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Ageing Criminals and Weirdness in Contemporary Horror and Thriller Films

Abstract: While the dominant ageist paradigm equates ageing with decline and a loss of power, the horror genre frequently reclaims agency for the elderly, albeit through a distorted lens: the ageing subject emerges as a terrifying antagonist. Although this dynamic aligns with the genre's standard affective categories, contemporary mixed-genre films and unusual casting choices complicate the picture. By examining three recent films in which charismatic, ageing actors play significant roles, the study interrogates genre conventions, individual performances, and diegetic relationships animated by gender differences.

Drawing on the psychological uncanny and Mark Fisher's additional concept of the weird (2017), the analysis takes the superimposition of the actor's star persona onto the character as its starting point. It argues that the performances of these ageing actors do not merely evoke the uncanny, but generate 'weird' states of being. Accordingly, the weird functions simultaneously as an overarching aesthetic register and an individual character trait, emerging from the tension between ageing and unnatural agency. The study explores the weird by traversing the material, diegetic, and phenomenological levels.

Keywords: contemporary horror, ageing, agency, famous actors.

1. Ageing in cinema

In recent popular releases (2024) combining elements of the horror and thriller genres, such as *Heretic* (directed by Scott Beck and Bryan Woods), *Longlegs* (directed by Osgood Perkins), and *The Rule of Jenny Pen* (directed by James Ashcroft), middle-aged and past-middle-aged actors play uncanny, strange characters who have important roles in the unfolding narratives—mostly as the perpetrators. Within the sample, an inversion of typecasting is particularly evident

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EKPHRASIS 1/2026

FILM GENRES AND STEREOTYPES
IN CONTEMPORARY FILM, TELEVISION
AND STREAMING LANDSCAPE(S)
pp. 81–94

DOI: 10.24193/ekphrasis.35.5
Published First Online: June 30, 2026

in the cases of Hugh Grant and Nicolas Cage. They have been predominantly playing positive characters so far, and their explorations as 'character actors', or as actors in negative characters, make them comparable to Geoffrey Rush and John Lithgow, both of whom have more mixed acting resumes (with the latter being the eldest and having the most on-screen appearances to date).

Actors' corporeal features and performances are the primary locus to explore ageing in cinema. Actors' appearances in cinema are judged on matters of age, i.e., both age as represented and as enacted, and the biological ages of actors, which affect both their performances and the roles they play. The term 'intertextual resonance' (Tracy and Schrage-Früh) usefully describes both concrete instances of cinema which reverberate types of roles played by actors of various ages, as well as connections between actors' and actresses' biological and chronological ages *and* their character ages. By acknowledging ageing in global cinema in gender-specific ways, we can observe generic views about ageing and old age. One may suggest that the older the actresses or actors, the more likely they are to be cast in negative roles. Particularly, films within the horror genre, or those blending horror elements, have been found to propagate ageist stereotypes (Guimaraes). As such, age-related differences both between characters and among actors cast are emphasised by the coupling of negative roles with ageing, thereby fulfilling the generic attribute of inducing fear. Turning to the horror genre is significant for the following: on the one hand, it seemingly complicates affirmative actions regarding representations of elderly performers (Tracy and Schrage Früh; Frejo et al.). On the other hand, industry practices that affect ageing performers can be viewed in the context of horror becoming the most common genre in 2024.[1] This fact implies an increase in related acting performances: actors who have been playing positive roles so far, as well as actors unrelated to the genre, may eventually appear in horror films (or in mixed-genre films that include horror elements). But do such appearances also count as 'affirmative actions'?

Whether actors may prefer playing villains, as Hugh Grant suggested in an interview in connection with his role as Mr Reed in *Heretic*, or that they can finally 'act their age', as Geoffrey Rush noted about his leading role in *The Rule of Jenny Pen*, appears as parallels with the same cinematic outcomes. The study is less concerned with either the psychological effects of embodying a particular character—as Nicolas Cage recounted his transformation into Longlegs—or the somatic archives of the actors (e.g., Bordun 167–181); rather, it focuses on how the enmeshment of actors and acting performances departs from both generic and genre-specific stereotypes that inform notions of masculine ageing. Star and charismatic actors in antagonist roles intensify, nuance, and transform characteristics related to ageing alongside their criminal agency. Considering age as a representational category, ageing itself ceases to be the defining trait of either the monstrous or that of decline; while a structural characteristic of the antagonists, it is assigned lateral roles. It is argued that the performing actors, cast primarily as antagonists (and, in one instance, as the protagonist),

while commenting upon ageing through subtly conscious acts of stereotyping, effectively subvert genre-specific enactments of age.[2]

The selective emphasis on ageing masculinity is reflected diegetically through the antagonist roles; the elderly women appearing in either *Heretic* or *The Rule of Jenny Pen* have no agency whatsoever, whereas in *Longlegs* the wrongdoings are heteronormative (not coincidentally, the narrative trajectory reinvokes an established horror trope, namely, the older woman ultimately reveals herself as the (additional) source of terror). Therefore, the antagonists cannot be examined in isolation, since they actively shape the narratives and gain prominence through their impact on the protagonists.

2. (Genre) constraints and agency

By acknowledging that acting performances, film production practices, and reception patterns collectively shape ageing phenomena in relation to cinema, the study proposes a cross-sectional view encompassing the material, diegetic, and phenomenological levels.

First, we may acknowledge, on the one hand, acting experiences as enabling the construction and development of roles and the formation of interpersonal relations among characters within specific diegetic worlds. On the other hand, this compels us to take into consideration the creative and artistic choices of filmmaking through which these worlds are envisioned, as well as the generic conventions that shape their thematic structures through familiar and recurring elements. In our case, we can observe the blending of popular appeal and genre elements. Concerning contemporary filmmaking, critique has observed the significance of the production perspective (i.e., essentially a structuralist perspective)[3] in supporting technologically/technically crisp executions, but has problematised the lack of originality on different terms:

> "[...] synthetically polished films, not just produced and/or distributed by A24, but also by fellow trendy studio Neon – and, to a lesser extent, streaming giants like Netflix and Apple TV+ – [that] have increasingly replaced the viscerality of genre cinema with an often hollow intellectualisation of it. Take any "anti-thrillers" or "elevated horror," and the results appear somewhat similar: we feel the shivers or goosebumps *after* experiencing these films more so than *while* watching them; the full-bloodied impact of the filmic experience is replaced with a more (compromised?) cerebral one" (Goyal).

If viscerality in horror films relates to bodily excesses as sources of fear (cf. Williams), contemporary horror displaces the fears associated with the immediate visual (and aural) impacts. For inquiring about intellectual rigour, the argument looks beyond the visual aspect

of storytelling. Instead of immediate visceral experiences, it brings forth cognitive processes, particularly backward reconstructions—akin to crime/detective fiction that stimulates the reader to decipher or piece together gaps within the narrative. Accordingly, twisted narratives and highly stylised cinematic scenes certainly leave marks; additional content production (e.g., by Thorogood or MadMorph Movie Club) for *Heretic* and *Longlegs* constitutes evidence in this regard. Whether it all amounts to 'hollow intellectualisations' only, we may wonder if it can still provide a meaningful exploration of ageing.[4]

In thinking about ageing, while it needs acknowledging first how age and ageing are made explicit, the present study necessarily looks beyond visual repulsiveness and fearfulness suggested by the constraints of the horror genre. The latter can be grasped as the representations of the elderly, but which have increasingly been read through the lens of ageist stereotyping, most often emphasising a negative perspective on old age. Accordingly, older people have been depicted as ill-minded and malevolent, positioned against youth (e.g., the old villain[ness] vs. the young final girl is a familiar, recurrent trope, cf. Corbin Anderson and Tabatabai). Such oppositions correlate with the genre's perennial popularity among young consumers; coincidentally, in 2024, their year of release, *Heretic* and *Longlegs* were in the worldwide top 20 films by attendance of young audiences (see Top 20 Theatrical Films by Persons 18-34 Audience Share [2024], *Hollywood Report 2025*); this leaves no doubt that, at least in the case of the two American films, their version of ageing has reached mainstream.

While horror may be regarded as symptomatic of cultural anxieties about senescence (e.g., Guimaraes), it is often inspired by medical discourse, which has regarded, until recently, cognitive decline and physical disease models as prevailing for the elderly. Considered as both a biological and a social condition, old age has been associated with diminished agency, eventually correlated with elder abuse and substantiated with the relative rarity of elderly offenders as a social phenomenon (e.g., Brogden and Nijhar). Whereas one does not need to be old to commit a crime, fictionalised malevolence presents a twist. As the condition of old age is made explicit within such narratives, and the ageing characters act, stereotypically, as destructive forces or mediums of evil, we can observe an uneasy connection between crime and ageing. Roles assigned to elderly characters are not just negative, but they emerge and thrive through agential capabilities. Given that, in the fictional realm, ageist stereotypes categorise the elderly either as incapable or just malevolent, the study untangles the close-knit pair of agency and crime in horror. The kinds of agencies enacted counter the determinism of age, thereby complicating notions of time, both concerning ageing and in connection with perception and diegetic worlds. Notwithstanding genre conventions and stereotypical representations of age, i.e. with the roles of the elderly as both victims and offenders, the study advances counter-stereotypes in terms of both action and the performance of ageing actors.

3. Ageing, the uncanny, and the weird

In this subchapter, it is argued that the superimposition of actor, performance, and role invites a reconceptualisation of horror's definitional framework. Whereas doubling and the uncanny function as self-evident presences, the weird operates primarily as a determining force at the narrative level and diegetic structures.

Considering the cinematic apparatus as engendering both representational and lived, phenomenological levels, the emerging path of thought concerning age and ageing is explicitly defined by uncanniness.[5] The genre builds on suspension and tension, which generally induce contradictory feelings, as well as on unexplainable occurrences designated by the notion of the uncanny. As Windsor notes, these phenomena "[...] by definition, lie beyond the scope of scientific understanding [and] fall within the category of the theoretical uncanny and are often found in uncanny stories include apparent hauntings, clairvoyance, telepathy, extrasensory perception, telekinesis, and precognition" (Windsor 336–37). The argument here is that, should one disregard scientific understanding in the case of fictional phenomena (namely, horror films), the uncanny can be considered, in our case, both as a conceptual tool and a feeling linked to perception.

Posited as the originary, anxiety-inducing mechanism of the horror genre, (absent) presence (e.g., Moine 34) obviously refers not just to an unseen force lurking behind, but also to its affective localising within the spectator as the spatiotemporal referent. Thus, (absent) presence is another explanatory frame for the uncanny, whereby we can view it as an affect not just in terms of terror, but also in connection with the dialectical opposites of ageing and agelessness. The notion of the uncanny is relevant not only to age and ageing, but, insofar as agelessness and de-ageing contrast with the natural phenomenon of ageing, they are also uncanny and weird.[6]

Ageing phenomena are familiar, or they become so, particularly as they denote a basic condition of living. The strange, uncanny side of the familiar, as attributed by psychoanalytic reasoning, relates to doubling (e.g., actors and actresses double the characters they enact), while in the case of ageing, any such doubling contains, in the context of horror, the fears projected onto ageing or manifested in conjunction with it. Then, acknowledging that, in a phenomenological perspective, cinema constitutes a default 'alien corporeality', feelings of the uncanny oscillating between threat and attraction (Griffero 192) appear evocative in the case of the film genres involved (primarily horror but also thriller). Concerning the films examined here, such feelings also emerge in connection with the ageing actors, their ambiguous roles and the young female leads.

Here, we can acknowledge, on the one hand, that assigning threat to the aged and attraction to the young is actually compressing biased gendered views as genre convention. On the other hand, the unfolding cinematic narratives play out alternative possibilities, e.g.,

the appeal of the wisdom of the elderly against the threat posed by the youth's ignorance, or the threat of suggestion or of being subjected to hypnotic influence against the appeal of clear, methodical diligence. If such intermingling is captivating for audiences, it aligns with identification theories, which emphasise the shifting intersubjective experience of the viewer through sharing the optical, affective, motivational, evaluative, or epistemic perspectives of particular characters (cf. Stadler 155). Thus, considering that shifting various perspectives—also formally supported by invisible editing—can make the uncanny present by default, what, then, constitutes the weird?

On the one hand, we can argue that having the protagonist' POV's as the recurring perspective on the narrative plots, in contradistinction to the 'external', objectively approached antagonists, entails foregrounding their experiences, whereby we can acknowledge the psychological effect of Freudian uncanniness as 'coming from the feeling of lack of control, of not being at home, of being controlled by someone or something other than oneself' (qtd. Griffero 191). Strategies of disguise, deception, as well as plot-twisting retain narrative and aesthetic appeal: they correlate with the ageing antagonists being clever, eccentric, and individualistic, or possessing agency in a place where such agency is unusual (e.g., *The Rule of Jenny Pen*). Here we can suggest the superimposition of the respective characters and actor personas—in the cases of both Grant and Cage, actors known so far for playing positive leading roles, as well as Rush and Lithgow, both of whom have enacted various roles, including negative ones. If the experiential feeling of 'jamais vu' arises when seeing Grant as Mr Reed, or Cage as Longlegs, one can have feelings of 'déjà vu' when following Crealy as performed by Lithgow and the retired judge Mortensen as enacted by Rush (that the latter is the positive protagonist accords partially with his role types); the characters become uncanny 'doubles' of the actor personas.[7] At the same time, their function and efficiency as uncanny doubles extends beyond the uncanny, toward the emergence of weirdness, or weird effects, in between the threads of the familiar and the unknown. If the unknown, by subscribing to the conventions of the horror genre, is substituted with fear (cf. Guimaraes), the weird is that which does not belong; it isn't conceivable within the familiar as the uncanny, but brings to it something which ordinarily lies beyond it (Fisher 8). Accordingly, the ageing actors configure the respective diegetic worlds not just in terms of the familiar-unfamiliar opposition, but also signifying the irruption [into this world] of something totally new from the outside (cf. Fisher 6, 18).

The mixture of familiar uncanniness and weirdness emerges through the schemes laid out by the antagonists, whereby the series of victims, and also the protagonists, become puppets; they are either immobilised, manipulated or reflected as if they were lifeless dolls. While presenting different forms of serial malice, these films share similarities concerning how fearful evil appears; namely, the condition of old age, rather than being a focal point, is detached from the former.

Thus, age-related issues can appear either off the agenda or are implicit and masked by on-screen appearances; paradigmatically, in the case of *Longlegs*, wherein the actor wears a complex makeup that renders him virtually unrecognisable. The character also retains something of the unchanging doll features: his white face paint conceals any age-related marks. It also suggests that evil is unchanging, resisting the passage of time. The grotesque qualities of the character—the hysterical screaming alternated with silencing and citing child verses to lure victims are subject to revulsion, whereby the simultaneous presence of the laughable and the grotesque suggests the close-knit relationship with the weird (as noted by Fisher 30). Subtler elements of personal style have been noted in the case of the antagonist characters from the other two films: Mr Reed and Dave Crealy; in the latter instance, ventriloquism serves as a mask for him to perform, or enables him to have a sort of double agency, but with one clear purpose.

If the uncanny and the weird appear to overturn ageist stereotypes, they also become unavoidable when elderly characters are juxtaposed with younger adversaries; the diegetic worlds created remain effective precisely because they enclose each character within these oppositions. Therefore, we encounter no sane young female FBI investigator (in *Longlegs*), no triumphant young girl who escapes (in *Heretic*). Similarly, the retired judge from *The Rule of Jenny Pen* remains within the care home. As a preliminary conclusion, by reviewing the presence of ageing actors and their disruptive acting performances in the selected films, we can designate the specific dimensions of the weird as emerging from the uncanny.

4. Weird agency (and law) in residential care

The *Rule of Jenny Pen* is a focused, at times realistic, and consequential cinematic approach to the problems and experiences of ageing. Unlike *Heretic* and *Longlegs*, it exposes neither beliefs clashing with each other nor supernatural evil at play, nor does it feature young female protagonists. Its narrative concerns a motorically and sensorily impaired judge confronted by a sadistic criminal haunting the care facility, bullying those put in care next to him. Insofar as cinema from New Zealand is one of 'unease' (Petrie 73),[8] *The Rule of Jenny Pen* is, similarly, a piece of negative affects, whereby feelings of unease emerge from witnessing health conditions aggravated by malice and indifference. By addressing specifically the living conditions of the elderly within a communal retirement centre, it highlights two aspects, which appear all the more significant as they resonate with a scarcely researched cross-section in social sciences: abuse and crime (see e.g., Brogden and Nijhar). Accordingly, the basic human rights are being violated in the context of institutional care; the plot proceeds from the inefficiency of the care-oriented, needs-based approach targeting the elderly, as the villain performs his acts seemingly unnoticed by the uninvolved caretaker staff.

Throughout the film, we may observe the parallel progression of the weird and the uncanny, whereby the lead character, thrown in a stereotypical life situation, finds himself increasingly facing the weirdness of it (within the diegetic world, he adopts an outside perspective, allowing him to see the inside of it as shaped by someone, the antagonist, who does not belong to it). The eeriness (as both an external, physical landscape and an internal, psychological one) appears as a cinematic reflection ob ageing, through which elderly agency is necessarily weird, since ageing itself is uncanny.

The health-related particularities of ageing condition, though not specified in the film, do appear: thus, the original part of the film, at least in terms of dealing with age-related incapacity, is that it presents it in the only logical way feasible in connection with crime and agency, namely, as fakeable, since even the protagonist-judge fakes his incapacity to succeed in overcoming the malevolent, psychopathic enemy. However, the fact that the plot does not insist on investigating pathology leaves space to social concerns.

If the literature on abuse, crime and the elderly prompts recognising that older people, whether as victims or as offenders, can exercise (although often restricted) agency, or make choices (if not exactly out of free, independent willpower), the film adds a twist to the justice/rights discourse. Namely, the move from claiming rights to justice, as argued by sociological literature in the field (e.g., Brogden and Nijhar 152-153), is reversed in the fictional course of the narrative; on a level, it appears subordinated to genre rules, while it questions the scope of justice; the latter is hopelessly pursued until eventually served, but not according to the rules of penal law.

5. Reasoning as weird, and reasoning by dolls

The notion of the weird, as argued by cultural theorist Mark Fisher, marks a difference in degree, insofar as it doesn't necessarily frighten (2017). Neither does 'intellectual' horror; it incorporates, along with a range of uncanny elements, also 'weird' ones. In *Heretic*, scientific reasoning is weird, at least for the protagonist girls; similarly, it counters the horror genre thriving on the unexplainable and the paranormal, as previously mentioned (cf. Windsor 336-37). Accordingly, in the context of a clash between religious and antireligious beliefs in *Heretic*, while revealing his atheistic position, Mr Reed's Mormon ideology-bashing discourse appears as a strange introduction that gradually gives way to an apprehension of the dread ahead for the female characters. By signalling that previously employed concepts and frameworks have become obsolete, it incorporates the weird right from the start. Insofar as the scene can affect both characters and spectators in comparable ways, it opens up a contemplation of the pleasure involved in '[...] seeing the familiar and the conventional outmoded [...]', as the weird cannot only repel but also must compel attention (Fisher 11–14).

Thus, dismissing religious movements as always already 'invented communities' marks not just an antireligious position, but the logical conclusion of the unfolding narrative in terms of the exposé; namely, there is no religious miracle—by staging a similar *illusion* of resurrection, which is exposed by the (final) girl protagonist subsequently. Only as the plot progresses do the protagonists begin to orient themselves, discovering clues and exploitable traces within the mazes and labyrinths prepared for them in advance. Manipulating them as if they themselves were dolls signifies their inefficient agency throughout much of the narrative. In parallel, by examining the use of 'real' dolls within the unfolding narratives, we can move beyond the general level of the weird, since they are placed directly within the diegetic relationships between the characters.

First of all, we can acknowledge that dolls, as ageless and lifeless, still things to play with, resonate with horror films, particularly in a two-way application, whereby the uncanny effect appears either when living beings are assigned the role of lifeless creatures, or vice versa. In *Longlegs* and *The Rule of Jenny Pen*, lifeless dolls appear as actants/physical carriers of malevolence, while in *Heretic,* they function as props, i.e. when sister Paxton, the second missionary girl, finds the miniature house with two small dolls placed within, thereby replicating the evil masterplan. In *The Rule of Jenny Pen*, a handheld speaking doll serves as a twist on both the evil-puppet trope and the stand-up comedy connotations of ventriloquism. Evil appears half-delegated to the puppet and able to manifest by literally hiding the hand of the perpetrator, so that incidentally it is taken as a sign of dementia, nervous degradation, and consequently to resemble or reflect the childlike intellect of the old psychopath.

In *Longlegs*, the deployment of dolls goes to the core of the narrative, as they appear instrumental for the killings to take place (the visual explanation being the black dust vaporising and the high-pitch sound from the silver sphere put in the head of the dolls, causing disillusions for the persons nearby as well as hypnotic effects just upon seeing the dolls, whereby they give up their volition and start killing each other). Similarly, when the protagonist Lee Harker shoots her lookalike doll, it puts her in a hallucinatory state and eventually triggers piecing together the case and her role in it.

Such effects complete the intentionally confusing messages and the diffuse reasoning of the narratives as developed by the filmmakers. As such reasoning is entwined with antagonistic discourses, it is problematic to claim it as an endeavour to intellectualise horror (cf. Goyal), even if it is further expanded by independent video essays as reasoning on the uncanny (e.g., MadMorph Movieclub; Thorogood).

6. Reasoning the uncanniness and weirdness: trauma

Within the diegetic relationships, protagonists' POV's can be viewed, in accordance with the respective narratives, as defined by trauma. In *Longlegs*, the gradual accumulation of clues reveals the delayed effects related to the protagonist's childhood. Within trauma theory, the mechanism is understood as latency, a concept inscribed in the binary of trauma and its representation (qtd. Meek 485–6). The latent nature of these memories implies that the traumatic core was always present, though it remained unobserved or unacknowledged. Operating as a repressed element, the latency manifests the uncanny nature of repression itself.[10]

On the one hand, we can take into consideration the time layer (of the past trauma) breaking into the habitual present in an uncanny, familiar way, e.g. when the protagonist Lee Harker periodically revisits the moment of her encounter with Longlegs. The flashbacks inserted as the protagonist's fragmented recollections show the antagonist's eccentric, 70's glam-rocker appearance unchanging since the first encounter, as opposed to the visibly aged mother of the protagonist, who shows clear signs of cognitive decline, as evidence of growing old, or the visible consequences of the biological ageing process. In *Longlegs*, viewers are presented with a dyadic trauma, eventually laid bare by the menace from the protagonist's childhood in the form and person of the puppet-maker. Functioning as a medium for unseen malevolent forces, Longlegs unearths the trauma borne by the protagonist's ageing mother. Similarly, but unlike memory retrieval, in the final scene of *Heretic* (which is otherwise centred on present, live action), Paxton, the missionary girl, is shown fantasising about her escape, which simultaneously is a projection into the future and bears the trace of trauma. However, in both scenes, we should note, the antagonists have an indirect role.

On the other hand, if traces of trauma surface in the aforementioned narratives uncannily, as threading across the past, present and future, the antagonists' agencies are weird insofar as, by causing trauma, they are not just violating present states but penetrating from the outside into the protagonists' temporally defined worldlines; such intrusions appear as unrecognisable and weird moments, which subsequently reshape temporal experience. Insofar as linearity is perturbed by the antagonists, the disorientation isn't just temporal; if the uncanniness of trauma is experiential, the weirdness is existential. Such effect became palpable when the lead actress Maika Monroe first saw Cage fully prepared for the scene; her unscripted shock was also included in the film's trailer (e.g. Romano), as blurring the boundaries between fiction and lived experience, between performance and profilmic reality.

Conclusion

We have argued for countering the ageist paradigm by presenting ageing not as a loss of power, but as enabling variations of agency. Thus, ageing denotes 'weird' states of being in/under generic constraints. Considering that the proximity of ageing makes it uncanny, and, in accordance with the generic requirements of horror, the usefulness of the uncanny for grasping the examined films, we have concluded that the shapeshifting of ageing means that antagonist agency becomes weird.

The explored perspectives of the weird are at once contextual, although each can be applied to the other films as well. The emergence of trauma as weird is a determining factor within all three diegetic worlds, while (scientific) reasoning is similarly weird, configuring different levels of decoding reality in both *Longlegs* and *The Rule of Jenny Pen*: in the former, through the triad of detective work aimed at deciphering an uncanny, paranormal phenomenon and the antagonist's motivation; in the latter, reasoning is attributed to the antagonist (via the scene commenting on the verse 'We grow old because we stop playing'). Similarly, not only *The Rule of Jenny Pen*, but also the diegetic worlds of *Heretic* and *Longlegs* are structured through the shifting interplay of Mark Fisher's expanded conceptual triad of the uncanny, the weird, and the eerie, in which the agency of the elderly antagonists can likewise be characterised as weird.

At the same time, insofar as the ageing actors have received critical recognition and awards for embodying these roles, they can be considered to be participating in affirmative representations of ageing (Tracy and Schrage-Früh; Frejo et al.). Following the release of all three films, the actors playing the negative characters, namely Hugh Grant, Nicolas Cage, and John Lithgow, have been nominated and awarded at film festivals and by various film societies for their roles as the antagonists.[11] Thus, we may suggest that the acknowledgement of (aesthetic) newness brought by their performances within these films mirrors a particular internal dynamic: by rendering the 'antagonist' as the centre of gravity around which the narratives—and the success of these films—orbit, the actors' acclaimed performances anchor the ontological realities of the films.

Acknowledgment. This study was supported by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences through the Domus Scholarship (2026).

Endnotes

1. According to the distribution of theatrical films by genre, horror reportedly overtook both action films and drama (21.2 percentage vs. 17.3 and 19.2 percentage). See: *Hollywood Diversity Report 2025*.
2. See the characterisation of *Longlegs* as "it's funny, it's creepy, it's Nic Cage" (Mad Morph Movie Club) which can be read as reflecting the abovementioned reasoning.
3. *Heretic* was produced by the famed A24, *Longlegs* by Neon, and *The Rule of Jenny Pen* by the similarly positioned Shudder.
4. Genre structures and cognitive processing constitute a different analytical path, particularly if we consider the affinities between newer generations of horror filmmakers and 'mind-game' films, as well as the uneasy relationship between contemporary horror and mentalising film images (in a Deleuzian sense).
5. For the sake of argumentation, I am interested in the uncanny in relation to fiction, less in uncanny moments of real-life experience (cf. initial distinction by Freud 217-220).
6. We could add that, on careful examination, aesthetic practices attaining agelessness and de-ageing also have similar doubling effects, despite eliminating or hiding visible signs of biological age. In the context of horror, agelessness and de-ageing are not just unnatural but also undesirable; they are left to the diabolical, ill-minded and bad-intentioned antagonists (cf. Guimaraes). Whereas both ageing antagonists and young protagonists are genre-bound, repetitive 'elements' tied to the representation, ageing appears, in an historical perspective on the genre, not just as a character feature, but also as being significant for the genre itself, while the recurring element of fear is, perhaps, one that reflects agelessness.
7. Fisher noted that repetition and doubling appear entwined at the heart of the uncanny, and together they make an uncanny pair (ibid., 7). The daemonic character of repetition, which in connection with the uncanny, is suggested to mark the compulsiveness of the repetition itself (qtd. Griffero 191) appears as a common thread for the main characters' actions in each film.
8. The label has been suggested to describe the particular configuration of the socio-historical context of the farthest island country as affecting its filmmaking in its entwined aspects, including production, themes and artistic expression (cf. Petrie).
9. E.g., *Longlegs*-director Osgood Perkins has been criticised for having created an intentionally confusing plot, namely starting as serial killer procedural, with elements and atmospheres reminiscent of the canonical *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991, directed by Jonathan Demme), as well as the *Mindhunter* series (created by David Fincher, 2017-2019), until it morphs into a satanic horror laying bare the protagonist's initial /hereditary entanglement in the plot (MadMorph Movieclub).
10. Cf. the original description by Freud: '[...] the frightening element is something that has been repressed and now returns [...] this would then constitute the uncanny... [so that] the German usage allows the familiar (das Heimliche, 'the homely') to switch to its opposite, the uncanny (the Unheimliche, the unhomely'), for this uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed' (Freud 209).
11. See the awards listed on the individual IMDb page of each film.

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