Serhat ERDEM

The Face of Horror: Ageing Anxiety in Horror Cinema and the 'Hag Horror' Tradition

Abstract. With the ageing of contemporary societies, anxieties surrounding old age and bodily decline have become increasingly visible in popular culture, particularly within horror cinema. While feminist film studies and ageing studies have addressed representations of older women, the specific cinematic strategies through which ageing female bodies are rendered horrific in the "hag horror" tradition remain insufficiently systematized. This article examines how ageing anxieties are narratively and visually articulated through elderly female characters in horror cinema, focusing on the persistence and transformation of this subgenre across different historical periods.

The central research question asks how ageing femininity is constructed as a source of horror and which narrative, visual, and thematic mechanisms sustain this construction over time. Drawing on feminist film theory, the study engages Barbara Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine and Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, alongside interdisciplinary scholarship on ageism and gendered representations of ageing (Kristeva 205; Creed 33).

Using qualitative textual analysis, the article examines three films from different decades—*The Leech Woman* (Edward Dein, 1960), *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* (Curtis Harrington, 1971), and *X* (Ti West, 2022)—selected for their explicit engagement with ageing female protagonists and their representative position within distinct phases of the Hag horror tradition. A comparative reading reveals how themes such as bodily decay, loss of youth, sexual deviance, and psychological instability are mobilized to produce fear, while adapting to changing ci-nematic styles and cultural contexts.

The findings indicate that despite aesthetic and narrative shifts, elderly female characters continue to function as sites of anxiety shaped by intersecting ageist and patriarchal discourses. The article argues that contemporary horror cinema reformulates rather than dismantles the core logic of hag horror, thereby sustaining cultural fears surrounding the ageing female body.

Keywords: Horror cinema, ageing anxieties, Hag horror, Feminist film theory, Monstrous-feminine, Patriarchal ageism.

Serhat ERDEM

Atatürk University, Turkey
serhaterdem@atauni.edu.tr
ORCID: 0000-0002-3782-0147

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Introduction

In the 21st century, as the global population ages, cultural anxieties around ageing have become increasingly visible. Popular media serves as a mirror to these fears, and *Western horror cinema* in particular often treats ageing as something terrifying. In horror, elderly people frequently function as a trope to evoke both fear of death and fear of ageing; old age is equated with bodily and mental decline, triggering anxieties about mortality in viewers (Guimarães 8). Within this genre, elderly women especially emerge as haunting figures, embodying society's deep-seated fears and prejudices about female ageing. Feminist film scholars note that horror often provides a *fantasy arena* to express the patriarchal society's fear or even disgust toward the female body when it deviates from youthful norms (Sobchack 336). In other words, the ageing female body—no longer young, fertile, or "beautiful" by societal standards—becomes a locus of horror. Vivian Sobchack observes that certain horror films reveal an almost visceral disgust for the older woman as a physical being, underscoring how ageism can be the last bastion of sexism (336). The archetype of the witch or crone in folklore and film reflects this dynamic: an old woman, no longer reproductive or family-oriented, turns into a monstrous incarnation of the ageing female body, a figure whose very existence seems to threaten the heteropatriarchal order. Historically, such "hag" or witch characters—hunchbacked, cackling, excluded from conventional family roles—have been depicted as repulsive anomalies. They personify the abject excesses of womanhood that patriarchal culture feels it must control (Crowther). In a society that prizes youth and beauty in women, the specter of an older woman who has lost these "assets" is often demonized. From early on, women are socially conditioned to fear the loss of their youthful attractiveness and fertility, so it is no surprise that popular narratives exaggerate this fear through sinister portrayals of old women. The image of the aged woman thus becomes an exaggerated embodiment of culturally taught fears about female ageing, a walking reminder of decay and decline meant to provoke both horror and pity in the audience. Comparable figures can be found in various cultural traditions; however, this study focuses specifically on their articulation within Western and English-language horror cinema.

Against this backdrop, a distinctive horror subgenre emerged in the 1960s, centered on the figure of the elderly woman. Referred to by critics as hag horror or *Grande Dame Guignol* (also derisively dubbed "hagsploitation" or "psycho-biddy"), this cycle of films cast formerly glamorous Hollywood actresses in grotesque, deranged roles that reflected cultural anxieties about ageing (Johnson).

The 1962 film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* is often cited as the seminal example that launched this subgenre. It brought together two ageing stars—Bette Davis and Joan Crawford—as venomously feuding elderly sisters, one a delusional former child star and the other a paraplegic ex-movie star, confined together in a decaying mansion. The critical

and commercial success of *Baby Jane* paved the way for a series of similar films in the 1960s featuring middle-aged or older female protagonists/antagonists, such as *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (Robert Aldrich, 1964) and others. In these films, once-beloved actresses effectively "persevere as horror objects" when they are deemed too old to be objects of desire (Walker; Medar 108). The typical hag horror narrative centers on an older woman who has been shattered by traumatic life events—loss of beauty, fame, or family—and who, unable to cope with the inexorable process of ageing, descends into madness or violence. These characters are portrayed as both pitiable *and* terrifying: pitiable because they are socially isolated and haunted by past trauma, yet terrifying because their mental breakdown often yields grotesque, vengeful behaviour. As film scholar Tomasz Fisiak notes, such films offer insightful psychological portraits of their ageing female characters, prompting Charles Derry to classify them as horrors of personality, a horror mode in which the human psyche itself becomes the monster (Fisiak 316). In other words, instead of external supernatural creatures, it is the woman's own fragmented personality and obsessive trauma that generate the horror. Through these storylines, the old woman is rendered monstrous—not via witchcraft or the occult, but through psychological distortion and unchecked rage born of societal rejection. This marks the first time in cinema that the crone figure takes center stage as the monster, merging cultural gerontophobia (fear of ageing and old age) with misogyny in a striking way. The elderly female body in these films is treated as a source of *threat* and *disgust*, turning society's anxieties about feminine ageing and decay into cinematic terror.

Crucially, the fear depicted is not only of the *old women themselves*, but of what they represent: the inevitable fate of ageing in a society that idolizes youth. As Susan Sontag famously observed, there is a cultural double standard of ageing—men are granted a "mature" or "distinguished" image as they age, whereas "[e]very wrinkle, every line, every gray hair [on a woman] is a defeat" under a single, youth-centric standard of beauty (Sontag 748). Women are considered "old" at a much earlier stage than men, and their ageing is seen as a kind of personal failure or even a moral trespass. This double standard means that older women in media have often been confined to negative stereotypes—from the unattractive crone to the dotty old spinster—which reflect and reinforce their social invisibility or derision. Recent studies confirm that such ageist and sexist stereotypes persist in contemporary cinema (Richardson). In horror, these prejudices are magnified and distorted to extreme proportions. The ageing woman's face and body become a literal *mask of horror*—exaggerated with makeup or prosthetics (see Bette Davis's ghastly face in *Baby Jane*) to signify both physical decay and moral aberration. The "*monstrous-feminine*" trope identified by Barbara Creed finds a new angle here: it is not just womanhood, but old womanhood, that is rendered abject. The *hag horror* tradition thus exploits cultural fears of female ageing by making the older woman both victim and villain. On one hand, these films critique society's cruel devaluation of women once they lose their youth—as evidenced by the sympathy occasionally elicited for

characters like Blanche in *Baby Jane* or Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950). On the other hand, they also *capitalize* on that very devaluation, serving up the ageing woman as a grotesque spectacle to be feared, ridiculed, or destroyed.

Purpose of the Study

Within this context, the present study examines how the fear of ageing is represented in Anglo-American horror cinema through the figure of the elderly woman, and what underlying gender ideologies drive these representations. Focusing on three representative films—from the pioneering *hag horror* of the early 1960s to a contemporary horror film—the analysis traces the evolution of the "*old woman as monster*" trope across different periods. By analyzing these case studies, we ask: How has the portrayal of older women in horror evolved from the mid-20th century to today, and what does this say about enduring patriarchal and ageist anxieties? Each selected film offers a window into its era's attitudes: from the Grand Dame Guignol classics that first made the ageing female body into a site of horror, to modern incarnations that revisit this motif in new social contexts. These films were chosen not only for their cultural impact and popularity, but also because each embodies a distinct phase in the depiction of older women in horror—allowing us to compare and contrast the narrative and visual strategies used to render ageing *frightening*. Through close textual analysis, the study illuminates how horror cinema negotiates the intersection of gender and gerontophobia. Importantly, our aim is not to suggest that the filmmakers intentionally demonized older women *simply because* they are older. Rather, we approach age as a metaphor for the monstrous: we explore how the natural process of ageing in a woman's life is symbolically coded as grotesque or menacing on screen, and how this reflects wider societal biases. In doing so, we hope to shed light on the broader cultural narratives that link femininity, ageing, and fear. Accordingly, the study prioritizes films that clearly articulate the hag horror tradition rather than more recent works that engage with ageing from adjacent or hybrid genre positions.

The findings of this study will contribute to a richer understanding of the role of old age in horror cinema, a topic that, while receiving growing scholarly attention, still has uncharted facets. By charting the trajectory of the *hag horror* tradition—from its inception in mid-century Hollywood to its resonance in contemporary horror—we highlight both continuity and change in these gendered fear representations. This research thus fills a critical gap by specifically examining the *evolution* of the horror crone figure and the way films at different moments in time infuse her with meanings. Ultimately, examining these exaggerated nightmares about older women can deepen our insight into real-world ageism and sexism. As our societies continue to age, recognizing how popular culture (mis)represents

the elderly—especially elderly women—becomes ever more important. By bringing these horror portrayals into analytical focus, we can better understand and challenge the stigmas attached to women's ageing in the public imagination.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design and employs close textual film analysis to examine how ageing anxiety is constructed through elderly female characters in horror cinema. The analysis focuses on three films that represent different historical phases of the Anglo–American hag-horror tradition: *The Leech Woman* (1960), *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* (1971), and *X* (2022). These films were selected because they place ageing female protagonists at the center of their narratives and exemplify the continuity and transformation of hag-horror conventions across distinct cultural and cinematic contexts. Taken together, they enable a comparative reading of how the subgenre evolves while maintaining its core representational logic (Walker). All selected case studies are drawn from the Anglo-American horror canon; examining non-Western horror traditions lies beyond the scope of the present study.

While more recent films such as *The Substance* (Coralie Fargeat, 2024) also engage with themes of ageing and bodily anxiety, the selected films were chosen for their explicit positioning within the historical lineage of hag horror. Each case study represents a distinct phase in the evolution of the subgenre, allowing for a comparative, generational analysis of its core narrative and visual strategies.

The analytical framework combines perspectives from feminist film theory and critical ageing studies. Rather than offering an extensive theoretical discussion, the study applies selected conceptual tools directly to the films' narrative and visual structures. Laura Mulvey's concept of the *male gaze* and Barbara Creed's notion of the *monstrous-feminine* are used to analyse how elderly female bodies are positioned within cinematic space, narrative agency, and regimes of looking. These concepts are operationalized through close attention to framing, character alignment, narrative perspective, and the visual coding of the ageing body.

In addition, thematic elements such as the grotesque body, abjection, and the crone/witch archetype are employed as analytical categories to examine how ageing femininity is rendered threatening or disturbing. These themes are not treated as symbolic intentions on the part of filmmakers but as metaphorical and representational strategies through which ageing is coded as excess, decay, or psychological instability within the horror genre.

While the intersection of horror cinema and ageing has been addressed in existing scholarship, it remains relatively fragmented, particularly with regard to elderly female characters and the hag-horror tradition (Guimarães 8). By bringing together feminist film

theory and ageing studies within a focused comparative analysis, this study seeks to offer a coherent examination of how ageing anxiety is visually and narratively articulated in horror cinema across different historical moments.

Feminist Film Theory, Ageing, and the Limits of Visibility

Feminist film theory, particularly Laura Mulvey's seminal analysis of the *male gaze*, has demonstrated how classical cinema structures visual pleasure around a masculine viewing position, rendering women primarily as objects of desire rather than narrative agents (Mulvey 16). Within this representational regime, youth and beauty are privileged, while the ageing female body remains largely excluded from cinematic visibility. Older women rarely occupy central roles in mainstream cinema and are frequently relegated to marginal positions such as grandmothers, servants, or background figures (Westwood 557). Empirical studies confirm that women over the age of fifty are significantly underrepresented in leading roles, reflecting the persistence of gendered ageism in the film industry (Chonody et al. 59).

This exclusion is closely connected to what Susan Sontag famously termed the "double standard of ageing," whereby women are culturally devalued as they age, while men may gain authority, experience, or charisma (Sontag; Meagher 101). As a result, older women become increasingly invisible within dominant cinematic forms. Several critics and practitioners have noted that actresses often "age out" of meaningful roles far earlier than their male counterparts, a dynamic that effectively removes ageing women from the field of desirability governed by the male gaze (Billson). Horror cinema, however, disrupts this invisibility by rendering the elderly female body hyper-visible—albeit in distorted and excessive forms. Rather than restoring agency, this visibility often emerges through grotesque exaggeration, positioning the older woman as a site of fear, abjection, or threat.

Monstrous Femininity, Abjection, and the Grotesque Ageing Body

Barbara Creed's concept of the *monstrous-feminine* provides a critical framework for understanding how horror cinema transforms femininity into a source of fear, particularly through images associated with bodily excess and boundary transgression (Creed 31). Drawing on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, Creed argues that female bodies become monstrous when they disrupt cultural distinctions between inside and outside, life and death, purity and contamination. In this context, the ageing female body—marked by menopause, physical decline, and the loss of reproductive function—occupies a particularly unstable position within patriarchal symbolic order (Kristeva 206; Creed 83; Crowther).

Neither aligned with youthful desirability nor maternal productivity, the elderly woman is frequently coded as abject: a figure that resists categorization and therefore provokes anxiety. This logic resonates with theories of the grotesque body, which emphasize openness, exaggeration, and decay in contrast to the closed and idealized classical body (Medar 108). As Mary Russo notes, the "female grotesque" often oscillates between comedy and menace, rendering older women simultaneously ridiculous and terrifying (Medar 110). Horror cinema exploits this ambiguity by aestheticizing the ageing female body as excessive —through makeup, costuming, and performance—thereby transforming cultural fears of ageing into spectacles of horror.

The witch or crone archetype further condenses these anxieties. Historically associated with infertility, deviance, and social exclusion, the witch represents what Amelia Crowther describes as the "non-maternal woman," a figure that challenges patriarchal norms by existing outside reproductive and familial structures (Crowther; Miquel-Baldellou 184). While feminist movements in the late twentieth century partially reclaimed the witch as a symbol of female resistance and suppressed power, horror cinema has more often mobilized this archetype as an embodiment of fear and decay rather than emancipation (Feng 308; Batobara 442). Nevertheless, contemporary films increasingly complicate this figure by introducing ambiguity and empathy, suggesting that the monstrous ageing woman may function less as a villain than as a mirror reflecting society's own anxieties about ageing and femininity.

While the crone and the witch figures are often conflated in folklore and horror narratives, this study distinguishes the 'hag' as a specifically cinematic archetype grounded less in supernatural deviance than in psychological deterioration, social abjection, and age-related marginalization.

The Hag Horror Tradition: Origins and Afterlife

The hag horror tradition emerged in the early 1960s at a moment of profound transformation in Hollywood. With the decline of the classical studio system and the rise of television, established stars—particularly actresses—found themselves increasingly excluded from leading roles. While ageing male actors continued to perform authoritative or romantic roles, actresses over the age of fifty were largely deprived of meaningful screen presence (Miller; Gil). This industrial and cultural shift created the conditions for a new cycle of films that placed ageing female stars at the center of horror narratives.

Robert Aldrich's *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) is widely regarded as the catalyst of this subgenre. Starring Bette Davis and Joan Crawford as two psychologically fractured elderly sisters, the film achieved unexpected critical and commercial success

(Miller). Its impact extended beyond the box office: *Baby Jane* established a formula in which ageing female bodies, no longer aligned with ideals of youth and beauty, became sources of fear, grotesque spectacle, and psychological horror. As several critics note, the film's success encouraged producers to develop low-budget thrillers and horror films built around ageing actresses, giving rise to what later became known as "hagsploitation" (Fisiak 317; Gil).

These films departed from classical monster narratives by relocating horror within the human psyche. As Charles Derry observes, hag horror exemplifies a "horror of personality," in which psychological instability, resentment, and social isolation replace supernatural monsters as sources of fear (Fisiak 316). Elderly female characters are portrayed as simultaneously pitiful and terrifying, embodying cultural anxieties surrounding ageing, obsolescence, and the loss of feminine value.

By the early 1970s, however, the cycle began to lose momentum. Films such as *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* (1971) attempted to revive the formula but failed to replicate the cultural impact of earlier examples, signaling the end of hag horror's brief golden age (Fisiak 323). From the mid-1970s onward, mainstream horror increasingly shifted its focus toward younger bodies, particularly within the emerging slasher genre.

Despite this decline, the figure of the elderly woman did not disappear from horror cinema. Instead, hag horror's representational logic persisted in fragmented and transformed ways. In contemporary horror, ageing female characters frequently reappear as ghosts, maternal figures, or embodiments of bodily and psychological decay. Films such as *X* (2022) explicitly reference the aesthetic and thematic legacy of hag horror, reintroducing the elderly female antagonist while complicating her role through empathy, mirroring, and sexual frustration (Walker). This continuity suggests that hag horror should not be understood as a closed historical cycle, but as a mutable representational tradition that continues to shape how ageing femininity is imagined within horror cinema.

Hag Horror Across Time

The Leech Woman (1960): Ageing as Abjection and Punishment

The Leech Woman (1960) represents an early articulation of hag horror by explicitly linking female ageing to bodily abjection and moral transgression. The protagonist, June Talbot, is introduced as an ageing woman subjected to continuous humiliation by her younger husband, whose disdain reflects what Susan Sontag famously conceptualized as the "double standard of ageing," whereby women lose value as they age while men retain authority and desirability (Sontag; Allison). The film establishes ageing not as a natural process but as a source of marital failure, disgust, and disposability.

June's encounter with a ritual promising rejuvenation transforms ageing into a supernatural problem requiring violent correction. The extraction and consumption of male bodily fluid in the ritual literalizes abjection in Kristeva's sense: bodily boundaries are violated, life is sustained through contamination, and the female body becomes monstrous through excess (Kristeva 205; Creed 83). June's transformation is therefore not empowering but conditional and punitive. Each temporary return to youth accelerates her physical deterioration, visually reinforcing gerontophobic logic through exaggerated makeup and bodily decay.

Importantly, the film oscillates between empathy and condemnation. While June's initial act of killing her abusive husband may momentarily align the viewer with her, her subsequent violence against others completes her transformation into a monster. In this way, *The Leech Woman* frames the ageing woman as both victim and threat: patriarchal cruelty produces her monstrosity, yet the narrative ultimately reasserts moral order by destroying her. Ageing femininity is thus rendered horrific, unsustainable, and deserving of eradication.

***Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* (1971): Loneliness, Motherhood, and the Witch Figure**

Curtis Harrington's *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* (1971) reconfigures hag horror through a fairy-tale structure, blending gothic atmosphere with psychological tragedy. Auntie Roo embodies the archetype of the isolated elderly woman whose failure to sustain normative roles—wife, mother, social subject—results in obsessive and dangerous behaviour. Her attachment to the mummified body of her deceased daughter collapses the boundary between life and death, producing a deeply abject scenario in Kristeva's sense.

The film's narrative tension emerges not from explicit violence but from perception. Through the children's point of view, Roo gradually becomes the 'witch' of Hansel and Gretel in the children's perception, illustrating how cultural myths shape fear—while the film itself frames her more as a socially abandoned hag than a supernatural figure (Crowther). Although Roo does not intend to harm the children, their belief in her monstrosity becomes self-fulfilling, culminating in her death. These dynamics shift hag horror away from pure demonization toward a critique of social abandonment.

Roo's characterization sustains a dual reading. On one level, she conforms to the trope of the deranged old woman whose grief turns into obsession. On another, she appears as a profoundly tragic figure, punished not for violence but for desiring connection and motherhood beyond socially sanctioned limits. The film thus complicates hag horror by foregrounding loneliness and emotional neglect, suggesting that monstrosity may be socially produced rather than inherent.

***X* (2022): Ageing, Sexuality, and the Mirror of the Future**

Ti West's *X* (2022) offers a contemporary rearticulation of hag horror by explicitly foregrounding ageing female sexuality as a source of horror. Pearl, an elderly woman living

in isolation, is constructed as the grotesque opposite—and potential future—of the young protagonist Maxine, who is also played by Goth. This doubling establishes ageing as a temporal mirror rather than a distant Other.

The film intensifies gerontophobic discomfort by aestheticizing young bodies while framing Pearl's sexual desire as disturbing and excessive. Her longing for intimacy, jealousy toward youth, and eventual violence position ageing female desire itself as a taboo. The choice to portray Pearl through heavy prosthetics applied to a young actress further underscores the artificiality of cinematic old age, reinforcing the idea that the "old woman monster" is a constructed mask rather than a lived body (Gangi).

Yet *X* does not fully externalize monstrosity. Pearl's final confrontation with Maxine stages a symbolic struggle between present and future selves, suggesting that the true horror lies in the inevitability of ageing. While the narrative resolves according to slasher conventions—Pearl is destroyed and the final girl survives—the unsettling implication remains: the monster may be a version of the self waiting in time. In this sense, *X* revitalizes hag horror by transforming it into a meditation on ageing anxieties rather than a simple tale of eradication.

Discussion and Conclusion

The hag horror tradition demonstrates both a clear continuity in its core themes and a significant evolution in style over the decades. Across the three films examined —*The Leech Woman* (1960), *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* (1971), and *X* (2022)—we see a recurring duality in the portrayal of the elderly female antagonist: she is both victim and perpetrator. Each of these characters is driven to monstrous acts by trauma or oppression, yet each is also a product of societal neglect or abuse. June Talbot in *The Leech Woman* is a victim of her husband's cruelty and obsession with youth, but becomes a literal man-killer to restore her youth; Auntie Roo is devastated by loss and isolation, but turns to abducting children to fill the void; Pearl is ostracized for her age and desires, but lashes out murderously against the young. This dual positioning evokes complex audience emotions—a mix of fear, pity, and even understanding—moving hag horror beyond a simple good-versus-evil formula. In all three films, the older woman's body itself becomes a site of horror: June's rapidly withering face once her potion wears off; Roo's lovingly preserved child's corpse, crumbling to dust in her arms; Pearl's aged, sexualized body presented in jarring contrast to nubile young flesh. Such grotesque or abject imagery is a hallmark of the subgenre, reflecting what Barbara Creed calls the monstrous-feminine that disturbs identity, system, order and transgresses social boundaries (Crowther). The elderly hag violates norms of feminine behaviour and appearance—she refuses to remain invisible and docile—and thus embodies

what patriarchal culture deems a threatening "Other." Each film punishes this transgression through narrative justice (often with the hag's death), reinforcing the idea that women who defy ageist expectations must be cast out or destroyed.

At the same time, the differences in tone and message across the eras are striking, revealing changing cultural attitudes. In the early 1960s, films like *The Leech Woman* presented a clear moralistic lesson: tampering with nature to regain youth leads to destruction. This film, a blend of science fiction and horror, treats female ageing almost as a disease or curse to be cured through violent, unnatural means. It reflects its era's fixation on youth and budding interest in plastic surgery and miracle elixirs, themes also seen in other late-50s B-movies (*The Wasp Woman*, Roger Corman, 1959; *She Demons*, Richard E. Kunha, 1958) that exploited women's obsession with beauty and the charlatan science of rejuvenation. By contrast, *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* (1971) came at the tail end of the 1960s hag horror vogue and adopts a more ambiguous and tragic tone. The film plays like a dark fairy tale (explicitly invoking Hansel and Gretel), softening the camp excesses of the 1960s Grande Dame Guignol style with a dose of psychological realism. Roo is grotesque and unhinged, but her madness clearly stems from grief—the trauma of losing her daughter drives her to desperate acts (Fisiak 325). The ending offers no triumphant victory, only a sense of melancholy; even as Roo is punished, the audience is left with pity for a broken woman. Critics of the time noted that *Auntie Roo* felt like a dated throwback—by the early 1970s, younger audiences were gravitating to the new horror trends (occult thrillers, slashers), and films about crazy old ladies were seen as passé (Fisiak 323). Indeed, the film flopped at the box office, and reviewers deemed the hagsploitation formula "outdated," with Shelley Winters' performance criticized as "shrill and overwrought"—a déjà vu of earlier hag roles (Smith 237). The waning interest suggested that the heyday of hag horror was over, as horror cinema's center shifted to youthful protagonists and more visceral fears.

Half a century later, however, Ti West's *X* (2022) revives and reframes the hag horror trope for a postmodern era. *X* deliberately pays homage to 1970s exploitation-horror (evoking the gritty style of *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* [Tobe Hopper, 1974], and others) while inserting a very contemporary commentary about ageing and sexuality. The film pits a van of free-spirited young pornographers against an elderly couple (Pearl and Howard) on a Texas farm, explicitly confronting the audience with a rarely-depicted taboo: the sexuality of older adults. West uses this setup to provoke the viewers' own prejudices. The youthful erotic scenes are shot to be titillating, but when Pearl's naked, wizened body desires the same intimacy, the film shifts to outright horror (Walker). *X* thus exploits the "innate" bias by which many viewers find aged bodies repulsive. One of the film's most uncomfortable sequences is an unflinching scene of Pearl and Howard having sex, intercut with the terrified young final girl hiding under the bed. As one commentator observed, West is using "the taboo of female desire in later life as the main horrific element" (Gangi)—

effectively holding up a mirror to the audience: Why are you so disturbed by this? Is it because you too fear and loathe the realities of old age? In this way, *X* turns the hag horror motif into a social critique of gerontophobia. Notably, the film was released after the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when the world had been confronted by its vulnerability and when generational tensions (and concern for the elderly) were heightened. While perhaps not intentional, *X* can be read in that context – the gap between Pearl and the young hedonists becomes a bloody allegory of how youth and age view each other with mutual incomprehension and dread.

Bringing these observations together, we can trace a line of continuity through hag horror even as its presentation changes. All these films, at their core, encode society's deep-seated ambivalence (indeed, *horror*) toward the ageing woman's body and power. The elderly female antagonist is consistently portrayed as "*monstrous*" largely because she exists outside patriarchal norms: she is no longer young, fertile, or obedient, and yet she refuses to disappear. She challenges the expected roles—the devoted wife (June breaks the marriage norms by seeking autonomy and vengeance), the nurturing mother (Roo becomes an anti-mother who endangers children), the chaste grandmother (Pearl is explicitly sexual and violent). In patriarchal logic, a woman who is not a young wife or a loving mother is coded as unnatural, even evil—an idea rooted in age-old folklore of the witch/hag. As Barbara Creed would argue, such a figure is abject because "she does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Crowther). We see this in the visual language of the films: the transgressive old woman is associated with decay and grotesquerie, her appearance and actions violating the boundaries of the proper female body (whether by reverting from beautiful to decrepit in seconds, or displaying sexual desire deemed unbecoming for her age). Furthermore, in all three films, the hag is ultimately vanquished, reasserting a moral that aligns with the status quo—the message (implicit or explicit) that those who "go against nature" or traditional order will be punished. This basic narrative outcome did not change from 1960 to 2022, which speaks to how persistent these cultural anxieties are.

On the other hand, the evolution of the subgenre's tone and focus reflects shifting cinematic trends and perhaps a growing self-awareness. The early hagsploitation entries often delivered a tidy moral lesson and a cathartic sense of *schadenfreude*—the old harridan got what was coming to her. By the 1970s, films like *Auntie Roo* injected more pathos, suggesting that there were human reasons behind the mad old lady stereotype. By making Roo a tragic figure haunted by trauma, the film invites the audience to empathize even as they recoil (Fisiak 323). In *X*, empathy and horror are intertwined even further: Pearl is the villain, but West ensures we glimpse her despair and longings (bolstered later by *Pearl* [Ti West, 2022], the character's sympathetic prequel). Indeed, *X* pointedly denies the audience a full sense of triumph when Pearl is finally killed—instead of a celebratory tone, the film leaves us with the image of Pearl's anguish and the realization that, in a different life, she might not have been

a monster at all. This mirrors a broader trend in modern horror to create nuanced monsters and to force viewers to confront their own biases. In essence, *X* judges the audience rather than its characters, as film scholars have noted, this is common in postmodern revisitations of the genre (Walker). Modern horror often carries an element of social commentary, and *X* is a prime example of using a retro horror style to say something pointed about present-day culture's treatment of older women.

From a critical perspective, the hag horror subgenre presents a dilemma that is both problematic and intriguing. On one hand, these films undeniably trade in negative stereotypes about older women. The old woman as monster—crazy, ugly, vindictive—is a trope that reinforces ageist and sexist ideas that a woman's value is tied to her youth, and that an ageing woman who doesn't "know her place" (quietly fading into background) must be deranged or malignant. Billie Walker's essay on *X* aptly asks: "How are women ever going to come to terms with the inevitability of ageing when the only representations of our older bodies are used to horrify?" (Walker). Indeed, the subgenre's *extreme* portrayals risk validating the very prejudices we should be challenging. And yet—on the other hand—hagsploitation ironically opened the door for older actresses to take center stage in a Hollywood that had largely discarded them. In the 1960s, when mainstream studios offered few substantial roles to women over 50, horror melodramas like *Baby Jane*, *Sweet Charlotte*, *Strait-Jacket* (William Castle, 1964), provided meaty, scene-chewing parts for the likes of Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Tallulah Bankhead, Shelley Winters, and others. These actresses, once A-list stars, enjoyed a late-career resurgence by essentially parodying their own fading star images – turning their off-screen status as "has-beens" into on-screen horror gold. As one journalist wryly noted, in golden-age Hollywood "the role of the hag was the only place left to turn once you were no longer deemed a leading lady" (Walker). The opportunity was a double-edged sword: it *was* a comeback (Davis even earned an Oscar nomination at 54 for *Baby Jane*, something unheard of for a horror role at the time), but it required these women to grotesquely caricature the very fate they feared—becoming the *old witch* that society sees them as. *The Guardian*'s Anne Billson observed that *Baby Jane* allowed Davis and Crawford to reenact "in a heartbreaking echo" Hollywood's real-life treatment of ageing female stars—"playing washed-up actors driven mad by their own obsolescence" (Billson). In this sense, hag horror carried a subversive kernel of industry critique: it was both exploiting these women and giving them a platform to mock the system that had marginalized them.

The legacy of hag horror is still evident in today's cinema, even if the heyday has passed. In the early 1970s, critics declared the subgenre all but dead (Shelley Winters' turn in *Auntie Roo* was seen as giving viewers a *been-there, done-that* déjà vu (Fisiak 323). And indeed, horror moved on to obsessions with satanic cults, slashers, and body horror in subsequent decades. But the archetype of the monstrous old woman never truly disappeared—it merely went

back to the margins and occasional set-pieces. We still see her in various guises: the witch in the woods in *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2015) who preys on a baby, the naked crone in *It: Chapter 2* (Andy Muchietti, 2019) who transforms into a leering giant, innumerable haunted-house ghost crones and demonic grandmothers, and, of course, Ti West's *Pearl* (2022)—a whole film fashioned as a sympathetic villain origin story for the old killer from *X*. What has changed is that contemporary filmmakers often add a twist of self-awareness or parody when resurrecting these clichés. For example, *It: Chapter 2* plays the old lady jump-scare for both horror and a bit of absurd humor; *The Visit* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2015) turns a grandmother's senility into a source of dread but also dark comedy. *X* itself, as discussed, consciously measures how far it can push the audience's buttons regarding aged bodies and sexuality, thereby sparking a conversation about *why* we react with such disgust. In short, the trope endures, but modern horror often *acknowledges* the trope even as it invokes it, sometimes to challenge the viewer's biases (as *X* does) or to satirize the old stereotypes. Future studies may extend this discussion by examining representations of ageing women in non-Western horror cinemas, which fall outside the present study's scope.

In light of the analysis above, certain themes about ageing and gender in horror emerge strongly. Firstly, the figure of the "old hag" is an age-old cultural archetype—essentially the witch of fairy tales—that horror cinema has recycled to represent society's anxieties about women who exist outside normative roles. In these stories, the elderly woman stands as the antithesis of youth, beauty, and order: she is often marked by physical decay (to signal moral or spiritual corruption) and by inappropriate desires (for youth, for power, for sex) which make her a threat to the social order. This reflects a broader societal view that has historically othered older women—labeling them as unintelligible, uncontrollable, even *inhuman* once they pass reproductive age. The horror genre, in magnifying fears for effect, makes this subtext explicit: the older woman literally becomes a monster. Yet, upon closer examination, many hag horror films invite a more critical reading of this dynamic. Often unintentionally, they end up questioning *why* the hag exists. The narrative may start by othering the old woman, but as her backstory or pain comes out, the audience is forced to ask, "Why did this woman become like this?"—and that question redirects blame back toward society itself. Each of our example films hints at larger systemic issues: June's fate indicts a patriarchal obsession with female youth (her husband's scorn pushes her into the fatal experiment); Roo's downfall points to the isolation and dismissal of older women (widowed and childless, she's left with wealth but no support network; Pearl's rampage makes us confront the cruelty of a culture that mocks elders' sexuality and leaves some to wither in loneliness. In other words, while on the surface these films propagate the "evil old woman" stereotype, they simultaneously (perhaps subconsciously) expose the *social injustices* that gave rise to that figure. As horror scholar Tomasz Fisiak observes, Grande Dame Guignol stories are often narratives of trauma at their core (Fisiak 316). The traumas can be personal (loss of a child, abuse, loss of fame)

and also structural (ageism, sexism), and the hag's violence is a distorted reflection of those traumas. Our analysis affirms this: Auntie Roo's character, for instance, gains depth when seen through trauma theory, and even though *X* is a modern slasher, it too gives its villain a tragic dimension rooted in years of repression and longing.

Given the current trajectory of both society and cinema, there are signs of hopeful change in representations of older women—albeit slow and uneven. In real life, women are living longer, staying active in public life, and pushing back against ageist norms. Hollywood has seen a few trailblazers: e.g. Jamie Lee Curtis headlining a blockbuster horror film in her 60s, the *Halloween* revival (*Halloween Ends*, David Gordon, 2022), and winning an Oscar at 64, or Helen Mirren, now in her 70s, still landing leading roles in action and drama. There is a growing awareness (as evidenced by articles in mainstream outlets like *The Guardian* and industry studies) (Gangi) of the need for more nuanced roles for older women beyond the clichéd crones or saintly grannies. Horror as a genre, interestingly, has continued to give significant (if often unflattering) screen time to older female characters, from the mother-in-law horrors to ghostly matrons. The challenge going forward—for filmmakers and audiences—is to move beyond the old binary where an older woman on screen is either a joke or a nightmare. As *X* demonstrates, it's entirely possible to make a thrilling horror movie that also challenges our bias against ageing. The genre known for reflecting our fears could evolve to reflect a more complex understanding of ageing, rather than just exploiting it.

In conclusion, the examination of these three films and the hag horror tradition at large reveals a rich interplay between cultural fears and feminist insight. Yes, hag horror exaggerates society's worst attitudes about older women, essentially screaming what mainstream culture often only whispers—that ageing in women is something to dread or ridicule. But in doing so, it inadvertently forces these prejudices into the light. Our analysis, grounded in both film theory and cultural gerontology, underscores that representations of the "elderly horror woman" lie at the intersection of ageism and misogyny. This interdisciplinary approach—weaving feminist film theory (e.g., the *male gaze* problem of who is allowed to be seen as attractive or active on screen) with gerontological insight (e.g. how fear of ageing manifests in narratives)—highlights the deeper significance of "B-movie" terrors. The findings here reinforce what scholars like Sally Chivers and Niall Richardson have noted: that older women in cinema have long been confined to limited, often negative archetypes (Chivers 16; Gangi; Richardson). The hag horror film took this to an extreme, but by doing so, it lays bare the cultural script: the post-menopausal woman is depicted as an "epitome of death and decay" once she can no longer produce life (Walker). Recognizing this pattern is the first step toward changing it. Moreover, by comparing works from different eras, we see how each generation's anxieties (from mid-century fears of losing beauty, to post-'1960s fears of unloosed female autonomy, to current fears of ageing in a youth-obsessed culture) get refracted into these films. This study's original contribution is in linking the popular history

of hagsploitation with academic theories of abjection, gender, and ageing. Such a lens reveals that behind the cinematic "face of horror"—the leering wrinkle-faced hag—there is often a mirror reflecting society's own injustices and phobias.

Ultimately, the continued relevance of the hag horror trope challenges us to confront our collective attitudes. The horror genre may keep using the image of the "old woman monster" to get pulses racing, but critical viewers can look beyond the makeup and ask what truths or lessons lie in that fright. If the hag makes us uncomfortable, is it because she embodies something we're running from—our fear of growing old, of becoming undesirable, of being cast aside? Perhaps as audiences and creators increasingly internalize that ageing is not something to be feared or ashamed of, but a natural part of life, the portrayals of ageing women will also evolve towards more respectful and empowering narratives. Until then, hag horror films remain a fascinating, if often disturbing, cultural artefact—one that *both* exploits and exposes the prejudice that older equals grotesque. They make us shudder or laugh at the exaggerated specter of the ageing woman, but in doing so, they also prompt us (whether we realize it or not) to question why our society so readily turns women into hags in the first place. Facing that question honestly is key to moving beyond seeing the older woman as *the face of horror* and instead recognizing her humanity and worth, in fiction and in life.

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