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Screening older age: The representation of older adults in British cinema between 2010 and 2022

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(2023) Screening older age: The representation of older adults in British cinema between 2010 and 2022. Project Report. UNSPECIFIED, Centre for Ageing Better.

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# Screening older age

The representation of older  
adults in British cinema  
between 2010 and 2022

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February 2023



in partnership with:

London School of Film, Media and  
Design, University of West London

# About us

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## **Centre for Ageing Better**

The UK's population is undergoing a massive age shift. In less than 20 years, one in four people will be over 65.

The fact that many of us are living longer is a great achievement. But unless radical action is taken by government, business and others in society, millions of us risk missing out on enjoying those extra years.

At the Centre for Ageing Better we want everyone to enjoy later life. We create change in policy and practice informed by evidence and work with partners across England to improve employment, housing, health and communities.

We are a charitable foundation, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, and part of the government's What Works Network.

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Visibility and diversity of older characters</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Roles cast with older characters</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Notions of ageing and older age</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Good Practice – Exceptions to the Rule</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Assessing the ‘authenticity’ of older adults’ representation</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Film selection and methodology</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>34</b>

# Introduction

**Recent decades have seen a growing awareness of the importance of media representation. Intersectional thinking has revealed the ways in which privilege and discrimination are compounded, and in film, a diversification of identities both in front of and behind the camera has slowly been gathering momentum.**

Screen representations form a significant part of the feedback loop in which culture both produces and is produced by media discourses. In order to address problems of representation, analyses of past and current trends and stereotypes are required. This study thus examines an aspect of identity which is often underrepresented in debates on diversification; how ageing and older age is portrayed on screen.

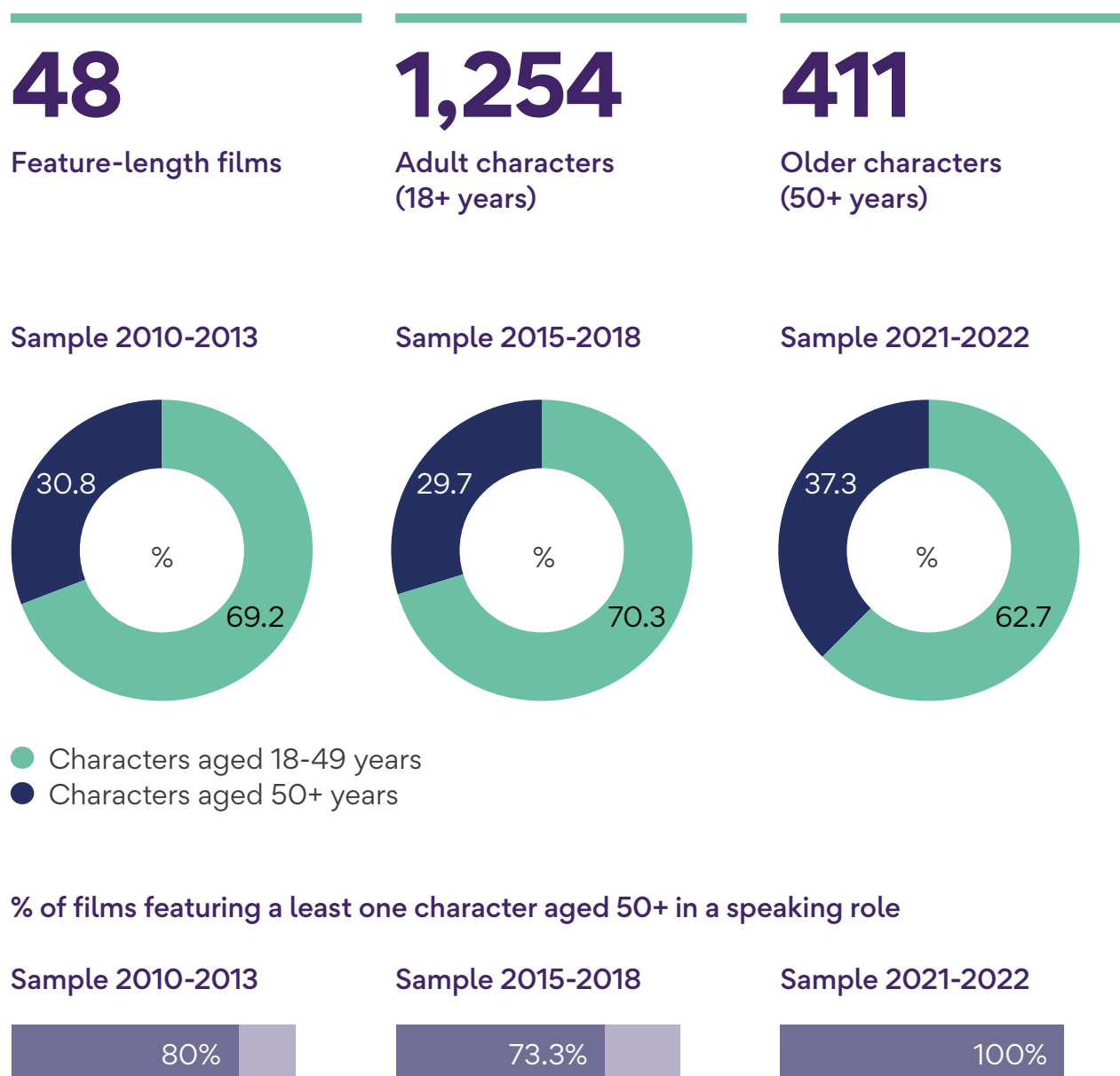
Film has always been a medium which glamourises youth. While all national cinemas have their traditions and idiosyncrasies, Hollywood's influence is felt worldwide—and Hollywood has never been a champion of older people in terms of on-screen representations. Recent studies of US cinema have shown that these prejudices remain to some degree, and our study seeks to investigate similar threads within the context of recent British cinema.

By combining a detailed statistical analysis with close readings of narratives and film language, this report aims to identify patterns in the representations of age in a cross-section of contemporary British cinema. As such, it participates in the deconstruction of cultures of representation, highlighting stereotypes and seeking positive developments, in order to understand the ways in which the discourse can be updated. Commissioned by the Centre for Ageing Better, this study has three research objectives:

- i To investigate how older adults—that is, those aged 50 years and over—are currently represented in British cinema;
- ii to trace how this representation might have changed since 2010; and
- iii to assess the 'authenticity' of the current representation.

To achieve these objectives, we analysed the characters, storylines and aesthetics presented in a selection of 48 British feature-length films released between 2010 and 2022—comprising almost 100 hours of narrative content. Figure 1 is a breakdown of elements of our study's data sample.

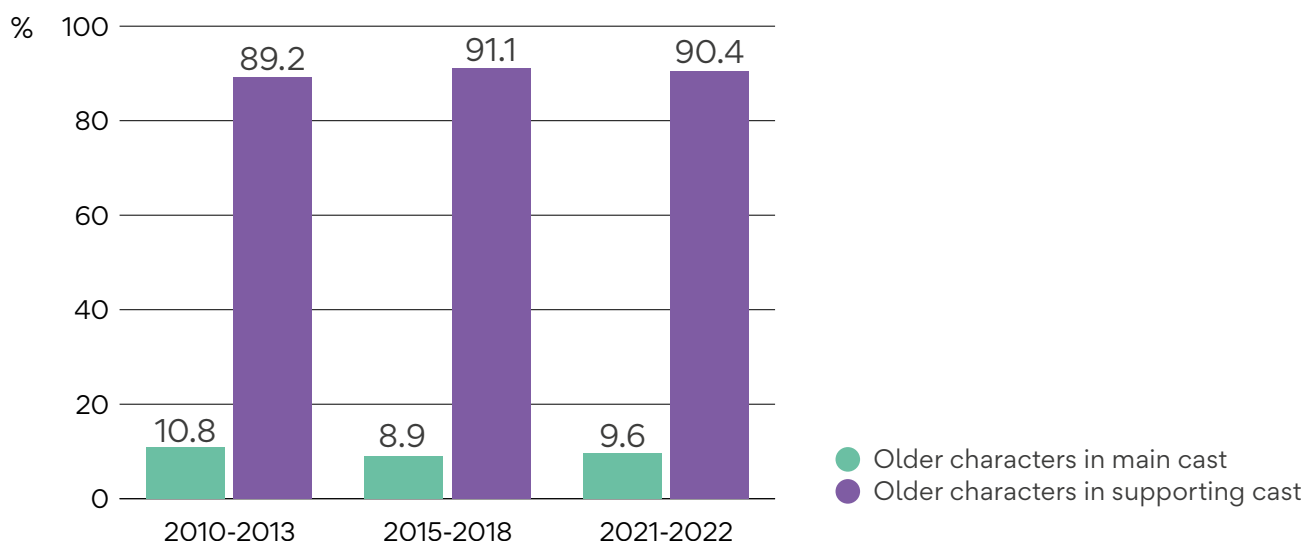
Figure 1: Elements of the study's sample composition



# Visibility and diversity of older characters

Without exception, all British films in our 2021/2022 sample featured at least one older character in a speaking role. This is a noteworthy increase over the previous decade, where on average about 1 in 4 British films did not feature any characters aged 50 years or over in such roles. However, simply including older characters in speaking roles does not automatically mean that these characters were central to the development of the plot or that they appeared much throughout the film. Taking a closer look at the main cast<sup>1</sup>, only 1 in 10 older characters (50+ years) featured in a major role in 2021/2022 (Figure 2). This is much less often than younger adults (18 – 49 years), who are in a major role closer to 1 in 5 times. This has not changed much since 2010. Therefore, while the overall inclusion of older characters in films has improved, this inclusion seems to be mainly via the supporting cast<sup>2</sup> rather than the main cast. More often than not, older characters support younger ones, merely dipping in and out of the film as the story progresses, rather than themselves becoming the main focus of the plot.

**Figure 2: Older characters (50+ years) featuring in the cast of British films**



- 1 A main cast of a film refers to characters in major roles—that is, characters that play an intricate part of the story. Think, e.g., the lead or supporting lead characters of a film.
- 2 A supporting cast of a film refers to characters in minor roles—that is, characters that simply push the story forward for the sake of the lead or supporting lead characters.

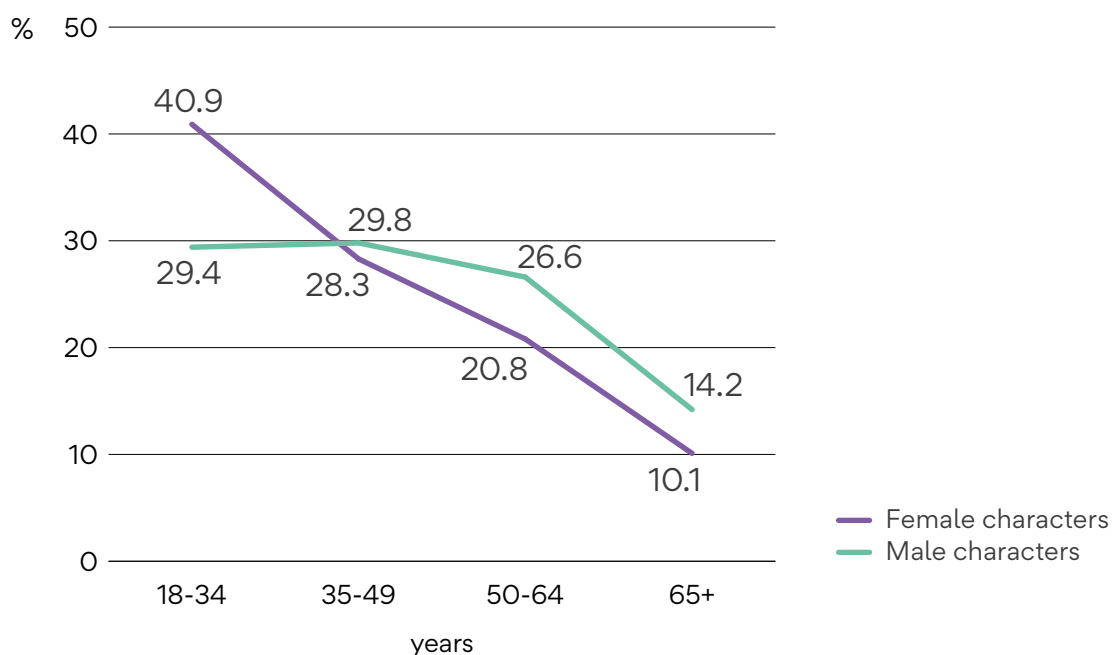
There appears to be a general reluctance to feature older adults as characters central to the plot of British films, which can be seen throughout the investigation period from 2010 until 2022. Our data show that increasing age lowers the chances of characters being included in the main storylines. However, where this reluctance is overcome, and an older character is featured, their inclusion tends to be more **purposeful**. An older character who engages in the main storyline tends to take up a specific and influential role defined **by** their age; for example, as a confidant for a younger character. This means that older characters are primarily defined by their age, rather than a broader set of identity markers, such as their mental or physical abilities. This results in limited representations which rely on stereotypes of both character and narrative.

Breaking this down for the most recent films (2021/2022), we found a slow but steady reduction in the percentage of characters from older groups. We found:

- 33.5% of characters were aged between 18 and 34 years;
- 29.2% between 35 and 49 years; and
- 24.6% between 50 and 64 years.

This is followed by a steep drop in the number of characters in their late 60s and 70s (11.2%), and a near total absence of characters aged 80 years or over (1.6%). Taking the character's gender into consideration, this decline was even more pronounced for older women than older men (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Age group of adult characters (18+ years) in British films according to gender**

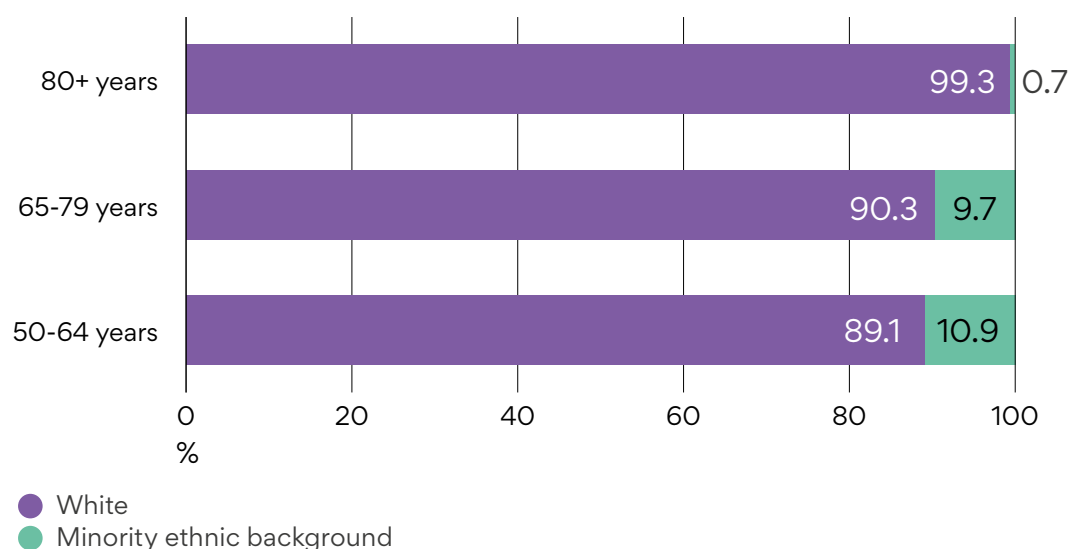




Previous studies have identified a gender imbalance in the frequency of older adults in the media, mostly at the expense of older women ([Swift & Steeden, 2020](#)). Our data corroborate this, showing a prevailing, albeit decreasing, gender imbalance in contemporary British cinema. In the early 2010s, this imbalance stood at 3 to 1 in favour of older men, which has since declined to about 2 to 1 in the 2020s. While this decrease is most certainly a positive development, looking more closely at our data, the closing of this gender gap seemingly only applied to women in their 50s and early-60s, with female characters aged 65 years and over remaining more than three times less likely to be featured in British films to date.

An imbalance at the expense of older women was not only observed in the frequency of their appearance, but also in how much characters were allowed to speak on screen. Comparing the speaking times as part of a character's role, older characters were noticeably less often given a voice compared to younger characters and, overall, older characters spoke up to a third less than younger characters since 2010 (with the height of this imbalance observed between 2010 and 2018). On top of this, looking more closely at the data reveals that older women spoke 14% less than older men in the most recent films (2021/2022), which was only a slight improvement over 2010, where they had 17% less speaking time assigned to their roles. Older characters are given less of a voice in British cinema, and this lack of representation is compounded for older female characters.

**Figure 4: Older characters from a minority ethnic background in British films according to age group**



Older characters faced significantly less ethnically diverse casting choices than younger characters, both in terms of frequency and breadth. This holds true for all datapoints we looked at since 2010. On average, only 1 in 10 characters in their 50s to 70s have a minority ethnic background (Figure 4); less than half as many as younger adult characters during the same period of time. In addition to limited frequency, the breadth of ethnic diversity seemingly also narrowed with age; the last decade experienced not only little minority ethnic representation overall, but also less inclusion of different ethnicities. If an older character was of a minority ethnic background, they were predominantly Black. Other ethnicities were, for the most part, absent. Virtually no minority ethnic representation existed for adults aged 80 years or older in any of our sampled films. There seems to be a lack of visibility of and stories told by our minority ethnic population aged 80 and over.

Overall, our data point to a lack of intersectionality for older characters that has not improved significantly since 2010. Progress was only evident with LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and more) themes finding their way into the plot and into the storylines of older characters, with two recent films in our sample—**Supernova** (2020) and **Benediction** (2021)—putting it front and centre. However, both of these stories focus primarily on male homosexuality, rather than a broader inclusion of LGBTQ+ themes.

Despite the shortcomings in terms of overall visibility, it should be noted that there were notable exceptions in our samples; that is, films that not only included older characters, but which focused entirely on them—for example, **The Lady in the Van** (2015), **King of Thieves** (2018), **Supernova** (2020), **The Duke** (2020), **Off the Rails** (2021), and **The Phantom of the Open** (2022).

## Taking a closer look at the visibility and diversity of older characters in selected film narratives and aesthetics<sup>3</sup>

**Off the Rails** (2021)—one of the exceptions noted—places older female characters front and centre within the story. The characters possess contradictory, rounded traits that cement them as true narrative agents rather than plot devices. Rather than deny or ignore their age, the film shows it to be no barrier to self-determination, self-reflection and positive change.

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3 It is worth noting that, from a narrative perspective, the examples used in the qualitative case studies present, on the surface, an anomaly insofar as three of the five films surveyed place older characters at the centre of the narrative. Films for this part of our investigation were chosen to reflect a cross section of genres—Comedy (**The Duke**), Period Drama (**Belfast**), Comedy Drama (**Off the Rails**), Drama / Tragedy (**Supernova**) and Biopic (**Benediction**)—that contain older characters (50+ years) in both main and supporting cast.

They are represented as equally (or more) active in their pursuits and decisions as their male or younger counterparts, and are therefore far more prominent in the narrative.

**Supernova** (2020) portrays two older male characters who are the driving force behind the film's narrative. Both Sam and Tusker are portrayed with individual agency, as they make decisions and share the burden of the major narrative choice that faces them, namely one in which age and its associated conditions of deteriorating health are confronted. The film does not shy away from age and ageing, but explores it thematically as a central component of the storyline.



Liz, Kate, and Cassie in **Off the Rails** (left), Tusker and Sam in **Supernova** (right).

**The Duke** (2020) also features two older central characters in Kempton and Dorothy. However, in contrast to the above, there is a gender disparity in narrative agency. Although of a similar age, Dorothy is depicted as having aged far more than Kempton, taking on a passive role as obedient citizen in the classed socio-cultural dynamic of conservative norms and propriety, in stark contrast to Kempton. It is the older male character, actively rallying against the assumed 'norms' of civilised existence, that drives the narrative, relegating the older female character to the sidelines. The traumatic death of their daughter is the central plot point for Dorothy's character arc, yet it is Kempton who drives Dorothy's process of overcoming her grief. She is rendered narratively impotent and serves as little more than a symbol of pathos (triggering empathy and often pity), and another obstacle in the plot to be won over by Kempton.

In **Belfast** (2021), although relatively prominent in screen time, neither the older character Pop nor Granny are given any intellectual investment in the contextual elements of the narrative—that is, the Troubles. While Pop's funeral sets up his role as a central and pivotal community member (as well as being symbolic of the old Belfast), it is conspicuous in its absence that neither he nor Granny are consulted on their opinions or perspectives.

From a narrative viewpoint, they are silenced on the issues and relegated to the role of passive onlookers. In terms of gender, Pop does at least have a limited impact on the central protagonist's character arc through his wisdom and advice, whereas Granny is rendered passive, having little or no bearing on the storyline or the main character arcs of Buddy, Ma, and Pa.

**Benediction** (2021) contains a number of older characters and—like **Supernova**—it is progressive in terms of its LGBTQ+ storyline and portrayals. The older male characters of Robbie and Dr Rivers are depicted as rounded, individual and positively impactful on the central character's arc in terms of their narrative functions as mentors and role models. However, the older female characters are marked by a high level of theatricality in terms of costume, acting style, and character traits. Edith, Sybil, and Ottoline's performativity and campness—compared to a character like Robbie—are undermined and ridiculed. Their vignette appearances are narratively superfluous, to the point that they become no more than versions of the same stereotype; an older woman, privileged and indulged, yet mocked for their empty artistic pretensions and unwanted sexual identities.



Edith (left) and Ottoline (right) in **Benediction**.

If we take the theme of visibility in relation to older characters and consider its literal, visual aspect, **Belfast** becomes particularly interesting in its deployment of framing devices and depth of field. Granny, for example, is notably relegated to far more disempowered positions, compared to other characters, including Pop.

A recurrent composition features Granny framed within a doorway or window off-centre, often in deep focus within the background of a shot. Triangular compositions are utilised, and these reflect degrees of narrative agency—Pop generally features more in the foreground, and is more active in conversations. He is also frequently depicted tinkering with a minor task. The utility of this work is never particularly clear, but is used (in the example of the saddle) as a pathos-drenched symbol of loss after his death, with the



camera lingering on his absence. Not only is Granny often contained within window frames, but at the end of the film she is trapped and made spectral behind a pane of frosted glass after her abandonment in Northern Ireland.



Triangular compositions enclosing Granny within window frames at the rear of the shots in **Belfast**.



Granny through a glass darkly at the end of **Belfast**.

A rare exception to these compositions is the scene where the older couple discuss their memories in a balanced two-shot which includes them in the same internal frame (the window). In this scene they are allowed a past, romance, and even sexuality—though a past is **all** that is allowed, a memory of these lived aspects, rather than a dynamic and living version. The scene does not impact the narrative, but is merely necessary for connecting us, the audience, to them and therefore laying the groundwork for their deployment as pawns of pathos.

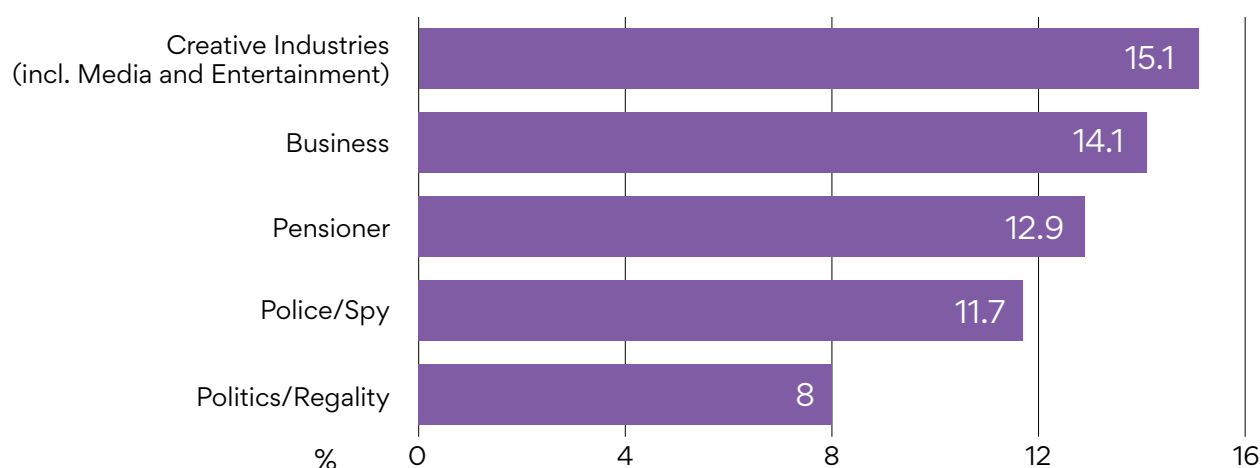


Granny and Pop share a frame in the foreground to recall their youth in **Belfast**.

# Roles cast with older characters

Throughout the investigation period, the data show that as characters age, they are increasingly likely to take on roles relating to parental and family responsibilities. Despite this, many older characters were still pursuing a professional career as part of the films' storylines, often being depicted as influential in their job and wielding power over other people. In films from the 2020s, only around 5% of characters in their 50s and early-60s were retired, which is not entirely unexpected given the average retirement age in the UK. However, this share only increased to about 51% for characters who reached state pension age. Interestingly, older characters very rarely stayed in their job for reasons of financial hardship: more often than not, continuous employment appeared to be a choice, rather than driven by any obvious financial necessity. Figure 5 shows the most common roles that characters played in British cinema between 2010 and 2022.

**Figure 5: Top 5 roles played by older characters (50+ years) in British films**



In addition to considering familial and professional roles, we looked at whether older characters were playing 'good' or 'bad' characters. For this purpose, we considered their motivations, analysing the drivers behind a character's actions and whether they intended to help or harm others by their behaviour.

Older characters were the good guys or the bad guys at a similar rate to younger characters. However, what stood out is that for those characters that crossed the 50-year mark, it was clearer cut that the roles were 'good'. Characters aged 80 years and over were almost exclusively portrayed as

good and helpful in their settings. Taking a more in-depth look at the most recent films (2021/2022), and considering the main cast only, where the character motivation could be particularly well observed, all older men were cast as 'good guys', whilst a third of older women were cast as 'bad'. This was a similar trend throughout the investigation period.

### Taking a closer look at the roles of older characters in selected film narratives and aesthetics

Gender appears to have affected narrative roles in **Belfast**. As noted previously, the older male character of Pop has some influence on his grandson's character arc. However, Granny's droll wit is little more than an embellishment which has almost no impact on the main characters. In story terms, Granny (and to a lesser extent Pop) is set up as an emotional anchor point—a plot device to project the younger character Ma's inner conflict of whether to stay in Belfast or leave, and, as such, her role is rendered passive from a narrative perspective.

Gender also appears to have an impact on older character roles in **The Duke**, especially in terms of narrative agency. The older male character, Kempton, is dynamic and humorous, shown to have maintained his agency into old age. However, his wife, Dorothy, has slipped passively into classed subservience and moral conservatism, repeatedly imploring for a 'normal' and 'proper' life. This clear counterpoint is set up in their introductions, with Kempton endearing himself to a courtroom with roguish charm, contrasted with Dorothy scrubbing a fireplace on her knees.



Kempton (left) and Dorothy (right) are introduced to the audience in **The Duke**.

We are presented the older man as a larger-than-life social actor, and the older woman as entirely bounded by domesticity. As with Pop and Granny in **Belfast**, there is a frequent dynamic throughout, in which the man offers advice, tells a story, or describes an aspect of the world, and the woman offers a humorous quip to undermine his slightly pompous grandstanding.



In **The Duke**, though, this tips from acerbic ballast into nagging obstruction.

The rest of the narrative bears out the dynamic, where we see Kempton standing up for his views in various contexts, working different jobs, writing, performing a heist, on trial, in leisure activities, demonstrations, and other pursuits. Dorothy is always either cleaning at work, or cleaning / cooking / knitting at home. The major shared element of backstory for Kempton and Dorothy is the accidental death of their daughter Marian, yet even this re-enforces the active / passive roles of the older male and female characters. Whilst Kempton actively pursues scriptwriting to help deal with his grief, Dorothy suppresses her feelings. It is only through reading Kempton's script about Marian that Dorothy is able to confront her grief. The culmination of Dorothy's narrative arc of closure is played out in extremely underwhelming form—with a short, silent trip to the graveyard which we have already seen Kempton visit in a separate scene. It is intercut with the dynamic courtroom scenes where Kempton holds forth with humour, valour, and romance to an audience who all take him to their hearts in a multitude of reaction shots which encourage us to feel the same.

As with **Belfast**, the older woman becomes a trigger for pathos rather than an active participant in the main narrative movements. This participation becomes even further removed from the older central characters with the film's revelation that it was their son who stole the painting, not Kempton. His cover-up becomes a version of what we see in **Belfast**; the older characters becoming a martyr for their children, who are the drivers of narrative action.

**Benediction** is inclusive in its representation of LGBTQ+ stories, but the roles assigned to older characters are again divided by gender. Both the older male characters, Dr Rivers and Robbie, are portrayed as emotionally and psychologically rounded, impacting the dominant storyline, whilst taking on the narrative roles of mentor and role model. In contrast, the older female characters are confined to one-dimensional tropes, such as the grieving mother to provide emotional weight and the staid wife who ages passively into socio-moral conformity. At the extremes, **Benediction** actively places older male and female characters in opposition in terms of the narrative themes of sexual and artistic agency. Dr Rivers and Robbie's sexual and artistic agency are celebrated and depicted as positive **despite** their age. However, the older female characters of Sybil and Edith are mocked, to some extent, for their sexual and artistic aspirations **because** of their age.

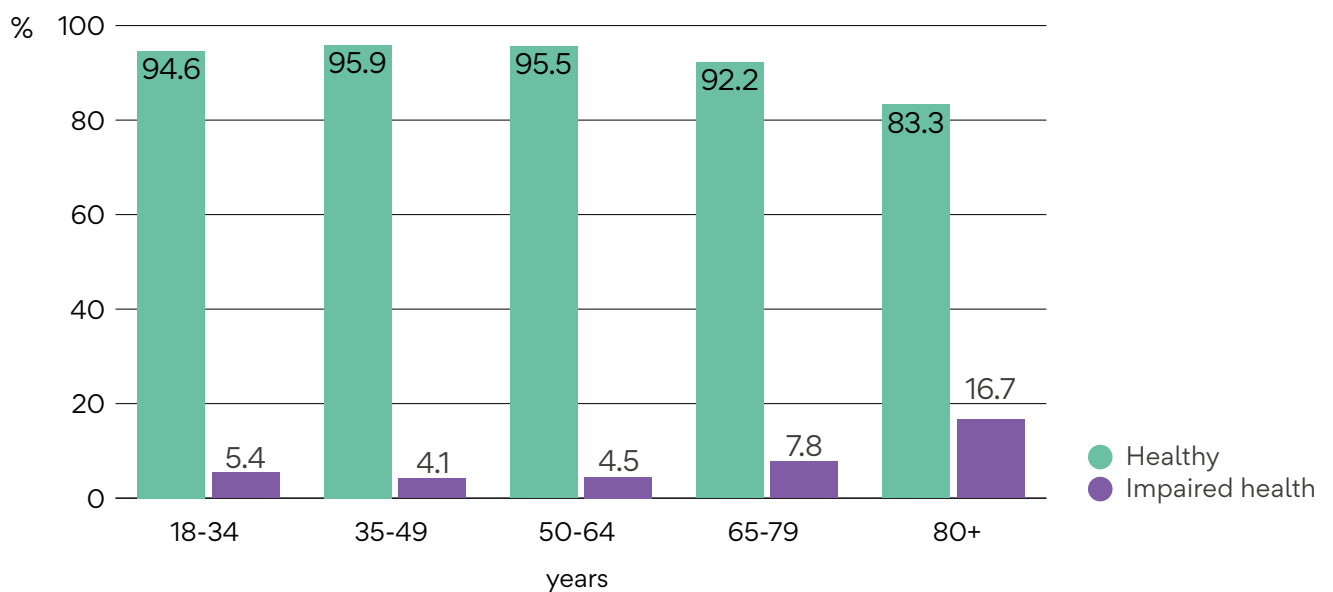
# Notions of ageing and older age

The media often focuses on aspects of frailty, dependency and a narrative of decline when it comes to ageing (Swift & Steeden, 2020). We therefore looked more closely at the health, wealth, lifestyles and social interactions of the characters within the films.

## Notions of health

Unsurprisingly, the health of both female and male characters declines with age. Despite this decline, in the grand scheme of things, older characters were not significantly worse off in terms of their overall health compared to younger adult characters; at least not until in their 80s (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Health of adult characters (18+ years) in British films according to age group**

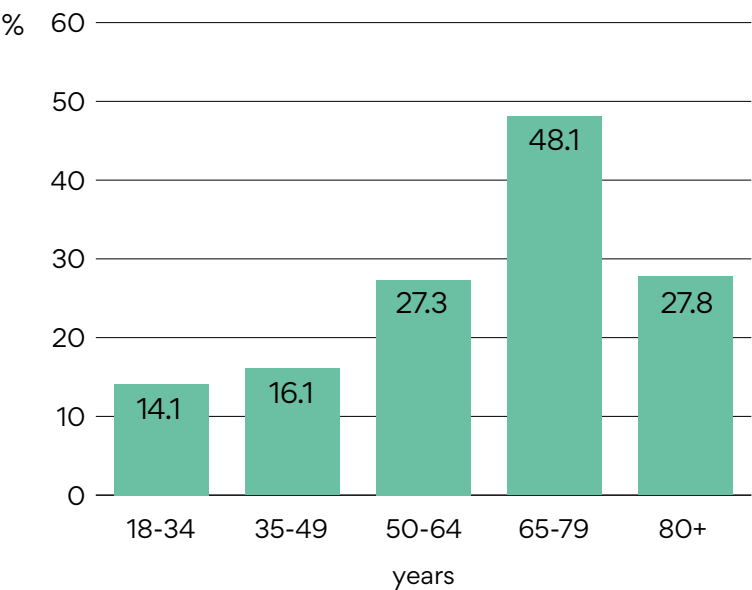


If the health of an older character was shown as being impaired, this was almost exclusively physical in nature, whilst younger characters could suffer from both physical and cognitive impairments. Taking a closer look at the main casts, older men were most often physically impaired, especially from the age of 65 years and over. This is a departure from films from the early 2010s, where older women were more often afflicted by age-related impairments.

Notions of wealth and lifestyle

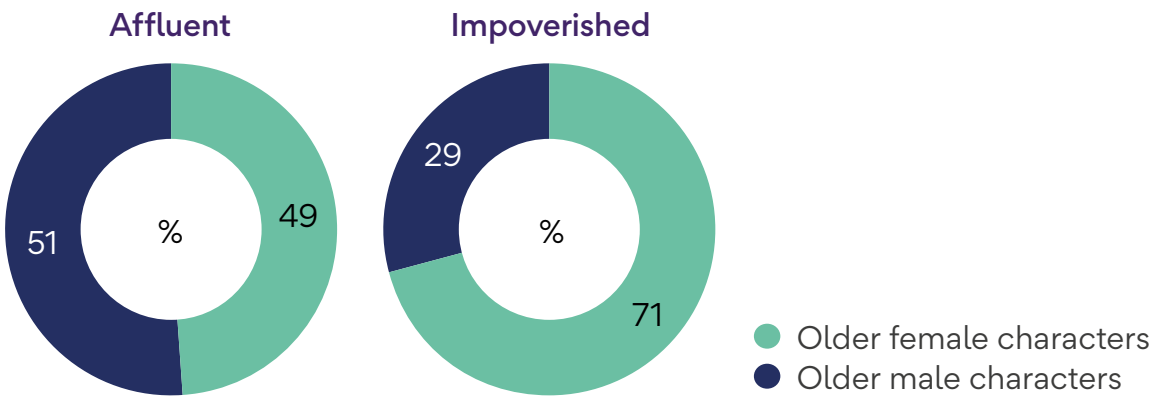
Older characters are often presented as affluent, with economic wealth concentrated particularly in characters who have reached retirement age. After a continuous rise of wealth with age, this started dipping once a character reached the age of 80 years (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Affluence among adult characters (18+ years) according to age group



Taking a closer look at main casts, we found that older women were similarly often at the upper end of the wealth spectrum compared to older men, yet were more likely to be presented as impoverished (Figure 8). In fact, only older female characters were impoverished in each decade of their lives following their 50th birthday, while for men this was only the case once they approached their 70s—and even then, they were less likely to face financial hardship than older women.

Figure 8: Gender of older characters (50+ years) presented as affluent/impoverished in British films

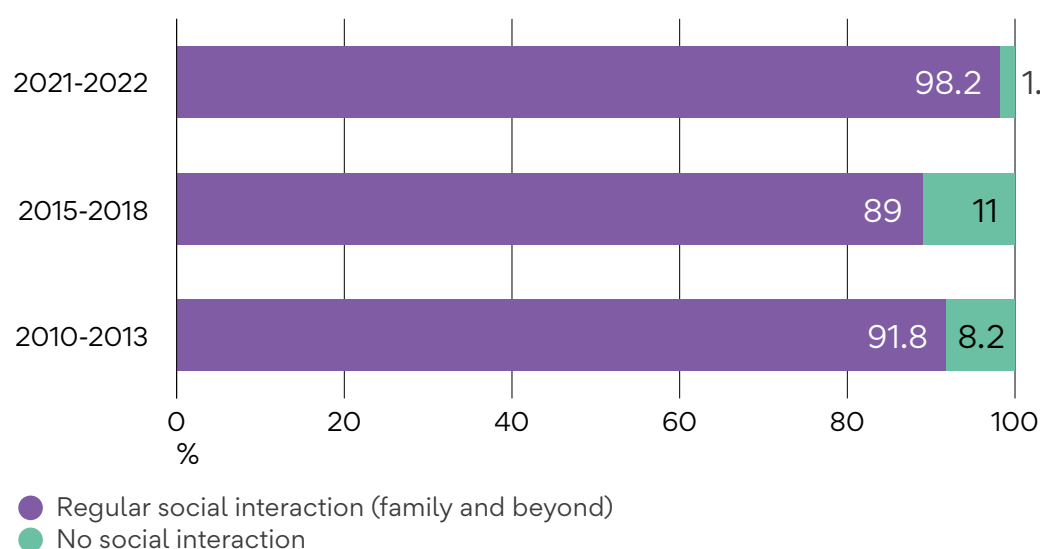


Notwithstanding the impaired health and financial difficulties in the storylines of some characters, in the bigger picture of our dataset, the lifestyle of older characters embraced a rather positive outlook on later life. In fact, the lifestyles of characters 50 years and older in 2021/2022 were almost twice as often presented as exclusively positive compared to those of younger adult characters. The only exception recorded was, once again, for characters aged 80 years and over, where a more negative connotation of ageing—such as impaired mobility and reduced self-sufficiency—occasionally found its way into the storylines of British films and impacted a character's lifestyle.

## Notions of social interaction

We saw older characters who are socially well-integrated and engaged. Social isolation or loneliness did not play a significant role in the storylines of British cinema between 2010 and 2022, and seems to have almost completely disappeared in recent films (Figure 9). On average, 2 out of 3 older characters regularly interacted with people beyond their close family unit. Notably, all age groups witnessed a broad spectrum of interactions across all films, except for characters aged 80 years and over, who were more often limited to interactions with their immediate family, rather than friends and acquaintances.

**Figure 9: Social interaction of older characters (50+ years) in British films**



Investigating close personal relationships reveals that older characters were slightly less often shown with a love interest or in a committed relationship compared to younger characters. Nevertheless, it was not always the case that older characters were deprived of romantic relationships. Almost 1 in 3 characters over the age of 50 years, still had some form of romance, and even sexual attraction, as part of their character's storyline. But again, once the threshold of 80 years was crossed, this dropped significantly to only 1 in 10.

## Taking a closer look at notions of ageing in selected film narratives and aesthetics

It appears to be gender again that is the main factor influencing the different ideas of ageing emerging from many of the films in the case study sample.

Older male characters are often portrayed as positively impactful on the main character's arc (Pop in *Belfast*, Dr Rivers and Robbie in **Benediction**). If older male characters are in major roles, they are shown to have aged with their agency intact, are able to self-reflect and actively drive the narrative forward through their decisions (Tusker and Sam in **Supernova**, Kempton in **The Duke**). The exception is the older Siegfried in *Benediction* whose passivity in old age is symbolically attributed to the socio-moral conformity of his marriage, wife and family. Male characters are generally able to maintain a level of narrative relevance as they move into old age.

In contrast, older female characters are often portrayed as ageing into socio-moral conformity (Hester in **Benediction**, Dorothy in **The Duke**, Granny in **Belfast**). They lack self-reflection and are often rendered non-essential to the main narrative drive, becoming mere symbols of pathos (Dorothy in **The Duke**, Granny in **Belfast**, Theresa in **Benediction**), passivity (Dorothy in **The Duke**, Hester in **Benediction**) or ridicule for not 'acting their age' (Sybil and Edith in **Benediction**). Older female characters appear to become less relevant with age, both to the narrative and to their younger counterparts.

One exception in our investigation is **Off the Rails**. Here, three older female characters, Cassie, Kate and Liz, are at the centre of the film, whereas their male and younger counterparts are used symbolically as emotion-based plot devices (Maddie), or sexual (Giovanni) and romantic (Dan) objects of desire. Each of the main characters is presented as individual, rounded and active, retaining narrative agency and relevance as they move into older age, something the film directly engages with and celebrates. The storyline allows them to act in diverse ways that are usually reserved for younger or male characters, such as travelling, being sexually and romantically active, experiencing loss and trauma, being able to self-reflect and to grow. Cassie, Kate and Liz are the central drivers of the narrative, they are never passive,

and their identities as older women are celebrated in multiple ways. In the greater scheme of our analysis, however, these empowered narratives of older women are sparse and clearly outweighed by a reverse power dynamic and gendered concept of ageing.



Cassie and Liz deliver a baby (left), and Kate duets with her love interest in **Off the Rails**.



Cassie and Liz dance while Kate sings in a bar in **Off the Rails**.

Conversely, **Benediction** embodies the connection between ideas of ageing and mourning which has been previously invoked, notably in the ending of **Belfast**. The poetry which is read over archive footage of the trenches at the beginning of the film brings a grieving, memorial, scrapbook aesthetic. This multimedia montage is important in its attempt to deal with the theme of mourning, considered against older characters.

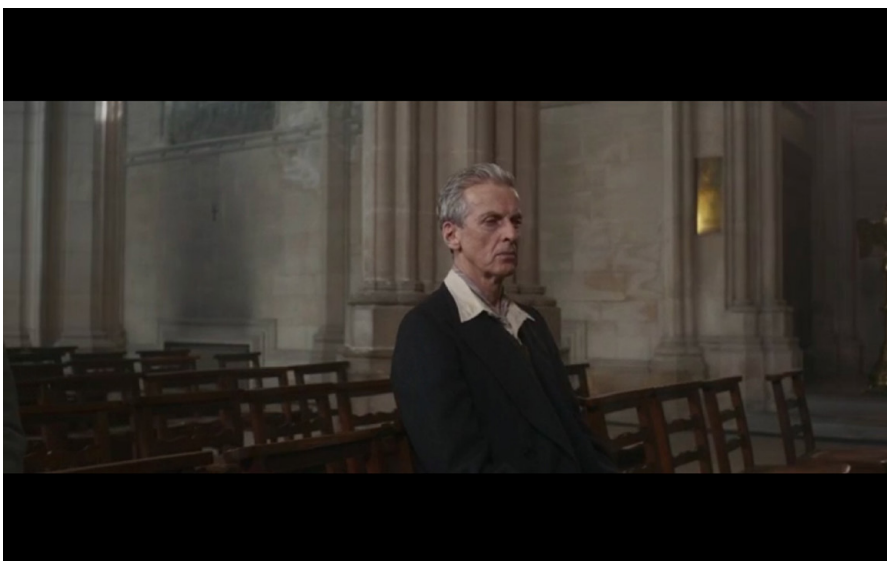


The first character to give voice to this theme is Siegfried's mother, whose association with his dead brother's photograph, along with lines such as "there's only one thing worse than remaining in the past, and that's begrudging the future", places her firmly within a backward look which removes her from the present (the time of action) and the future (the time of hope). As an older woman, Siegfried's mother is imprisoned within a role whose sketched lines are of only two shades; grieving mother and anxious mother—the latter a fear of grief to come.



Siegfried's mother connected to the photograph of her lost son by a panning camera movement in **Benediction**.

The idea of entrapment is repeated in the important scene where we see the ageing process depicted literally. As Siegfried sits on the church pew, the camera circles around him, signifying the continuity of time as he ages before us, but it also evokes a sense of nonlinear time, a strange loop. Within, Siegfried is trapped, repeating a similar pattern in his later years to those cycles of traumatic repetition which are present in his mother.



The camera circles around Siegfried as he ages before our eyes in **Benediction**.

Compared to the vivacity of much of the film which has gone before, the sections which take place in Siegfried and Hester's house in the last quarter are notable for the drab, flatness of their visuals. They stand in stark contrast to the wartime / post-war sections, with their intensity of experiences and flush of youth maintained through the colour, light, music, and supple camera movement. Later, the palette displays washed out tones and cramped spaces made even more staid by the static camera.



Repeated compositions with contrasting colours across the time periods of **Benediction**.

Later in the film, the older Siegfried stands alone at the window, trapped behind glass, a present merely signifying a past, with no future. Like Granny in **Belfast**, he is presented as enclosed, pressed like an exhibit, abandoned by the life of youth—a complete lack of positivity. The montage style returns as other older characters stand beside him, the rising 'voices of the muffled dead'. In **Benediction**, the experience of the older generation is a post-traumatic emptiness, mourning lost people and lost youth.



The older Siegfried off-centre and framed behind glass and rain towards the end of **Benediction**.



## The Nostalgic Dance: A Recurrent Motif in Representing Older Couples

In the qualitative sample, one trope was notably recurrent within the depictions of older characters; a scene where an older couple dances together in a nostalgic recollection of their youth and re-inscription of their bond. **Belfast** and **The Duke** have the most similar versions of this motif; the couple dances together in a moment of lightness harking back to younger days. Both are instigated by male characters who manage to coax a smile out of older female characters initially resistant to the dance.



The couples dance in **The Duke** (left) and **Belfast** (right).

These scenes are also token gestures in a narrative sense. The dancing scene is removed from the central drama of the film, a hermetically sealed narrative satellite. In both films, the scene is a microcosm of the broader passivity of the older female character, in contrast to her active male counterpart.

In **Benediction**, the trope recurs, but is rendered devastating in its emotional tone. The motif encloses the couple within a loop, a silent waltz, imprisoning them in a temporal circle which returns us to the scene where they first dance together at the party, then back again in a depressing inversion.



Siegfried and Hester dance distantly in **Benediction**.

In **Supernova**, there is a noticeable rejection of the motif—Tusker refuses to dance when Sam asks him to. The equality in the visuals in terms of the frequency of two-shots—compared to the triangular deep-focus compositions of **Belfast**—perhaps suggests a queer deconstruction of the power imbalance shown in the heteronormative relationships of older couples, which retain a strong patriarchal sense of inequality. However, the more modern setting (and absence of a female character) is also important to recognise.



Tusker refuses to dance with Sam in **Supernova**.

Finally, in **Off the Rails**, the older female characters also engage in dance. Yet here it is portrayed as joyous and of the moment. Dance is not a nostalgic window to a more dynamic youth, rather it is an expression of living life to the fullest, encompassing past, present, and future possibilities.



Cassie dances wildly with her friends at the festival (left), then intimately with Giovanni (right) in **Off the Rails**.

# Good Practice – Exceptions to the Rule

Of the films sampled, two outliers provided examples of good practice in relation to presenting older characters on screen.

As a mainstream film featuring two A-list actors as main characters, **Supernova** is not only progressive in placing an LGBTQ+ story front and centre, but also contains authentic portrayals of older characters as the main drivers of narrative. Sam and Tusker, despite their age—and, to an extent, as an indirect consequence of it—both maintain relevance, self-determination, self-reflection and the agency to make their own decisions that motivate story and plot.

In **Off the Rails**, none of the main older characters are portrayed as passive, or judged for ‘not acting their age’. In fact, age is never denied or ignored, but embodied and celebrated. The film engages with the specifics of being older, while allowing the older female characters all the dynamic narrative agency of their younger, or male, counterparts. As an example of good practice in terms of portrayals of older female characters, **Off the Rails** also shines a light on the under-representation of older women in film production. A debut feature by a female director in her 50s, it is telling that this was the only film in the case studies to portray older women as active and rounded characters who were also the main drivers of narrative.

# Assessing the ‘authenticity’ of older adults’ representation

One of the objectives of this study was to assess the ‘authenticity’ of the current representation of ageing and older adults. To achieve this, we evaluated how well the portrayals and storylines of older characters align with the realities of British society and the real-life experiences of older adults in the UK.

Compared to their share of the population, older adults are noticeably under-represented in British cinema. In our study, about one in three adult characters were aged 50 years or over, which does not compare favourably with current population data for the UK that puts over-50s and those aged between 18 and 50 years at roughly 50/50 ([Eurostat, 2022](#); [Office for National Statistics, 2021](#)). Considering the different age groups, adults aged 65 years and over were most noticeably under-represented and, further, the casting of characters aged 80 years or over would need to quadruple to reflect the reality of British society.

Our analysis also suggests the prevalence of ‘double jeopardy’—that is, the phenomenon whereby members of marginalised groups are further stigmatised as they age ([Bugental & Hehman, 2007](#)). Double jeopardy has a long tradition in both cultural artefacts such as film and in real life settings such as the workplace ([Swift & Steeden, 2020](#); [Lincoln & Allen, 2004](#)). In the context of our study, double jeopardy occurred particularly where older age intersected with gender or ethnicity. Older women featured significantly less often than older men in British films, which seems surprising given the composition of the UK’s population ([Office for National Statistics, 2021](#)). Double jeopardy might also have factored into the choice of roles in which older women were cast, resulting in them having less character agency, less speaking time, increased risk of poverty, and being utilised more frequently as ‘villains’. Older male characters were generally able to maintain a level of narrative relevance as they move into old age; they were primarily depicted as active, whilst older female characters appeared to become less relevant with age, both to the narrative and to their younger counterparts, often drifting off into socio-moral conformity which ages them into passivity. At the intersection of age and ethnicity, the limited range of ethnic diversity among older characters stood out, far from reflecting the full spectrum of the UK’s true ethnic composition ([UK Government, 2020](#)).

Finding older characters working beyond state pension age reflects a real-world trend, but with almost half of older characters in films remaining in employment, this is a clear exaggeration of reality in the UK. According to recent surveys, only about one in three adults currently plans on remaining in work after reaching pension age ([Centre for Ageing Better, 2019](#)), and in 2021, only about 11% of people aged 65 years or over were in employment ([Centre for Ageing Better, 2022a](#)). Motivations for remaining part of the workforce in films appear somewhat whitewashed, with financial necessity playing a significant role in the real world, yet not being a main driver for older film characters to do so. Current British films also fail to address potential challenges that older workers might face remaining part of the workforce. In the UK, many older applicants are excluded from the job market due to inadequate recruitment processes, age bias and a lack of engagement from employers and recruiters, which has intensified post-pandemic ([Centre for Ageing Better, 2022a](#); [Centre for Ageing Better, 2018](#)).

The common portrayal of romance and physical relationships between older adults is a positive development towards media narratives that break with long-standing, ageist taboos and stereotypes in terms of sexuality in older age ([Swift & Steeden, 2020](#)). Previous studies found that “unlike films about young people’s sexual activity, the details of sexual encounters [of older people] are left to viewers’ imaginations” ([Gatling et al., 2016, p.23](#)), which still holds largely true for the films included in our study. However, instances where sex scenes between older characters were openly shown on screen are starting to appear (e.g., **Supernova**). In combination with the increase in more diverse narratives including major and minor older LGBTQ+ characters as part of storylines, this may reflect an evolution towards a more truthful idea of ageing and old age that reflects the diverse lives of older adults in Britain today. However, two caveats need to be raised: (i) whilst the UK is currently home to over one million lesbian, gay and bisexual older adults ([Age UK, 2020](#)), films in our study did not embrace the full spectrum of sexual orientations or gender identities; instead, focusing predominantly on the presence of cisgender male gay characters. (ii) Sexuality in older age still cannot be considered mainstream. In very rare instances it is also still the root of ridicule of older characters in films, such as Sybil’s sexual desire in **Benediction**, thus feeding into pre-existing age stereotypes.

The depiction of wealth in films corresponds largely with the pattern of wealth distribution reported for Great Britain ([Office for National Statistics, 2022](#)), with individual wealth increasing with age. This tends to peak around retirement age, before falling again in older age groups as people use their wealth to support life in retirement. The depiction of older female characters being more frequently affected by poverty also conforms to the realities of the UK ([Independent Ageing, 2022](#)). However, the disparity between older men and women in film in this regard appears to be exaggerated.



In terms of health, a finding that stood out was the older characters’ almost immaculate mental health. While mental health problems were addressed in younger adults on and off screen—e.g., in **All My Friends Hate Me**, **Last Night in Soho**, **Rise of the Footsoldier: Origins**—these were largely absent from the storylines for older characters. This might reflect an overly optimistic idea of ageing and older age, considering real-world data which report mental health problems as occurring regularly in older adults ([Independent Ageing, 2020](#); [Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2018](#)). More generally, the idea of pristine health that lasts long into one’s old age, as suggested by most British films, might gloss over reality in the UK, where “the number of years we can expect to spend in good health, without disabling illness, continues to decline; this is now 62.4 years for men and 60.9 years for women” ([Centre for Ageing Better, 2022b, p.2](#)).

In a similar vein, our finding on social isolation and loneliness—or rather, the lack thereof for older characters—feeds the impression of overly optimistic representation. Data for the UK suggest a more complex reality for older Brits, where about 1.5 million older adults feel cut off from society ([Age UK, 2019](#)), only interacting with family, friends or neighbours less than once a month ([Age UK, 2015](#)) and often feeling lonely ([Age UK, 2018](#)).

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### Concluding remarks and thoughts on ‘authenticity’

Overall, our study found a portrayal of older adults that is more diverse than previous research has suggested, which is slowly coming closer to embracing the realities of life in the UK. However, what we have found is still far from an authentic representation. Older characters are still not as visible as their share in society would suggest. We also still identified over-simplified notions of what it means to age and to be old in the UK, as well as roles and behaviours of characters that feed into pre-existing stereotypes associated with older people. This is particularly true for older women and the oldest people of the UK’s population—those aged 80 years and over.

It should be noted at this point that an entirely accurate reflection of reality was neither expected, nor might it even be desirable, in the context of narrative films. After all, narrative films are fictional productions, and the conception of authenticity in representation has always been a contested and problematised category. However, representations are fed by the imagination and intentions of creators, as well as the current cultural discourse ([Olsen, 2022](#)). Therefore, it still matters how older characters are portrayed in films, no matter how far from reality their storylines might be—a character such as the wizard Dumbledore may be a fantastical creation in the Harry Potter universe, but the way in which this character is portrayed both reflects and reshapes cultural attitudes.

It matters whether the audience is seeing an older person as a hero or a villain, powerful or weak, healthy and vital, or suffering from age-related

deterioration—and active or passive in the narrative. Age stereotypes conveyed by the media influence the wider perception of older people within society, as well as this social group’s self-perception and own behaviour. Repeated media exposure makes certain characteristics more available in our memory, which feeds and creates stereotypes. These stereotypes subsequently shape our attitudes and view of reality ([Olsen, 2022](#); Morgan et al., 2009). The idea of ageing and older age that is communicated in the media, including film, should therefore not completely contradict the realities that older adults face.



# Film selection and methodology

Using information provided by the [British Film Institute \(BFI\)](#), our team chose those films that met the study's pre-defined selection criteria. For inclusion in our study, films had to:

- feature in the top 15 of the UK's weekly box office charts ([BFI, 2022](#));
- state the UK as their sole country of origin ([BFI, 2022](#));
- be fictional productions;
- be an original release—that is, not a remaster or rerelease from a previous year; and
- be available to rent or purchase at the time of data collection (Q4 2022).

Every film that met these criteria between July 2021 and June 2022 was included in our study, reflecting the most current representation of ageing and older age in British cinema at the time ( $N = 18$ ). A 12-month period was chosen to avoid possible seasonal effects (e.g., an over-representation of older characters during Christmas family gatherings). Only the theatrical release version of each film was included in our study, thus excluding any director's cuts or extended edits.

To allow for the assessment of potential changes to the representation of older characters since 2010, we also constructed two comparison samples (purposive sampling). The first comparison sample included films meeting our selection criteria between 2010 and 2013, thus representing films from the early-2010s ( $N = 15$ ). The second comparison sample included films meeting our selection criteria between 2015 and 2018, thus representing films from the mid-/late 2010s ( $N = 15$ ). Similar compositions in terms of genre distribution and seasonal releases were ensured for all samples. Our final study included a total of 48 films released since 2010.

Once the composition of samples was concluded, we commenced with our media content analysis. For this purpose, we included all characters aged 18+ years who featured in a speaking role (that is, they had a least one line on-screen), resulting in a total of 1,254 adult characters, including 411 aged 50+ years as part of the investigation. Variables coded for each character were based on previous film analyses from other countries and included: the age of the character, gender, ethnicity, character prominence, character role, occupational power, health status, physical and cognitive ability, social interaction, affluence, and lifestyle.

Coding was conducted by two female and two male coders, aged between 26 and 68 years. All coders were based in the UK. Their selection was intended to counteract potential cultural, sex and/or age bias during the coding process ([Olsen, 2019](#)). Training of coders took place via video conferencing, and lasted between two and three hours each. After the training, initial coding took place independently and without consultation or guidance ([Lombard et al., 2002](#)).

All variables were coded considering each character presented in the films rather than the actor/actress playing the character; this included age. Each character's age was judged by the coders according to pre-established age categories ([Eurostat, 2022](#)). In some instances, this approach proved challenging, where little effort was put into presenting an actor/actress according to the character's intended age. By way of example, in **Rise of the Footsoldier: Origins**, actor Terry Stone, at the time of filming about 50 years old, plays a much younger Tony Tucker by simply wearing a wig. In similar vein, Catherine Tate plays both her older and younger self in **The Nan Movie**.

Therefore, following the initial round of coding, all deviating cases in terms of age were discussed between coders. Where no consensus could be reached, characters were excluded from the sample. Similar exclusion applied to cases where characters spoke only off-screen, or where overlapping conversations (e.g., larger group settings or party scenes) hindered the assignment of lines to specific characters. For the remaining variables, reliability coefficients for inter-coder reliability were determined via percentage agreement. The variables achieved satisfactory results of between .87 and 1.0.

In addition to our quantitative analysis, we also looked at five films across our 2021/2022 sample more in-depth via aesthetic/formalist and narrative analysis. The objective was to enrich our quantitative findings by providing illustrative examples and showcasing outliers that otherwise might not be apparent. Films for this part of our investigation were chosen to reflect a cross section of genres—Comedy (**The Duke**), Period Drama (**Belfast**), Comedy Drama (**Off the Rails**), Drama / Tragedy (**Supernova**) and Biopic (**Benediction**)—set in both present day and in the past, and that contain older characters (50+ years) in both the main and supporting cast.

The final report was peer-reviewed by three independent academic colleagues, based at the University of Westminster, Newcastle University, and Technische Universität Berlin.

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