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Rewriting Female Ageing in 2020s Cinema: Ageing, Care, and the Post-Pandemic Context

Abstract. Ageing has surged as a central theme in the cultural landscape of the 2020s, becoming prominent in narratives shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, and creating new pathways for cinematic representation, particularly regarding female ageing. This paper examines how later life is framed for women in narrative cinema, focusing on three films released in the 2020s from the Global North: *The Life Ahead* (Edoardo Ponti, 2020), *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande* (Sophie Hyde, 2022), and *The Miracle Club* (Thaddeus O'Sullivan, 2023). Through a qualitative analysis of narrative structure, cinematography, and character development, this study explores how these films construct female ageing across social and cultural discourses that emphasise resilience, care, and social engagement. Complementing the qualitative approach, a quantitative section examines patterns of gendered screen time, highlighting representational trends that contribute to positive ageing narratives. Findings suggest that contemporary 2020s films attempt to resist traditional decline-centred frameworks by portraying middle-aged and older women as more complex and agentic, reframing ageing as a stage characterised by relational depth and continued participation in social and cultural life. While focusing on a limited film sample, the study acknowledges that broader diversity may require further research. This paper positions cinema of the 2020s, read within a post-pandemic context, as a site where age norms are both reflected and reimagined, demonstrating how positive portrayals of female ageing contribute to interdisciplinary discussions on ageing, media, and cultural production. By bridging European and Anglophone cinema, it offers insights into evolving representations of gendered ageing and the shifting cultural imaginaries of later life, addressing questions central to contemporary debates in film, society, and gerontology.

Keywords: female ageing, 2020s cinema, embodiment, post-pandemic, intergenerational care, film studies, gender representation, cultural ageing.

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Cinema has historically struggled to imagine female ageing outside narratives of loss and marginalization. Kathleen Woodward describes this tendency as 'the cultural logic of decline,' where "the aging female body is construed as a site of decline rather than growth, of loss rather than gain" (Woodward 164). Within this framework, ageing is often approached through an anti-anachronistic lens in which older women are either considered invisible within modern systems or hyper-visible as figures that disrupt them, and both notions are frequently associated with some degree of loss, whether it be youth, sexuality or opportunities. Examples of these representations can be seen in a number of films such as *Clouds of Sils Maria* (2014, Olivier Assayas), *The Iron Lady* (2011, Phyllida Lloyd), *Youth* (2015, Paolo Sorrentino), or *Gloria Bell* (2018, Sebastián Lelio). This dynamic shapes how audiences perceive ageing female subjects and how ageing women perceive themselves, as both are mediated by the social gaze that regulates their visibility. In the 2020s, this framework has increasingly been challenged within a broader post-pandemic cultural context. Recent films of the 2020s have started to disrupt the established visual and narrative tropes of decline, presenting ageing not necessarily as erasure but as transformation, and an ongoing negotiation between ageing and agency. As Amanda Giammanco and Heike Mißler note, the pandemic "brought to light issues that had been simmering in the background for a long time and were suddenly given renewed attention" (Giammanco and Mißler 2).

Building on this, the hypothesis guiding this study centres on how cinema of the 2020s, interpreted within a post-pandemic context, reframes female ageing through relational, embodied, and care-oriented narratives that respond to the collective experiences of isolation and vulnerability intensified by COVID-19. In this framework, the article also argues that recent films from the Global North released in the 2020s reconfigure the cultural meaning of female ageing. Within the post-pandemic cinematic context, films shift the representational focus from decay and nostalgia to affective continuity and agency by presenting middle-aged and older women as active participants in social and emotional life. Three films were selected from Anglophone and European cinema to exemplify this trend: *The Life Ahead* (Edoardo Ponti, 2020), *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande* (Sophie Hyde, 2022), and *The Miracle Club* (Thaddeus O'Sullivan, 2023). While they are geographically and culturally different, they were selected due to their 2020s release contexts, narrative strategies, and audience response, which reflect emerging representational changes shaped by pandemic-era experiences of vulnerability, isolation, and interdependence. In this sense, the post-pandemic context of the 2020s cinema becomes a space in which ageing women are no longer framed as marginal figures of decline.

Gender, Age, and Contemporary Cinema: The Reconfiguration of Later Life

Research on ageing and cinema demonstrates that film often constructs older characters, particularly women, as subjects whose bodies resist modernity's visual economy and are frequently confined to domestic or marginal spaces with their visibility framed through nostalgia or capitalistic development. Their narratives are mostly mediated through flashbacks that emphasize their youth rather than their present selves and focused on their lack of past experiences or their approximation to death. Rarely do their storylines explore the present subjectivity of their ongoing lives. As Sally Chivers notes, "ageing women are doubly stigmatised in that they not only lose the potential for childbirth but also their youthful beauty is viewed as diminishing with age" (Chivers xv). As a result, women appear less frequently on screen with their sexuality often framed as improper or humorous, what Susan Liddy calls "the missing discourse of desire" (Liddy 69). This results in limiting discourses of ageing where the middle-aged and older woman "must somehow both acknowledge her sexual identity and at the same time, put it back down somewhere within her" (Tally 47). This positioning leads to scarce representations of the complexity of ageing female characters, as they are placed not only as secondary to the young main characters, but tertiary to their older male counterparts and rendered mostly invisible.

The post-pandemic context, however, provides a framework for interpreting the destabilization of these representational hierarchies, inviting a reconsideration of later life. COVID-19 transformed collective perceptions of life, including how society perceives vulnerability, isolation, and care. As Amanda Giammanco and Heike Mißler argue, "a pandemic is not just a medical crisis but a social, economic and political, and cultural one as well" (2). This was highlighted through social discourses and practices circulating during the pandemic, such as the strict and divisive quarantine regulations where older adults were considered part of the most vulnerable subjects with regards to the virus and divided from the rest of the population. This division recalibrated public perception on ageing subjects, locating them in a paradoxical position as part of a risk group endangered by the virus and its surroundings, and also humanized as subjects in need of individual and collective care. In this respect, COVID-19 did not function as a social equaliser but instead "picked apart these pre-existing inequalities, at least in the short term, magnifying social vulnerabilities further" (Han and Curtis 1). This made the structural invisibility of older women no longer abstract but publicly exposed.

As Clare Wenham emphasizes, "all crises, whether caused by disease, natural disaster, climate change or conflict exacerbate gender inequalities" (9). Older women then occupied a doubly marginal position during COVID-19, as they were vulnerable both due to their age and to gendered expectations surrounding care, economic dependency, and social worth.

These conditions inform cinematic representations in the 2020s, where ageing women are increasingly depicted as subjects who navigate this inequality while negotiating visibility, positioning later life as a period marked by complexity, affective continuity, openness, and sustained participation in social and cultural life.

Methodology and Analytical Approach

The present article adopts a comparative approach to the analysis of cinematic representations of female ageing in 2020s cinema. It focuses on how narrative structure, visual framing, and character construction contribute to the representation of middle-aged and older women in contemporary cinema released after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study focuses on films produced within the Global North, where dominant cinematic trends continue to shape representational practices. While a limited corpus was selected, the films are comparable in their shared narrative emphasis on intimacy, spatial containment, and the central positioning of ageing female protagonists. The three films from Anglophone and European cinema that were chosen, *The Life Ahead* (Edoardo Ponti, 2020), *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande* (Sophie Hyde, 2022), and *The Miracle Club* (Thaddeus O'Sullivan, 2023), all maintain thematic coherence. While not all of the films analysed were produced during the pandemic, their spatial dynamics gained significance when viewed within a post-pandemic context. The study is limited to a small corpus and does not aim to account for all national or temporal variations in 2020s cinema. Nevertheless, it aims to identify a shared representational tendency that has persisted in the aftermath of COVID-19, offering insight into broader changes in how ageing, care, and visibility are articulated in contemporary cinema.

Analytically, the qualitative section of this article examines how ageing is articulated through embodied performance, cinematography, spatial organisation, and interpersonal dynamics. Particular attention is paid to how ageing female bodies are framed on screen and how visibility and vulnerability are negotiated within narrative space. Concepts such as embodiment, relationality, and care are employed as analytical lenses. In addition, the article incorporates a small quantitative component examining screen-time distribution and audience reception data. The results are not intended to function as a statistical study but as a complementary perspective that contextualises the qualitative findings within broader patterns of visibility and reception.

Embodied Ageing, Visibility, and the Post-Pandemic Context

Embodied ageing conceptualizes the experience of growing older as a negotiation between corporeality, social meaning, and cultural visibility. As Stephen Katz notes, embodiment involves "resisting, accepting, denying and recreating ageing" as an ongoing social process (Katz 127). Rather than reducing ageing to a singular narrative about decline, this framework understands the body as a site where social and personal histories converge. Edoardo Ponti's *The Life Ahead* (2020), Sophie Hyde's *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande* (2022), and Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *The Miracle Club* (2023) have very distinct narrative structures and female characters, but despite the differences each film reconfigures later life through embodied ageing storylines with an emphasis on connection and corporeal agency. Read within the cultural context of the 2020s, marked by increased awareness of bodily vulnerability and social isolation, these representations emphasize the ageing body as a site of renewed visibility and presence. This emphasis takes two main forms, the first one is through the cinematographic strategies that frame the ageing self visible and in alignment with the audience. The second form addresses embodiment through open discourses of sexual politics included in the dialogue, thus positioning the ageing female body as a site of sexual activity without marginalization.

As Casado-Gual and Oró-Piqueras argue, ageing women's bodies are reduced to "irrelevant stereotypical roles ... outsiders, unacceptable or wrong" (51). *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande* (2020) explicitly articulates this tension between Nancy's body hypervisibility and her internalized ageism early in the narrative. In one of their encounters with Leo, while looking at herself in the hotel room mirror, she states "I've always been ashamed of myself. My body, I mean" (00:50:27–00:50:31). The cinematography further reinforces the societal expectations around her body by positioning the camera through a side angled close-up of her eyes, as if the audience were looking at her and not through her eyes, a stark contrast from her later experience in the mirror. Here, Nancy's ageing body is presented to her as something foreign and a constant source of shame. This self-perception led her in the past to neglect her feelings and put her sexual needs aside, which, as she aged, became more intertwined with the negative cultural connotations that surround old age, where there was no room for sexual exploration.

Conversely, at the end of the film, after Leo leaves her room, she looks at herself in front of the mirror once again, this time fully naked and appreciates her body in a more positive light. Nancy's reaction to her reflection becomes a performance of self-acceptance, "where self-recognition supersedes self-surveillance" (Woodward 171), marking a shift from self-surveillance to self-recognition. This new kind of embodied negotiation resonates with broader cultural conditions shaped in the aftermath of the pandemic, echoing Han and Curtis' observation on how "films addressing epidemic diseases often depict more complex

societal responses than simply panic and chaos driven by fear" (27). When she looks at herself in the mirror (01:35:17–01:35:53), the split between body and identity is broken, and she becomes visible to herself and to the audience.

Similarly, *The Life Ahead* (2020) situates Madame Rosa's ageing self within gestures of physical proximity that displace the traditional decline-based representation in favour of a more affective one. While traditional cinematic conventions would typically 'grandmotherize' older women, presenting them as compassionate and naturally nurturing figures that tend to other younger characters, the film gives Madame Rosa narrative authority, visibility and an embodied social presence. Her past as a sex worker is explicitly stated and does not diminish the character or function as a comedic scapegoat. This is signalled by Dr. Coen, a well-known member of the community, when he remarks that Momo needs her, "someone though, who commands respect" (00:08:25–00:08:40). Rather than being framed as a source of shame, her past is treated as one aspect of her lived experience. Cinematically, this is reinforced through recurrent frontal close-ups, where Madame Rosa faces the camera directly, almost admonishing the audience, as well as Momo, positioning her ageing self as equal with other characters in the narrative and the viewers.

While *The Life Ahead* (2020) retains conventional elements associated with decline, such as Madame Rosa's dementia, her eventual death and her position as a caregiver, these characteristics are integrated foregrounding vulnerability while maintaining her agency. Her acceptance of Momo and the other children is initially motivated by financial necessity rather than instinctive maternal affection, as Madame Rosa herself makes clear when she sets her conditions, stating that she will take Momo in only for "750, two months and not one day more" (00:10:54–00:11:04). Her care emerges gradually and is shaped by circumstance rather than natural instinct. Similarly, her episodes of confusion are not displaced outside the visual narrative, instead, they are incorporated into her embodied relationship with herself and Momo. The camera highlights this by focalizing her ageing during her episodes, portraying her confusion and fatigue while sustaining her narrative presence. In this sense, dementia is represented as an experience rather than only a narrative endpoint. The film also situates Madame Rosa beyond the maternal sphere by embedding her within a broader social network. Her interactions with Dr. Coen and Mr. Hamil, as well as her friendship with Lola, a younger street worker, establish her as socially engaged and communally integrated. Through these relationships, ageing, illness, and dependence are framed as relational conditions rather than endpoints, allowing Madame Rosa to remain visible as a socially embedded subject rather than a figure of decline.

In contrast to the previously discussed films, *The Miracle Club* (2023) centres on four protagonists, where three of them, Chrissie, Eileen, and Lily, are women over forty living in working-class Christian Ireland in the 1960s. The women's social environment is shaped by religion and gendered expectations, particularly affecting Lily and Eileen's relationship

with others. Their moral judgement toward Chrissie, who previously had an out-of-wedlock pregnancy and left for America, reflects the weight of the socially regulated sexual and reproductive norms that structure the perceptions of themselves and their interactions. However, the pilgrimage that the characters make from Dublin to Lourdes acts as a suspension of these normative structures.

While the narrative retains elements rooted in guilt and does focus in the past, the film's visual strategies diverge from conventional representations of older women by highlighting their bodily ageing markers rather than concealing them. Wrinkles, stiffness, and Lily's mobility difficulties are rendered visible across the group, and older women outnumber younger characters, positioning their ageing experience as a primary narrative focus rather than a marginal sidestory. This visibility is reinforced through the cinematography that showcases repeated moments of mutual gaze and frontal close-ups, especially between Chrissie and Eileen. In several scenes, the camera focuses on the women as they look at one another, holding their expressions in the frame for a long time, aligning their gaze with the viewer before the shot cuts to the other woman. These visual choices emphasise recognition and relational presence, marking ageing bodies as central to the film's narrative. *The Miracle Club* reframes ageing as a socially embedded experience and as "a relational practice rather than a personal condition" (Katz 44). This is further highlighted in the extended bathing scenes at Lourdes, where Lily and Chrissie bathe in the caves (01:11:26–01:13:08) . Although the camera does not present their bodies nude, the duration of these scenes and the attention given to their bodies highlight their narrative presence and the multiplicity of experiences in later life.

As Han and Curtis note, "films are especially effective mediums for providing insights into issues such as trust, inequality, and vulnerability during epidemics because they seamlessly shift between the macro scale of humanity or society to the micro scale of individual protagonists and relatable characters" (8). Across *The Life Ahead*, *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*, and *The Miracle Club*, positioning the protagonists with limited financial means further unsettles dominant cultural scripts, which often privilege the affluent, middle-aged 'coastal grandmother' figures. By portraying working and lower middle-class experiences, these films broaden the cultural field in which female ageing is normally represented. Within the context of COVID-19 and its aftermath, these representations obtained additional resonance, since the pandemic destabilized the economic landscape and highlighted social vulnerability, particularly for older women.

These broader socio-economic effects are further addressed within the narratives, through formal and representational choices that structure how ageing bodies are seen and experienced on screen. This is reinforced by the collective lack of flashbacks that all of the films share, which prevents the substitution of older bodies with youthful images, thus making sure that ageing and the present self of the protagonists remain the central component of the narrative. It is important to highlight how the protagonists are also portrayed by actresses whose ages

closely align with their characters, resisting cinematic practices that tend to 'age down' characters to make them more palatable. By refusing to visually present the past through a younger counterpart, the films force viewers to engage directly with the protagonists' present desires and vulnerabilities.

Ultimately, embodied ageing operates less as a sign of decline than as a mode of openness shaped by heightened awareness of the resilience of the ageing bodies and their social engagement. Across *The Life Ahead*, *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*, and *The Miracle Club*, conversations about sexual practice, sustained frontal close-ups, and the unfiltered presentation of ageing bodies reframes the vulnerability of the ageing self as a condition that enables connection rather than diminishes agency. Embodiment then emerges as a form of visibility in which the ageing body functions as a site of continued presence and affective engagement. This connection is further reinforced by the spaces the characters inhabit and their care practices.

Care, Space, and Relational Ageing

Alongside embodiment, the experience of ageing in these films is articulated through the spatial environments the characters inhabit and the relational practices that unfold within them. Rather than portraying care as one-directional and performed strictly by the older female character, the films treat it as a shared practice shaped by the emotional and spatial conditions in which it unfolds, expanding the ageing experience through its physical settings. As Yi-Fu Tuan states, the "architectural space reveals and instructs" (114). In this respect, space is not simply a background where the main characters are isolated or act against modernity, because it organizes visibility and shapes the possibilities for intergenerational or unconventional forms of self-care. This results in an extended geography for later life in which spaces such as hotel rooms, caves and temporary shelters become sites of emotional negotiation, care and identity formation for the ageing experience.

Conventionally, a "woman's world on film is a box within a box" (Basinger 216) and while "the man moves; the woman remains at home... In essence she is the home" (Garber 126). This has long made films locate women primarily within domestic spaces. In contrast, the protagonists in the three selected films occupy non-traditional caring roles that extend beyond familial obligations and domestic spaces. Positioned outside the domestic sphere historically associated with caregiving, the protagonists inhabit either liminal, public, or semi-public environments that allow for alternative modes of connection with themselves and others. This spatial change echoes post-pandemic conditions, in which the way "space was perceived changed drastically, be it the absence of people in public spaces or how much space should be between individuals to disrupt viral transmission" (Giammanco and Mißler

6). Spatial relations on film then became emotionally charged with the sentiments and caring dynamics that arose during COVID-19.

This spatial logic becomes particularly evident in *The Life Ahead* through the hidden shelter beneath Madame Rosa's apartment, where she and Momo retreat toward the end of the film. While previously it was a wartime refuge for Madame Rosa, the underground space continues this function by repositioning the spaces as a site of care during her cognitive decline. While "traditionally, the medical model of dementia has tended to focus on the environment surrounding a person with dementia only in order to demonstrate his or her disorientation toward it" (Capstick and Ludwin 8), the shelter operates differently by enabling a reconfiguration of caregiving roles between her and Momo. The movement from the open city, after escaping the hospital (01:16:44–01:20:52) to the underground shelter, marks a shift in their interactions, transforming care into an interdependence practice. In this space, Momo assumes a caregiving position, while Madame Rosa becomes the recipient of that care without being narratively sidelined. This emphasis underscores both the increased visibility of care needs among older populations and the intensified experiences of isolation they endured during the pandemic context. While the shelter is spatially removed from the dominant structures of social visibility, it helps make the characters' histories of marginalization visible. Madame Rosa's experience as a Jewish child hiding during wartime and Momo's position as a Black, orphaned migrant separated from his mother situate both figures outside normative frameworks of belonging. It is within this marginal space that care becomes reciprocal and situational, grounded in their mutual recognition.

A similar spatial logic operates in *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*, where the hotel room in which Nancy and Leo meet becomes a site where self-care and intergenerational relations intersect. Conventionally understood as a transitional space associated with secrecy and sexual exploration, the hotel is reconfigured by the film by placing Nancy, an older woman, at the centre of the narrative. Her growing self-recognition across the film constitutes a form of self-care, facilitated by the hotel's status as a liminal environment in which ageing normative expectations are temporarily suspended. The space is further marked by a "double existence between visibility and invisibility" (Altuntaş 107), a condition that mirrors Nancy's negotiation of desire, care, and self-acceptance. This reconfiguration is particularly resonant given that pandemic era discourses of self-care for adults largely prioritised physical health, not sexuality or emotional self-care. However, within this setting, shame is gradually displaced, allowing Nancy to engage with her ageing body and sexuality differently. This process extends beyond the private room in the film's final hotel lobby scene where she identifies herself as Susan and publicly acknowledges her desires in front of her former student (01:29:03–01:29:30).

Like in the above mentioned films, in *The Miracle Club*, spatial and ethical dimensions intersect across both private and public environments. During their retreat in Lourdes, the women share an intimate conversation within the hotel room in which they are staying, a space

temporarily removed from the moral and social obligations of their Catholic environment. Dolly, the youngest member of the group, confesses her fear and guilt surrounding her son's speech impediment and reveals her earlier attempt to perform an abortion (01:04:55–01:06:11). Her admission causes Eileen and Chrissie to reveal similar experiences, transforming the room into a space of mutual recognition and social engagement. This exchange reframes individual pain as a collective experience through intergenerational care. This relational dynamic extends into the public space of the Baths at Lourdes, which create the conditions for Lily and Chrissie to confront their shared past. Lily confesses that she misled her son Declan about the reasons for Chrissie's departure, an act she believes contributed to his eventual suicide (01:10:03–01:11:14). The women's reconciliation in the open space acknowledges relationships within the ageing experience as continuous. The scene thus positions later life not as a period of decline, enacting what Casado-Gual and Oró-Piqueras describe as "affirmative continuity," which recognises change in old age while affirming agency and connection (15).

Across the three films, the settings function as structuring elements in the formation of age and care relations. Hotel rooms, shelters, and caves organise how care is enacted, negotiated, and shared, enabling forms of interdependence that extend beyond familial or institutional frameworks. In situating older women within enclosed yet relational spaces that are open to communal interactions, the films reposition care as a social practice rather than a responsibility enacted by the older agent. These spatial configurations resonate with post-pandemic shifts in how care, vulnerability, and proximity have been negotiated in ageing.

On-Screen Visibility and Audience Reception

While the qualitative analysis highlights the shifts in visual and spatial representation of ageing women emerging in post-pandemic cinema, it is equally necessary to examine how these thematic developments are reflected in measurable patterns of on-screen visibility and audience reception. The quantitative analysis supports the qualitative findings by demonstrating that ageing women occupy a substantial share of narrative space, with screen-time percentages exceeding 65% across the three films. Researcher Martha Lauzen notes that although "for the first time in recent history, the percentage of top grossing films featuring female protagonists equaled the percentage of films with male protagonists in 2024" (1), only around "26% of female characters were 40 and older, whereas 55% of males were 40+ ... and only 5% of female characters were 60 and older, compared to 9% of male characters" (Lauzen 2). Placed against this backdrop, the screen time distribution in the films examined here not only reflects the commitment to center women but also expands the representational landscape by focusing specifically on ageing female protagonists.

Screen-time was estimated through a scene-by-scene review on each film across their full runtime and noting the extent to which the ageing female protagonists remain visually present within the frame. Based on a scene-by-scene review of each film's full runtime, the ageing female protagonists occupy a substantial proportion of on-screen time. Drawing on this analysis, Madame Rosa appears in roughly 65–75% of *The Life Ahead* (around 60–70 of its 95 minutes), Nancy is visible for an estimated 80–85 of *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*'s 97 minutes (approximately 80–90% of the film), and, in *The Miracle Club*, the three main characters' time on screen account together for around 55–65 of its 90 minutes (60–70% of the runtime). While approximate, these figures confirm that ageing women are not briefly included but continuously present, visually anchoring the narrative and guiding audience engagement across all three works.

Film	Year	Rotten Tomatoes Critics	Rotten Tomatoes Audience	Metacritic Critics	Metacritic Users	Common Reception Summary
The Life Ahead	2020	92% (91 reviews)	77% (250 reviews)	66/100 (24 reviews)	7.5/10 (53 reviews)	Recognized for its realistic tone and Loren's strong performance dealing with ageing and interdependence.
Good Luck to You, Leo Grande	2022	94% (231 reviews)	84% (500 reviews)	78/100 (34 reviwes)	7/10 (79 reviews)	Acclaimed for its direct portrayal of Nancy's exploration of sexuality and identity in midlife.
The Miracle Club	2023	68% (116 reviews)	83% (100 reviews)	55/100 (25 reviews)	5.5/10 (11 reviews)	Appreciated for warmth and reconciliation, working-class depiction and authenticity.

Along with their narrative prominence, this study also considers critical and audience reception towards the films and the main characters. Taking into account two popular review websites, *Rotten Tomatoes* and *Metacritic*, a compilation of critic and audience reviews was created up to the 20th of October 2025. The selection of these two platforms was primarily driven by two main factors. The first being their high accessibility for both audiences, critics and viewers. The second, their data as they both have continuously updated data feeds, allows us to see the interpretation of the movies across different time periods. While a lot of the users criticized the film narratives, the majority of both critics and audiences praised the characterization of the female leads.

The Life Ahead (2020) achieved high approval from both critics (92%) and audiences (77%) on *Rotten Tomatoes*, with *Metacritic* users also rating it positively (7.5/10), even as critics scored it more moderately (66/100). Responses frequently emphasised the film's emotional authenticity and Sophia Loren's portrayal, with comments that highlight her rendering of ageing. *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande* (2022) was similarly well-received, earning the highest

critic score among the three (94% on *Rotten Tomatoes* and 78/100 on *Metacritic*). Audience responses were slightly lower but still strongly positive. Reviews consistently highlighted the film's treatment of sexuality in midlife and its humour, suggesting broad appreciation for its non-traditional representation of ageing female desire and self-care. *The Miracle Club* (2023) received more mixed critical evaluations (68% on *Rotten Tomatoes*; 55/100 on *Metacritic*), but audience ratings remained distinctly positive, with an 83% approval rate and more than 100 reviews, and 5.5/10 on 11 audience reviews on *Metacritic*. While some critics and audience members regarded the narrative as conventional or predictable, both critics and audiences nonetheless commended mostly positively on the portrayal of older female characters' relationships and its emphasis on working-class authenticity.

Selected professional reviews are cited below as illustrative examples of these reception patterns. For instance, critical responses to *The Life Ahead* frequently highlighted Sophia Loren's performance as central to the film's portrayal of later life. *Screen Daily* notes that Madame Rosa's character suggests "the resilience of a woman who has needed a steely will to survive" (Grierson). Reception of *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande* similarly foregrounded its engagement with later-life sexuality and emotional vulnerability, as Annabel Smith describes the film as one that "remains defiant in the face of expectations and dives into the supposedly taboo" (Smith, *The Indiependent*), while another reviewer observes that the film engages with "sex for older women, and not just sex, but the baggage associated with sex, and how that baggage robs us of joy and fulfillment" (O'Malley, *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*). Commentary on *The Miracle Club* was more mixed but frequently emphasised the emotional interplay among its characters, noting how the film is strongest in "the interplay of emotions and resentments, the silliness of holding grudges, the pain beneath the surface of these women" (O'Malley, *The Miracle Club*). Taken together, these reception patterns reinforce the films' shared emphasis on relationality and sustained visibility in later life, themes that resonate with the representational and spatial dynamics analysed throughout this article.

Conclusion

This article examined how 2020s cinema functions as a site of reconfiguration of the cultural meanings of female ageing. Through the comparative analysis of three films, *The Life Ahead*, *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*, and *The Miracle Club*, the study demonstrates how recent films released in the 2020s depart from decline-oriented frameworks, centering women as agents whose ageing bodies remain socially visible. The qualitative analyses show that embodied ageing is articulated through visual proximity, sexual self-recognition, and vulnerability without erasure, while spatial configurations of unconventional spaces, such

as shelters, hotel rooms, and pilgrimage sites, enable alternative care practices that extend beyond domestic or institutional norms. These spaces echo post-pandemic cultural conditions that redefined proximity, isolation, and interdependence. The quantitative findings further support this shift, revealing that ageing women occupy a substantial share of screen time and narrative focus, a pattern that contrasts sharply with broader industry trends of age- and gender-based underrepresentation. By rejecting binaries such as youth versus decline, visibility versus invisibility, and caregiver versus care-receiver, the films analysed present later life as a dynamic, socially embedded stage marked by continuity rather than closure. In doing so, they contribute to an emerging cinematic ethic of interdependence that reflects the lasting cultural impact of the pandemic on how vulnerability, care, and ageing are understood in contemporary cinema.

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