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Out of Frame: A Data-Driven Analysis of the Representation of Migrant Elderly Care in European Cinema

Abstract. This article explores the striking absence of migrant caregivers in contemporary European cinema, despite their essential role in sustaining ageing societies. Drawing on the AGE-C dataset (Ageing and Gender in European Cinema), which catalogues over 6,000 films produced between 2014 and 2023, it investigates how care and ageing are represented across four major national film industries: Germany, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom. The analysis reveals a persistent imbalance: ageing is visible, even aestheticised, while the labour that supports it, most often performed by migrant women, remains largely off-screen.

Combining digital-humanities methods with cultural theory, the article situates this absence within broader ideological frameworks that privilege autonomy and obscure interdependence. It draws on the work of Stuart Hall, Helma Lutz, Rhacel Parreñas, Joan Tronto, and Temenuga Trifonova to argue that cinematic non-representation functions as a mode of cultural exclusion. Through both quantitative data and close readings of selected films, the study shows how European cinema has traditionally denied the realities of care work, while a small but significant body of recent films begins to reframe care as a site of political and ethical visibility.

Keywords: European cinema; ageing; migrant caregivers; representation; care work; gender; transnational labour; cultural invisibility; digital humanities; AGE-C dataset; ethics of care; social inequality.

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Introduction

In January 2024, the German newspaper *Bild Zeitung* published a brief report on the shortage of care workers in Bavaria. Accompanying it

were two photographs taken outside a Caritas residential home in Gauting. The first shows twenty-one employees standing together in front of the building, an image of solidarity, professionalism, and collective service. In the second, the photographer reportedly asked all migrant employees to step aside. Seventeen people left the frame. Only four remained. What seemed moments earlier as a complete team now looked strikingly hollow. The resulting image exposes, with startling simplicity, the extent to which migrant labour sustains European eldercare: without it, the system quite literally disappears from view.

These two images encapsulate the paradox this article explores. Migrant caregivers form the unseen foundation of Europe's ageing societies. They clean, feed, and comfort the elderly, often in precarious conditions and far from their own families. Yet in public discourse more broadly, and in European cinema in particular, their presence is rarely acknowledged. What remains out of frame is not only a group of people but an entire social infrastructure of care. This study examines how European cinema reinforces this cultural and social silence and how the rare portrayals of migrant caregivers offer visibility without recognition, turning representation itself into a subtle form of exclusion.

Drawing on the AGE-C dataset (Ageing and Gender in European Cinema, 2014–2023), one of the largest empirical resources on ageing and gender in European cinema, this article combines digital-humanities methods with cultural theory to analyse patterns of visibility and invisibility surrounding the representation of migrant elderly care in European cinema. It focuses on four countries: Germany, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom, where reliance on migrant caregivers is high and film production prolific. The analysis of these four national cinemas illustrates a structural disjunction between the cultural visibility of ageing and the underrepresentation of the labour that sustains it.

This imbalance becomes particularly evident in individual film narratives, where ageing is richly visualised while the labour that sustains it remains marginal or simplified. Films such as *Amour* (Michael Haneke, 2012), *45 Years* (Andrew Haigh, 2015), and *The Father* (Florian Zeller, 2020) depict old age with great emotional sensitivity, yet rarely show the labour that enables dignity and survival. The result is an image of ageing that appears self-contained and detached from the global economies of care that make it possible.

The Structural Invisibility of Care: Dependency, Representation, and Ideology

Stuart Hall's theory of representation helps explain why such realities remain unseen. Representation, he argues, is an active process that constructs meaning through selection and exclusion. Cultures define themselves by drawing boundaries between what is valued and what is ignored, and what lies beyond those boundaries becomes "matter out of place."

In this sense, non-representation is not an absence but a cultural operation that sustains hierarchies of belonging and worth (Hall 236–239).

The invisibility of migrant caregivers in European cinema exemplifies this mechanism of exclusion. Care work takes place in the most intimate domestic spaces, yet the workers who perform it often remain socially invisible. They are present in European households but absent from Europe's self-image. Their invisibility on screen mirrors their exclusion from political discourse, where they are essential but peripheral actors in the story of modern ageing. What is left unseen in cinema is precisely what challenges the dominant fantasy of independence and self-sufficiency.

The material context reinforces this symbolic logic. In Germany, more than five million people were classified as care-dependent in 2023, a 78% of those in need of care were aged 65 or older, and around one third were at least 85 years old (Destatis 2023). Between 300,000 and 600,000 live-in caregivers currently work in German households, most of them women from Central and Eastern Europe (Kriegsmann-Rabe et al. 2). Italy employs over one million domestic workers, with migrants, primarily from Ukraine, Romania, Moldova, and the Philippines, making up more than seventy percent of those in eldercare (ISTAT 2022). Similar patterns exist in France and the United Kingdom, where migrants form a substantial share of the professional care workforce (Pillars of Health 2022; Skills for Care 2024). These figures show that Europe's ability to manage ageing populations depends fundamentally on migrant labour.

Helma Lutz provides a crucial framework for understanding this structure. In *The New Maids*, she argues that globalization has not eliminated gendered divisions of labour but has internationalised them. The growing participation of middle-class European women in paid work has led to the outsourcing of domestic and care labour to poorer women from abroad. Rather than liberating women collectively, this process reproduces hierarchies along lines of class, race, and nationality (Lutz 1–2). Rhacel Parreñas describes a similar phenomenon as the "international division of reproductive labour," a global hierarchy in which reproductive work, including childcare and eldercare, is transferred from privileged to marginalised women (Parreñas 51). This flow of labour creates what she calls "transnational families" (Parreñas 53), sustained through emotional and economic exchanges across distance. Such arrangements show how the labour of care circulates globally, connecting households through asymmetrical dependencies.

From the perspective of political theory, Joan Tronto situates these transnational dynamics within the moral contradictions of liberal democracy. In *Caring Democracy*, she argues that while liberal societies celebrate care as a moral virtue, they simultaneously devalue its material practice. Caring requires time, physical effort, and emotional investment, yet it is treated as secondary to forms of work that produce measurable economic outcomes. Certain groups, Tronto notes, receive "passes" that free them from caregiving responsibilities because

their labour is deemed more valuable to society, while others, often women, migrants, and members of the working class, are disproportionately assigned these tasks (Tronto 32–35). Migrant caregivers epitomize this imbalance. They perform the intimate labour that sustains daily life for others, yet their contribution remains politically marginal and socially undervalued.

Cinema provides a revealing site for examining how these contradictions are translated into cultural imagery. Siegfried Kracauer, in *Theory of Film*, described cinema as a medium uniquely capable of capturing the visible world. He argued that films reach their full expressive potential when they engage with and underscore material reality (Kracauer ix–xi). What is excluded from the frame therefore acquires interpretive significance. If film records the world, its omissions are as telling as its representations.

Stuart Hall's conception of representation deepens this insight. If cinema does not reflect reality but constructs it, then the consistent absence of certain figures, such as migrant caregivers, signals an ideological selection. European cinema's portrayal of ageing tends to privilege autonomy and dignity, reinforcing an ideal of self-contained subjectivity that leaves no room for dependency. The labour of care is excluded not because it is visually unappealing but because it disrupts a cultural narrative about what it means to live and age in Europe.

Temenuga Trifonova extends this logic to the figure of the migrant. In *The Figure of the Migrant in Contemporary European Cinema*, she observes that the migrant occupies an increasingly central position in the European cinematic imagination, yet this visibility is often symbolic rather than social. The migrant becomes a metaphor for Europe's internal anxieties, embodying the instability of its borders, values, and collective identity (Trifonova 18). She argues that the migrant unsettles Europe by challenging its moral boundaries and sense of belonging. Rather than depicting migrants as agents of lived experience, cinema often turns them into abstractions, using their presence to dramatise Europe's philosophical crises (Trifonova 13–15).

This framework, which brings together Hall's politics of visibility, Tronto's ethics of care, and Trifonova's analysis of migration, forms the theoretical foundation of this article. These perspectives show that cultural visibility is never neutral. The decision to include or exclude certain subjects from representation shapes how societies understand themselves. The near absence of migrant caregivers in European cinema is therefore not a trivial omission but a reflection of broader ideological priorities that deny dependency and conceal the structural foundations of wellbeing.

Tronto's notion of care as a democratic test is particularly relevant. A caring society, she argues, recognises interdependence and values care as a collective moral and political responsibility (Tronto 23). Yet European cinema largely denies this interdependence. Films about ageing often aestheticise vulnerability, treating it as an individual or familial concern rather than a systemic one. They depict domestic spaces in which dependency is assumed

to occur naturally, without visible labour. The workers who make such care possible, often migrant women employed under precarious conditions, are absent from the frame. Their invisibility reinforces the illusion that ageing and dying are autonomous processes, detached from global economies of labour.

Cinematic representation thus becomes complicit in sustaining social hierarchies. By erasing the workers who make care possible, film reproduces the moral economy of liberal society, which privileges independence over dependence and productivity over care. The invisibility of migrant caregivers in European cinema is therefore both a cultural symptom and an ethical problem.

Quantifying Absence: Data, Representation, and the Politics of Care

The AGE-C dataset (*Ageing and Gender in European Cinema*), developed by an interdisciplinary team from five European universities, provides a comprehensive empirical foundation for studying how ageing is represented in contemporary European film. It catalogues more than six thousand films from nine national industries produced between 2014 and 2023, identified through criteria related to age, gender, and thematic engagement with ageing (Freijo et al.). This large-scale resource allows for a systematic analysis of the demographic and narrative patterns that structure cinematic visibility across Europe.

Each film was manually coded with more than 130 thematic and narrative tags covering genres, character traits, and plot motifs (Freijo et al.). The most frequent tags include state institutions, cultural memory, artistic creation, family, fatherhood, motherhood, and personal memory, while caregiving and migration appear far less often (Freijo et al. 10). Moreover, the dataset exposes clear demographic patterns. Most ageing characters in European cinema are male (66%), heterosexual (97%), white Western European (78%), and able-bodied (88%). These figures confirm what cultural gerontologists have long observed: ageing in European cinema is largely represented as masculine, autonomous, and culturally privileged (Freijo et al. 10). It is constructed through a narrow, normative lens that associates later life with independence, physical ability, and whiteness, while erasing experiences of dependency, illness, and social marginality. Within this visual regime, care work, particularly migrant care work, rarely appears, revealing the limits of European cinema's moral and social imagination.

Although the dataset was not designed to study migration or care work, its relational structure made it possible to identify relevant films. The analysis therefore focuses on four major Western European industries: Germany, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom, where film production is extensive and the reliance on migrant caregivers high. Two tags, caregiving and migration, were cross-referenced to isolate titles in which both themes occur,

and all matches were manually verified for relevance. This process yielded only a small number of films. These cases are especially revealing for examining the gap between the cultural visibility of ageing and the social invisibility of those who sustain it.

The temporal scope of the dataset, covering 2014 to 2023, inevitably excludes earlier and later productions, while smaller national cinemas outside this framework have also contributed to representations of ageing and migration. Nevertheless, the patterns that emerge are striking. Even across more than six thousand films, depictions of migrant caregivers are remarkably scarce. This scarcity is not accidental but reflects broader cultural hierarchies of visibility. It demonstrates the persistence of what Temenuga Trifonova calls cinema's "selective geography of empathy," a mapping of inclusion and exclusion that exposes the moral boundaries of European self-perception (Trifonova 6). Within this corpus, caregiving appears as a marginal and almost invisible activity despite its immense social and economic significance.

In this sense, the AGE-C dataset functions both as an analytical instrument and as a mirror. It makes measurable the extent to which European cinema sustains an aesthetic and moral order built on the erasure of dependency. The underrepresentation of migrant caregivers is not merely a gap in representation but a structural omission that shows how European culture continues to value autonomy and visibility over interdependence and care.

Germany

The German corpus includes 1,073 films produced between 2014 and 2023. The most common themes, such as artistic creation, cultural memory, and urban life, reflect German cinema's ongoing engagement with questions of identity and history. Caregiving appears in 58 films and migration in 22, but only two titles combine both themes: *Die Vergesslichkeit der Eichhörnchen* (*The Forgetfulness of the Squirrels*, Nadine Heinze, Marc Dietschreit, 2021) and *Rival* (*Rivale*, Marcus Lenz, 2022). This scarcity shows how migrant caregivers remain largely absent from German cinema, even though they play an essential role in the country's eldercare system and expose its dependence on transnational labour.



The Forgetfulness of the Squirrels (2021), is one of the few German films to place a live-in caregiver at the centre of its narrative. It follows Maria, a Ukrainian woman caring for an elderly man with dementia, tracing



the fragile balance between affection, control, and dependency that defines their relationship. At first glance, the film appears to humanise the caregiver, but it ultimately reproduces familiar stereotypes. Maria is kind and patient, yet portrayed as naïve and linguistically limited, caught in moral dilemmas that expose her social vulnerability. The elderly man treats her as a daughter in need of guidance, his son sees her as a sexualised threat, and his daughter as an opportunist.

These projections reveal the contradictory position of the migrant caregiver: essential yet distrusted, intimate yet alien. The family's reactions transform Maria's foreignness into a screen for their own anxieties about ageing, dependence, and control. Through her quiet endurance, the film evokes empathy without granting her full subjectivity. Her emotions remain mediated through the employer's gaze, a pattern that reflects what Stuart Hall identifies as the unequal power relations shaping representation itself, where visibility depends on who has the right to look and to be seen (Hall 234–262). In this sense, Maria's partial visibility reinforces Joan Tronto's observation that care relations are inherently asymmetrical, granting moral recognition to some while rendering others indispensable yet invisible (Tronto 173–175). *The Forgetfulness of the Squirrels* exposes this tension without resolving it, demonstrating the limits of empathy within a representational framework still organised around hierarchy and dependency.

Marcus Lenz's *Rival* (2020) approaches care from an indirect perspective, focusing not on the caregiver but on her child. The film follows nine-year-old Roman, who travels from Ukraine to Germany to find his mother, Oksana, an undocumented live-in caregiver working for an elderly widower. His arrival exposes a fragile arrangement that blurs the boundaries between work, intimacy, and survival.

As Rhacel Parreñas argues, global care chains create an international division of reproductive labour in which affection and obligation circulate through unequal exchanges (Parreñas 51). *Rival* translates this inequality into the child's experience: Roman's jealousy and confusion lay bare the emotional costs of migration and the instability of care when divided across borders. Lenz's restrained direction emphasises the tension between love and labour, showing how dependency is never singular but shared.

When Oksana falls ill and is abandoned by her employer, Roman and the old man develop a fragile bond that reverses the roles of caregiver and cared-for. This moment echoes Joan Tronto's view of care as a moral test of democracy, revealing interdependence as both a source of vulnerability and an ethical necessity (Tronto 23). By refusing resolution, *Rival* turns care into a reflection on mutual dependency and the limits of autonomy.

Italy

The Italian corpus comprises 1,240 films, reflecting the scale and vitality of the country's national cinema. Among the most frequent thematic categories are artistic creation, personal memory, and fatherhood, underscoring Italian cinema's continued investment in familial and generational narratives. Within this landscape, caregiving and migration appear only marginally, tagged in 57 and 35 films respectively, and intersect in just five titles. This scarcity is striking given Italy's heavy reliance on migrant *badanti*, the live-in caregivers who form the backbone of the country's eldercare system. As Helma Lutz observes, Italy exemplifies how the global feminisation of care labour has created a transnational dependency on women from Eastern Europe and the Global South, whose work remains socially indispensable yet culturally marginal (Lutz 1–2).

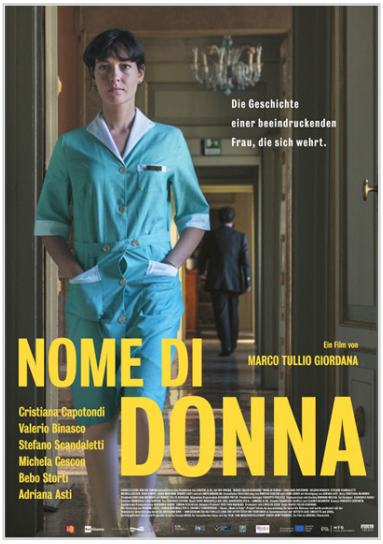


This marginality is evident in the few films that depict care work. *Le Badanti* (*The Caretakers*, 2015), directed by Marco Pollini, offers one of the rare portrayals of migrant care work in Italy. The film follows three young Eastern European women hired to care for elderly Italian men, using comedy to frame their presence as both exotic and restorative. The caregivers are shown as cheerful caricatures whose optimism masks fatigue and displacement, exemplifying what Helma Lutz calls the "commodification of affection" in the global care economy (Lutz 42). Their foreignness becomes a narrative device for rejuvenating the male protagonists rather than a subject of reflection. By portraying care as naturally joyous and apolitical, *Le Badanti* turns migrant labour into sentimental entertainment, reaffirming rather than questioning Italy's gendered and class hierarchies.

A more complex portrayal emerges in *Nome di donna* (*A Woman's Name*, 2018) by Marco Tullio Giordana. Widely praised for its feminist message, the film offers a bold critique of sexual harassment in the care industry and the complicity of state and church-run institutions. It tells the story of Nina, a young Italian woman who starts working in a private elderly home and soon discovers systemic abuse by the director toward female staff. Some of her colleagues, including migrant workers, have endured harassment silently, fearing job loss or deportation. Nina's decision to denounce the abuse exposes not only institutional complicity but also the gendered hierarchy within care work.

However, no critical attention has been given to the film's national framing of resistance: the only character who challenges institutional abuse is a native Italian woman, while her

migrant co-workers are rendered passive or voiceless. This raises questions about whose voices are permitted to challenge the status quo. Despite its critique of power, the film inadvertently reproduces a national lens of agency, overlooking the intersectional barriers faced by foreign caregivers, the very women most likely to endure, and least able to report, abuse.



France

The French corpus, the largest within the AGE-C dataset, includes 1,879 films and exposes a strong preoccupation with middle-class autonomy and professional identity. Among the most frequent thematic categories are self-employment, high-ranking employment, and parenthood, suggesting that French cinema continues to privilege narratives of independence and social mobility. Caregiving and migration appear in fewer than one hundred films combined, and none focus on migrant caregivers. This absence is striking given France's reliance on care workers from North and Sub-Saharan Africa, as Bridget Anderson notes in her analysis of the racialised division of domestic labour that remains largely invisible in French public discourse (Anderson 112–115).

French cinema's portrayal of ageing typically revolves around intergenerational intimacy and emotional self-sufficiency, omitting the labour that makes such independence possible. Films such as *La Belle Époque* (2019) and *Amour* (2012) aestheticise late life through introspection and nostalgia, transforming ageing into a moral or romantic experience detached from material conditions. This omission exemplifies what Stuart Hall describes as a politics of exclusion, where dependency and servitude are rendered culturally unspeakable and difference absorbed into the fiction of sameness (Hall 234–262). The silence surrounding migrant caregivers is therefore not incidental but central to a cinematic tradition that equates dignity with autonomy and invisibility with equality.

The absence of migrant caregivers in French cinema performs a cultural function. It protects the illusion of universalism by erasing the racialised and gendered labour that sustains it. In this sense, non-representation becomes an ideological operation that preserves the myth of equality while concealing systemic inequality. The very category of the "migrant" remains peripheral to French conceptions of national identity, which favour assimilation over visibility (Fassin 510–515). Consequently, the elderly in French films appear independent or surrounded by family, while the paid migrant caregivers who enable this image remain unseen.

United Kingdom

The British corpus includes 776 films, reflecting the diversity of contemporary UK cinema. Among the most frequent thematic categories are homosociality, cultural memory, and self-employment, highlighting cinema's preoccupation with individual identity and male social bonding (Dagnino et al.). Caregiving and migration appear only marginally, tagged in 77 and 36 films respectively, and intersect meaningfully in just two titles. This scarcity underscores how British cinema, despite its social realism and multicultural settings, rarely confronts the structural realities of migrant care labour.

One example is *The Carer* (2016), an English-Hungarian co-production, directed by János Edelényi, which follows Dorottya, a young Hungarian actress working as a caregiver for an ageing British stage legend. Though critics described the film as heartwarming and praised Brian Cox's performance (Bradshaw 2016), its narrative remains conventional and steeped in familiar stereotypes. It frames the migrant caregiver's presence as a source of humour, sentiment, and moral rejuvenation for her employer while leaving structural inequalities unexamined. Dorottya's ambitions and interior life are subordinated to the older man's redemption, reaffirming what Stuart Hall identifies as the selective logic of representation, in which marginalised figures appear only to sustain the visibility of dominant ones (Hall 226–239). In this sense, the film reproduces what Joan Tronto calls the moral asymmetry of care, transforming dependency into a stage for empathy without challenging the hierarchies that define it (Tronto 32–35).

A different perspective appears in *Raging Grace* (2023), directed by Paris Zarcilla, a British–Filipino filmmaker. The film centres on Joy, an undocumented Filipina caregiver employed by a wealthy English family. Unlike the sentimental or comic depictions of care found elsewhere, *Raging Grace* merges social realism with gothic horror to expose the racial and class hierarchies embedded in domestic labour. Joy's invisibility becomes literal as she hides in the house to avoid detection by immigration authorities. Her dual role as nurturer and intruder embodies the contradictions of migrant care work: she is indispensable to the household's survival yet excluded from its social legitimacy.



Zarcilla's film offers a rare and complex representation of care as a site of confrontation rather than reconciliation. It presents interdependence not as moral harmony but as a field of competing vulnerabilities, where recognition must be fought for and can never be taken for granted. In this sense, *Raging Grace* demonstrates that visibility does not guarantee acknowledgement. Instead, it turns the domestic space into

what Stuart Hall describes as a site of difference, where identity and power are constantly negotiated rather than resolved (Hall 226–239). The film's hybrid genre intensifies this instability, using horror to make dependency uncanny and to demonstrate, as Joan Tronto suggests, the uneasy reciprocity at the core of all caring relations (Tronto 174–175). Joy's struggle is neither invisibility nor empowerment but a constant negotiation between the two, making *Raging Grace* one of the few European films to render care and coexistence as a dynamic, conflicted terrain of visibility.

Conclusion

Across the four national contexts examined, the AGE-C dataset reveals a striking continuity: ageing is highly visible, while care remains largely unseen. Contemporary European cinema portrays ageing as a personal or familial experience rather than a social and structural condition. Migrant caregivers, though essential to Europe's ageing societies, appear only rarely and often through reductive or peripheral roles. When they do appear, they tend to serve as moral catalysts for native characters rather than as agents of their own stories.

This systematic pattern exemplifies what Stuart Hall terms the politics of representation. By defining what is seen and what is excluded, cinema reproduces the broader hierarchies of European self-perception. The absence of migrant caregivers mirrors their marginal position in public discourse, where care is sentimentalised but seldom recognised as political work. In aestheticising dependency as a private matter, film reinforces the illusion of autonomy and obscures the collective labour that sustains it.

The AGE-C dataset makes these dynamics empirically visible. By cross-referencing tags for caregiving and migration, it quantifies absence and exposes the cultural boundaries of visibility. As Freijo and colleagues argue, digital methodologies make it possible to connect distant reading with interpretive critique, transforming omission itself into a source of analytical insight (Freijo et al. 10–12).

The films analysed here illustrate how European cinema negotiates the paradox of dependency in different ways. *The Forgetfulness of the Squirrels* and *Rival* reflect Germany's oscillation between empathy and estrangement. *Le Badanti* and *Nome di donna* reveal Italy's struggle between sentiment and critique. The French corpus maintains invisibility through the rhetoric of universalism, while *Raging Grace* from the United Kingdom offers a rare counter-image that reframes migrant care as a site of resistance and recognition.

Together, these examples show that invisibility is not total but contested. Each film gestures toward the structural inequalities underpinning European ageing, even if such gestures remain fragmented. The challenge ahead is to move from isolated representations

to a systemic understanding of elder care as a central dimension of European modernity. To represent ageing is to confront dependency and reciprocity as shared social realities. A cinema that makes these relations visible would not only depict ageing more truthfully but also broaden the ethical and political imagination of Europe itself.

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