture.

Mario Tirino is an Associate Professor at the University of Salerno, where he teaches "Media Communication Sport" and "Sociology of Sports Cultures" and is Scientific Director of the Digital Cultures and Sports Research Laboratory (DiCS Lab). On the mediatization of sport, he has written several articles, published in national and international scientific journals, and edited the volumes *Sport e scienze sociali* [Sport and Social Sciences] (with L. Bifulco, 2019, CONI Prize), *Sport, pratiche culturali e processi educativi* [Sport, Cultural Practices and Educational Processes] (with M. Merico and A. Romeo, 2022), *Sport e comunicazione nell'era digitale* [Sport and Communication in the Digital Age] (with L. Bifulco, A. Formisano and G. Panico, 2023, CONI Prize) and *L'atleta digitale* [The Digital Athlete] (with P. Russo and S. Castellano, 2024). He also edited the monographic issue of the journal "Im@go",

entitled "The Sports Hero in the Social Imaginary" (with L. Bifulco, 2018), and the monographic issue of the journal "Eracle", dedicated to "Media, Society and Cycling Culture" (with P. Landri, 2022). He has been Visiting Professor at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona. He directs the scholarly publishing series "Binge Watchers. Media, sociology and the history of seriality" (with M. Teti).

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