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Abstract

This article approaches Judi Dench’s role as M in the long-running James Bond series from a gender and ageing studies perspective and explores this character’s subversion of normative concepts of gender and temporality. Based on the assumption that cultural narratives shape our understanding of ageing, it examines how M disrupts prescribed age- and gender-roles, presenting an alternative within films which otherwise perpetuate normative notions of a sexualised, youthful femininity. It focuses on Dench’s return as M in *Casino Royale* (2006), as an instance of anachronism (Russo, 1999), subverting viewers’ expectation of linear timelines and examines M’s challenge of normative age-appropriateness in *Skyfall* (2012). Despite M’s portrayal as a more vulnerable female character in the latter, this article presents her character as an alternative to traditional portrayals of older women on screen.

Keywords

Ageing

Representation

Judi Dench

Popular Culture

Age-appropriate

Temporality

Introduction

British actress Judi Dench (born in 1934) was 61 years old when she became an internationally acclaimed ‘movie star’ and, as her biographer notes, ‘far from being at the end of her career, she was just about to conquer one medium that she had mistrusted for so long, and that had too often failed to do her justice – film’ (Miller, 1999, p. 271).¹ Her first major film role was her debut as head of the Secret Service, M, in *GoldenEye* (Broccoli & Campbell, 1995), a role she was to play intermittently over a period of 17 years, seven films and two Bond actors – Pierce Brosnan and Daniel Craig – with a last appearance as M in the recent *Skyfall* (Broccoli et al., 2012). Before *GoldenEye* and *Mrs Brown* (Curtis & Madden, 1997), ‘her handful of appearances in the cinema was limited to often quite small supporting roles, in art-house movies that were never contenders for huge box office success’ (Miller, 1999, p. 727).

Dench’s ongoing film success within an international context can be considered a unique trajectory, which fabulously subverts commonsensical notions of an actress’ life course and contravenes the general tendency for bias towards older actresses in the film industry (Lincoln & Allen, 2004; Markson & Taylor, 1993, 2000). Dench’s non-normative entry into the international spotlight is only the first of the challenges the actress presents to normative notions of temporality, age-appropriate casting and, as I will illustrate with her role of M, prescribed timelines. Seen as a model for positive and graceful ageing, Dench might not be an immediate choice for a case-study in age-inappropriateness. The contrast between her public image and her more transgressive screen roles, such as M, is in itself revealing of cultural attitudes towards ageing and the ageing female body.

¹ At this stage, Dench had enjoyed a long and successful theatre career. Starting on the stage of the Old Vic (1957-1961), she performed most of Shakespeare’s plays. Dench was part of several theatre companies over the years: The Royal Shakespeare Company, The Nottingham Playhouse, The Oxford Playhouse, The National Theatre Company. The list of awards is similarly extensive, including seven Laurence Olivier Awards for best actress. In 2008, Dench ‘scooped the Bronte Award, which recognises outstanding achievement in the Arts’ (2008) in an initiative launched by the British Library in association with *The Sunday Telegraph*.

The public discourse surrounding Dench confirms her status as a ‘successful ageing’ role model, following that type of positive ageing discourse (Rowe & Kahn, 1987, 1997) which recognises success stories but can as easily slip into a prescriptive tone. She is the ever-active actress, a self-confessed workaholic,² who recently announced she never wants ‘to stop working’ (Adams, 2012). Now in her seventies, Dench does not seem to wish to ‘disguise the marks of age’ or ‘recreate the essence of youthful femininity’ (Basting, 1998, p. 171). And a brief look at online celebrity magazines reassures us that Dench has aged gracefully, wears age-appropriate attire (London, 2012) and that her ‘silver pixie’ haircut is considered a model for mature hairstyles (Nellis, 2011). Although work and constant activity can be seen as resisting a notion of old age – challenging traditional assumptions of decline,³ passivity and frailty – this discourse can change into the prescriptive regime characteristic of the images-of-positive-ageing-discourse, which praises ‘[o]lder people who have preserved their youthful beauty, fitness and energy’ (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1995, p. 29). In other words, praise turns into a requirement for all, irrespective of their personal health or financial status.

My interest in exploring the representation of M as an ageing woman, follows other studies which have provided an insight into the ideological underpinnings found in visual or literary narratives (Kribernegg, 2013; Swinnen, 2012). Indeed, as Jan Baars emphasises, ‘[n]arratives about aging and the aged that are spread by powerful systems, including the media, deserve critical attention because they are much more influential than the narratives that are not backed up by societal power and concentrate less on narrative persuasion’ (2012, p. 158). By analysing Dench’s role in one of the most popular film franchises of the last decades from an ageing studies perspective, I intend to explore narratives about ageing, while simultaneously addressing a lack of attention to the actress’ star persona and numerous screen

² Dench immersed herself in work after her husband’s death in 2001 (see Adams, 2012).

³ One of the rare occasions presenting Dench as vulnerable to the consequences of biological ageing occurred in February 2012 with British newspapers reporting on Dench’s battle against ‘age-related macular degeneration’, affecting her eyes (see Chittenden, 2012).

roles.

M's participation and screen time has gradually increased from the 1990s to the 2010s and has recently received critical acclaim, with reviewers stating that Dench has 'generally presented a more-rounded, less cartoony take on the character' (Child, 2012). Except for Kord and Krimmer (2005), who rightly identify Dench as an alternative to Hollywood's depiction of women on screen and recognise M's transgressive potential as a feminist figure, not much has been written about Dench's screen roles. In publications about the Bond franchise, Dench's character M is approached marginally, as a mere supportive role (see Lindner, 2009).

The importance of creating alternatives both in terms of experiences, as well as of images of ageing has long been recognised within ageing studies (Richards, Warren, & Gott, 2011). As Richards *et al.* argue, visual representations of ageing 'both capture and constrain our imagination, giving forecast of what we can expect as well as a prescription for how we ought to live in later life' (2011, p. 66). Contemporary cinema now presents images of ageing which are more diverse and complex than the two options outlined by Karen Stoddard in the 1980s – either the 'good grandmother' or the 'meddlesome grandmother' (1983, p. 108) – and images of 'positive ageing' proliferate (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1995). There are, nevertheless, new stereotypes of old age to contend with. Images of a sexless or asexual old age, for instance, have been substituted by images of the 'sexy oldie' (Vares, 2009), which create another set of assumptions in relation to a successfully aged female body, by enforcing and reproducing heteronormative youthfulness, in line with a youth-centred postfeminist cultural framework (Tasker & Negra, 2007). Within ageing studies, the need to move away from binaries, including the positive/negative binary, has been recognised – by querying the 'progress-versus-decline' binary (Gullette, 2004) or by challenging the predominant discourse of age, which 'pivots on the blunt binary of young and old, as if there were only

two states of age' (Woodward, 1999, p. xvii).

This article explores Dench's M in the Bond film franchise from an ageing studies perspective and locates instances of cinematic gender- and age-transgressions, illustrating how her mere presence disrupts Bond's traditional notions of gender (and sexuality) and normative temporality.

I begin with a brief consideration of the concept of time and temporality and address the uses of queer temporality within ageing studies. In 'Out of place: Spy Chief M', I explore how Dench's M disrupts gender norms, as illustrated in the Brosnan films, and emerges as a feminist icon. In the following sections, I consider M's disruptions of chronological linearity in *Casino Royale* (Broccoli et al., 2006), exploring Mary Russo's concept of anachronism (1999). Finally, I concentrate on *Skyfall* and its portrayal of an ageing M, providing a cultural critical reading of its narrative of decline. Despite the character's demise as a transgressive figure by the end of *Skyfall*, I suggest that her resistance to traditional female gender roles and age-appropriate behaviour norms offers viewers an alternative to more typically ageist portrayals.

Time and ageing

The notion of time is central to ageing studies, the 'awareness of the flow of time has permeated human consciousness from its conception' (Worsfold, 2005, p. xix). We age in time and, as Margaret Gullette suggests, most of the stories about 'the meaning of time passing' consist of the authoritative decline narrative (2004, p. 13). Baars contends that experience of time is always culturally mediated, expressed and communicated in narratives (1997, p. 291). It is in sharing our experience of time with others 'in the form of narratives' that there arises the possibility of shaping its meaning differently – 'narratives make it possible to give personal meaning to the otherwise abstract chronological dimension that

reminds us of our connection to nature with its inevitable processes of aging and decay’ (1997, p. 288). Elsewhere, Baars elaborates about the difficulties of measuring time, suggesting that chronometric age is an abstract notion which simply is ‘not very informative about that person’s aging processes’ (2012, p. 148) and, more problematically, ‘the exactness of a chronometric measurement [can be] used to legitimate normative assessments of people with certain ages’ (2012, p. 147). In the context of this article, this normative assessment is illustrated through the issue of M’s and Dench’s age in *Skyfall*, namely, whether the character is now ‘too old’ to be an efficient Head of MI5 and whether Dench is now ‘too old’ to perform M’s role plausibly. Disruptions to normative temporality, such as age- inappropriate roles can create alternatives to prescribed life-scripts and can challenge our sense of normative timelines, as I will explore through the concept of queer temporality.

The notion of queer temporality offers the opportunity to challenge binaries and the concept of normative temporality, a chronological and linear understanding of time as moving inevitably towards decline in old age (see Barber & Clark, 2002; Freeman, 2007; Halberstam, 2005; Port, 2012). Queer theory’s refusal of fixed identity categories (see Jagose, 1996) can thus be explored to unsettle other identity categories understood as biologically determined. How normative heterosexuality has configured general conceptions of sex and gender has been exposed by Butler (1999, 2004), whereas Halberstam provides the means to unpick heteronormative notions of time and place (2005). Taking a queer approach to age identity seems, however, more problematic, given the resistance to destabilising the identity ‘old’ in the same way gay and lesbian identities have been destabilised by queer theory, as Margaret Cruikshank argues (2008). According to Cruikshank, there is a ‘vested interest in maintaining a fixed identity of “old” [...]. If “old” were fluid, changing, and indeterminate, it would be hard to tell who “they” are’ (2008, p. 149). Whether or not a move away from identity politics towards queer theory will materialise within the field of age studies, there

have been some fruitful theorisations around the notion of queer temporality, following Halberstam's propositions.

According to Halberstam, queerness can be understood beyond the realms of sexuality, as a concept with the 'potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space' (2005, p2). This concept is valuable for an alternative understanding of ageing, as opposed to 'heteronormative time', which is regulated by notions of 'reproductive time' (p. 10), queer time is 'unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing' (p. 2). Imagining alternative temporalities, freed from the rhythms of reproduction can be particularly empowering for an understanding of women's ageing bodies. Queer temporality allows individuals to 'believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death' (p. 2).

Expanding on Halberstam's concept, Cynthia Port argues that queer temporalities provide 'potentially asynchronous modes of time [which can] open up the interpretive possibilities for recognizing alternative temporal experiences of old age' (2012, p. 5). The risk of unsettling normative, linear notions of time has been theorised by Russo through the concepts of risk and the scandal of anachronism (1999). According to Russo 'anachronism is a mistake in a normative systemization of time' (p. 21) and thus involves risk: '[n]ot acting one's age, for instance, is not only inappropriate but dangerous, exposing the female subject, especially, to ridicule, contempt, pity, and scorn – the scandal of anachronism' (p. 21). The expression 'acting one's age' evokes the idea of age as a performance, an accomplishment; acting one's age demands a 'behavior that conforms to norms' (Laz, 1998, p. 86). Implied is the notion that age identity is not fixed, that age requires work, requires constant performance (p. 87). Laz's concept of *age-clicks*, not unlike Russo's notion of anachronism relates to not acting one's age: 'we realize that we are "ahead of" or "behind time" (for example, more or less

advanced in our careers or family lives in comparison to other people of the same chronological age or of the same cohort [...]’ (p. 101).

Not acting one’s age

Dench seems exempt from either of the two choices Basting presents: ‘either play an older woman star lamenting the loss of stardom, or deny your age’ (1998, p. 170). In one interview Dench laments the lack of roles for older women – ‘You get asked to do ‘flashback’ parts, except you’re the one having the flashback, you’re never in the flashback itself’ (Teeman, 2009).⁴ It might be true that Dench has performed more supporting roles than leading roles (in film), but hardly a year goes by when Dench does not show up on cinema screens, whether in a cameo role, supporting role, or as part of an ensemble cast.⁵ Dench has been cast in a variety of roles; some might be described as age-appropriate, but more often than not, her characters subvert the conventions of appropriate ageing or age-stereotypes.

Dench’s role of M illustrates how her screen characters are generally allowed to step outside prescribed gender- and age-roles, challenging heteronormativity and disrupting linear temporality. Among Dench’s film roles there are numerous examples of characters who refuse to act ‘one’s age’ and thus risk the scandal of anachronism in Russo’s sense (1999): a widow’s refusal to behave as appropriate to her age – in *Chocolat* (Brown et al. , 2000) or in *Mrs Henderson Presents* (Heyman & Frears, 2005); an older woman’s love or desire for someone younger than her – Ursula desiring young castaway (Daniel Brühl) in *Ladies in Lavender* (Brown et al., 2004) or Barbara’s obsession for fellow teacher Sheba (Cate Blanchett) in *Notes on a Scandal* (Fox et al., 2006).

⁴ Dench is probably referring to *Iris* (Fox et al., 2001) in which she plays the older Iris Murdoch alongside Kate Winslet.

⁵ In 2011, for instance, Dench appeared in *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* (Bruckheimer et al.), *J. Edgar* (Eastwood & Grazer, 2011), *Jane Eyre* (Owen & Fukunaga, 2011) and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (Broadbent et al., 2011).

Whereas Gullette alerts to the problems posed by ‘age-blind’ casting – ‘where hiring young has become a general practice, severely reducing work for people over forty’ (2004, p. 177) – in her role as M, Dench challenges general assumptions once again. Assuming the character M is in her late 50s (based on the average SIS Chiefs retirement age),⁶ Dench is playing a character who is chronologically *younger* and she carries on performing this role for 17 years. Dench’s M is an example of the type of age-inappropriate casting which, according to Gullette, allows ‘manifestations of age on the body in the dazzling bright light of *presence*’ (p. 176). Dench’s last appearance as M in *Skyfall* provides the ideal opportunity for an overdue exploration of the actress’s long-lasting participation in the Bond franchise. Dench’s age (78 years when *Skyfall* was released) and the centrality of ageing as a theme in this latest Bond instalment – marking its 50th anniversary – make this a fundamental film to consider from an ageing studies perspective.

Whereas the Brosnan-Bond films⁷ illustrate M’s disruption of normative gender roles, the Craig-Bond films⁸ offer the opportunity to explore the existence of ‘temporal breaches’ (Brooks, 2007), which challenge the viewer’s perception of normative temporality and suggest ‘potentially asynchronous modes of time’ (Port, 2012, p. 5). In what follows, I discuss M’s disruption of the male-dominated Bond universe and then, in section ‘Against Time: *Casino Royale*’, I consider M’s challenge to normative temporality.

Out of Place: Spy Chief M

When *GoldenEye* was released in 1995, the new ‘007’, Pierce Brosnan, was not the only change from the previous Bond film, *Licence to Kill* (Broccoli et al., 1989). The producers

⁶ Based on the last 5 Chiefs, this would be 59 (Anonymous, 2012b).

⁷ *GoldenEye* (1995), *Tomorrow Never Dies* (Broccoli et al., 1997), *The World Is Not Enough* (Broccoli et al., 1999) and *Die Another Day* (Broccoli et al., 2002).

⁸ *Casino Royale* (2006), *Quantum of Solace* (2008) and *Skyfall* (2012).

had decided ‘to make the women a little tougher, a little more independent, aggressive – in all departments’ (Campbell & Wilson, 1995). In line with this decision – and supposedly inspired by the appointment of Stella Rimmington as the director-general of MI5 (1992 to 1996) – it was decided to ‘make’ M a woman. As Tincknell notes, Dench brings ‘additional intertextual conviction’ to this role as an actress whose credentials include playing two Queens of England (2009, pp. 105-106). Yet, at the same time, having a well-loved theatre and TV star such as Judi Dench in this role would have smoothed this transition from a male M (played by actors Bernard Lee, Robert Brown and Edward Fox) to a female M. Alongside Q, Moneypenny and the Bond villains, M is a major element of the formula and the producers anticipated some disruption with this ‘gender swap.’ Opinions about a female M and the casting of Dench are divided. One reviewer points out that Bond’s dated charms are what make him popular in the first place (McCarthy, 1995), while another points out that Dench ‘a national treasure, much loved and cherished’ is not intimidating enough to play M (Ingrams, 2009).

Bond’s ‘clash with modernity’ (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 49) is illustrated by the strained relationship with his boss M, who is now ‘an authoritative woman’ (2002, p. 49). Moments of actual disruption are few in number, given that M is a supporting role; her screen time throughout the four Brosnan-era Bond films comprises a mere total of 32 minutes. Nonetheless, the introduction of a female figure of authority into the patriarchal space of the Bond formula causes tensions, as several moments of confrontation throughout *GoldenEye*, *Tomorrow Never Dies*, *The World Is Not Enough* and *Die Another Day* illustrate. M is ‘out of place’. Her authority is compromised, her decisions questioned and she is required to prove her team is ‘under control’ (Kord & Krimmer, 2005, p. 116).

M’s entrance and her first mission brief with Bond, in which she accuses Bond of being ‘a sexist, misogynist dinosaur, a ‘relic of the cold war’, i.e. an ‘outdated’ male specimen, are

representative of the gender dynamics that occur when M is introduced into this tense environment of male complicity (see Brabazon, 1999, p. 494; Britton, 2005, p. 199). Armed with a sharp feminist discourse, M is positioned as a feminist figure within a patriarchal space. In contrast to the type of heteronormative, youth-centred femininity embodied by the 'Bond Girl', M's authority derives from the professional hierarchy as Bond's superior as well as her female masculinity (Halberstam, 1998, pp. 3-4).

Some argue that M can be considered a maternal figure or describe her relationship to Bond as 'maternal' (Garland, 2009; Tincknell, 2009). This fascination with the mother figure, by screenwriters and reviewers denotes a primordial construction of the maternal body and the figure of the mother as problematic (Creed, 1993; Ussher, 2006). Associating M with a mother figure might derive from a need to heterosexualise a visibly masculine woman in a position of authority (note that in *GoldenEye* M mentions her children within a minute of screen time). That the mother is a site of problematic femininity becomes more evident in *Skyfall*, with villain Silva (Javier Bardem) declaring 'Mommy was very bad'. M here is positioned as the monstrous, castrating Mother of Freudian psychoanalysis (see Creed, 1993).

The continuous re-insertion of M into traditional female gender roles – mother, wife, widow – seems to indicate a need to contravene this character's female masculinity, lesbian appeal⁹ and general feminist disruptive potential. More significantly, the intertextual convergence between character and Dench's public visibility as a widow, mother and grandmother, facilitates this recuperation of a fictional character who has the potential to challenge patriarchal power structures.

M encounters resistance throughout and her authority is persistently undermined as Kord and Krimmer note: 'because this M is a woman, her authority is constantly questioned: she makes mistakes, she is under attack or in captivity' (2005, p. 116). Despite being contained,

⁹ Elsewhere, I explored the possibilities of appropriating M as a lesbian figure (see Krainitzki, 2012).

M's feminism has had an impact outside Bond's fictional sphere. The reiteration of the 'dinosaur speech', for instance, consistently places M within a feminist discourse – whether in reviews in which this choice is identified as mere political correctness (Falk, 1995) or where the mutability of the Bond film is praised (Mars-Jones, 1997). By accusing Bond of being a 'sexist, misogynist dinosaur' M became a feminist icon, a symbol of representational change within the Bond universe as well a vehicle for feminist campaigns.¹⁰ The importance of casting an older woman in this role cannot be underestimated, and M has a wider significance as an alternative image of gender and ageing, as an older, masculine woman who challenges notions of 'decline in social power' that old age seems to denote (Arber & Ginn, 1991, p. 30). A character who combines identity markers such as old, single, butch – which immediately situate her as 'out of place' in a heteronormative, youth-centred universe – invites identificatory practices and provides alternative images of gender and ageing for female audiences in general and non-heterosexual and/or ageing women in particular.¹¹ As a character who defies chronologically-appropriate casting, performed by an actress who is allowed to age into her late seventies on the silver screen, M embodies Russo's scandal of anachronism (1999), as I explore in the following section.

Against Time: *Casino Royale*

In *Casino Royale* (2006), Daniel Craig is introduced as the new James Bond. This film also presents a new timeline with a narrative restart, or reboot – 'a film remix: a transformation of the franchise that acknowledges previous iterations while claiming its own autonomy' (Arnett, 2009, pp. 1-2). Schiebel argues 'the filmmakers in no way attempted to

¹⁰ See, for instance, the video released for the 2011 International Women's Day campaign (Broccoli & Taylor-Wood, 2011), featuring Bond (Daniel Craig) and M's voice over (Judi Dench). M's tone is reminiscent of her first appearance in *GoldenEye*.

¹¹ Whatling states that strong film heroines present identificatory possibilities and 'an attractive role-model for the lesbian viewer to embrace if she so wishes' (1994, p. 185). Also see Sheldon (1980, pp. 17, 23) and Dobinson and Young (2000, p. 109).

hide the breaks in the series' chronology with [*Casino Royale*], affirming Bond as an ageless and timeless "mobile signifier" rather than a rounded, realistic character in an ongoing narrative continuity' (2009, p. 28). Formulaic characters such as Money Penny and Q are missing and Bond is object of a make-over. One element of continuity is Dench's M.

Port elaborates on disruptions of traditional 'temporalities of old age' (2012, p. 2) suggesting that 'the uncanny effects of Benjamin's youthening also have a disorienting effect on the viewer's internalized sense of chronocorporeality' (p. 69). Although the Bond franchise does not contain narratives of reversed ageing, as happens in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (Chaffin et al. 2008), there are several instances where normative temporality is challenged, for instance, in Dench's casting and *Casino Royale*'s narrative restart. Disruptions to linearity, through devices such as the flashback or reboot, two fundamental concepts in (film) narration, constitute a challenge to viewers' expectation of linearity, opening up an alternative understanding of temporality. Whereas a flashback complies to continuity (Turim, 1989, p. 13), a reboot initialises an alternative timeline: '[it] indicate[s] a removal or nullification of history in order to "begin again" from "year one"' (Proctor, 2012a). The decision to restart the Bond narrative with the reboot film *Casino Royale* gave producers the freedom to make a Bond film 'as if no Bond film had been made before' (Day, 2009), offering viewers 'the chance to see how 007 earned his status, but in a less antiquated setting' (Haworth, 2012).

What matters in the context of this article is that Dench's return as M in reboot *Casino Royale* goes against the logic of the 'narrative restart', goes 'against time', and challenges normative temporality. Following the narrative-restart logic, this casting decision can be considered anachronistic, or indeed constitute a temporal breach (Brooks, 2007). Following Port's argument (2012), I propose that M's disruptions of chrono-temporality similarly allow viewers to imagine an ageing process outside of paradigmatic markers and to avoid the

master narrative of old age as decline. According to Sperb ‘it is *awkward* and even jarring to see her again in the film that otherwise claims to sever any sense of continuity with the Brosnan films’ (2009, p. 63, my italics). This *awkwardness* is key in challenging normative notions of temporality which can encourage the viewer to think ageing differently. Although Bond films have never respected temporal linearity, with *Casino Royale* and *Skyfall*, Bond’s timeline was certainly thwarted. Traditional temporalities have thus been disrupted.

A film is a time-based medium, Brooks explains, and thus ‘the production and negotiation of “collaborative expectancies in time” between film and viewer are central to a film’s production of meaning and affect’ (2007). Casting Dench as M at two distinct points in time, or in two distinct timelines in this case, constitutes a temporal breach ‘a point where temporal continuity is interrupted or suspended’ (Brooks, 2007). According to Proctor, a reboot ‘strives to disconnect itself, in a spatio-temporal sense, from the earlier incarnation in a quest for autonomy’ (2012b, pp. 4-5). When Dench appears as M (according to the reboot logic) at the beginning of Bond’s career, there is an obvious spatio-temporal disruption, the continuity of the Bond timeline is suspended.

Anachronism implies the notion ‘against time’ (Russo, 1999, p. 21). When Dench first appeared as M in *GoldenEye*, she was 61 years of age, the same as MI5 Director General Stella Rimington when she retired in 1996 (Anonymous, 2012c). Seven years pass between the first (1995) and the last (2002) of the Brosnan-Bond films and, in 2006, Dench (now age 72) returns in the role of M in *Casino Royale*. If we understand anachronism as ‘a mistake in a normative systemization of time’ (Russo, 1999, p. 21), M’s appearance in *Casino Royale* subverts the logic of linear temporality. It generates the *awkwardness* (Sperb, 2009) needed to detach Dench’s chronological age from the character’s age. Exploring this time breach as an example of queer temporality allows viewers to detach ourselves from a normative correspondence between an actress’ and her character’s chronological age. Experiencing

cinematic age-clicks (Laz, 1998), even indirectly through age-inappropriate roles, allows the viewer to step outside the logic of ‘paradigmatic markers of life experience’ (Halberstam, 2005, p2), and opens up ‘the interpretive possibilities for recognizing alternative temporal experiences of old age’ (Port, 2012, p. 5).

Certain qualities intrinsic to Dench’s star image seem to allow her characters to move across normative temporality. Dench’s dual role as theatre and TV/film star, and the quality of ‘timelessness’ Basting attributes to theatre stars (1998, p. 170), confer a degree of ‘casting license’ to theatre and film directors. Titania in Peter Hall’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (see Billington, 2010), for instance, has been described as an ageing-defying casting decision (Teeman, 2009). Dench is cast as Titania, a role she first played at school and then in 1962 at the Stratford Theatre (Miller, 1999). These instances of age-blind casting have infused Dench’s star image with an element of timelessness, allowing the audience to see beyond the actress’ chronological age. Dench’s quality of timelessness is revoked in *Skyfall*, in which M becomes more age-appropriate, as I discuss next.

***Skyfall*: Going ‘Back in Time’**

Skyfall opened in the UK with great Box office success and brilliant reviews (Kennedy, 2012). This film marks the 50th anniversary of the Bond franchise; it is Daniel Craig’s third Bond film and Judi Dench reprises her role as M for the seventh time – time and the passage of time, age and ageing are central. Approaching *Skyfall* through an ageing studies lenses, it does not come as a surprise that Dench’s *ageless* M, who in the two previous films defied notions of chronological temporality, now plays an *ageing* M. In a film where ageing is a key theme, Dench’s non-normative M becomes problematic. Reviewers are led to answer the question – is she *too old*? For instance:

[...] so Dench’s M has really had a pretty impressive run. That’s not to suggest that she is

too old for the role: her rendering of the character has been such that Eon Productions would probably keep her on well into her ninth decade given the opportunity. She was, after all, retained for *Casino Royale* despite the incongruity of being joined by a new Bond in her fifth turn in the role.

(Child, 2012)

Rumours that this might constitute Dench's last appearance as M were confirmed when M is wounded towards the end of *Skyfall* and dies in Bond's arms. Producer Barbara Broccoli observed the following – '[i]t's very difficult to end that chapter. But it ends with enormous dignity and I think it's one of her finest performances. It's very bittersweet. She will be well-remembered for playing this role' (Coyle, 2012). According to a quote in the same article, Dench would be happy to continue the role: '[th]at this is the end of her run with Bond comes as no relief to Dench. "Certainly not" she says. "No, certainly not. I could go on for years. Maybe I'll come back as a ghost. Now that would be Shakespearian."' (Coyle, 2012).

The reasons behind the producers' decision to kill-off M remain obscure, although Dench's age comes up repeatedly in articles and reviews:

M's death would certainly be a suitably explosive way for Dench to go out. Her stature as a national treasure and impressive seven-film, 17-year tenure demands a fitting endgame, and now might be the right time to leave on a high.

(Child, 2012)

With this focus on ageing, the unspoken fact that Bond never ages, despite Bond actors being replaced one after the other, suddenly is made evident. Des O'Neill points to the coincidence that the 'celebration of 50 years of the franchise also unwittingly reflects the age at which the World Health Organisation considers one to be an older adult' (2013). In Brabazon's analysis of the impact of feminism on Bond-character Moneypenny, the author found that this franchise does not necessarily 'reflect its time or society: instead it reinforces, moulds, twists, and subverts the many truths of a culture' (1999, p. 495). Thus, in *Skyfall*, there are echoes of what Baars describes as the Grand Narrative of 'aging as a burden for

society' (1997, p. 294); or echoes of an economic ageism which reiterates the idea of the 'insupportable economic "burden" the older generation increasingly imposes on younger workers' as Port recently noted (2012, p. 4).

Skyfall illustrates how M 'is viewed as "past it"' (O'Neill, 2013). Continuity and rupture are combined, as this film establishes a fine balance between innovation for new audiences and a return to elements from the 'old' Bond formula, for instance, the reinstatement of characters Moneypenny and Q. The binary opposition between young and old is established throughout and ageing, both female and male, is central to the plotline, with, as one reviewer notes, 'multiple references to Bond being part of a bygone age' (Simpson, 2012). Craig performs an ageing masculinity that is both a consequence of his typical lifestyle and his age. The dialogue between Bond and Q (Ben Whishaw) first illustrates this opposition between an *old* Bond and a *young* Q humorously:

Q: 007. I'm your new Quartermaster.
JAMES BOND: You must be joking.
Q: Why, Because I'm not wearing a lab coat?
JAMES BOND: Because you still have spots.
Q: My complexion is hardly relevant.
JAMES BOND: Your competence is.
Q: Age is no guarantee of efficiency.
JAMES BOND: And youth is no guarantee of innovation.
Skyfall (2012)

The binary of old and young, youth and old age, is reiterated as oppositional throughout *Skyfall* and both Bond and M are threatened and defined as obsolete – in a culture obsessed with youth, old will inevitably be the devalued term. M's competence and efficiency are called into question, not due to her gender – in *GoldenEye* or *Tomorrow Never Dies*, for instance, her judgment and decisions were disputed due to her being woman – but due to her age (or perhaps both), as implied in the following dialogue:

GARETH MALLORY: Three months ago, you lost the drive containing the identity of

every agent embedded in terrorist organizations across the globe. [...]

Eleanor, be sensible. Retire with dignity...

M: Dignity! To Hell with dignity! I'll retire when my goddamn job is finally done.

Skyfall (2012)

Where previously M had been positioned as 'out of place', in *Skyfall* M can be seen as having run 'out of time'. The expression 'retire with dignity' invokes phrases such as 'growing old gracefully', often employed to enforce normative, age-appropriate behaviour and clothing styles (see Fairhurst, 1998; Twigg, 2007). Incidentally, Mallory's line similarly resonates with the producers account of Dench's last performance as M (as cited above): 'it ends with enormous dignity' (Coyle, 2012) or even, as cited above 'now might be the right time to leave on a high' (Child, 2012). M's retirement and Dench's last performance as M (as these inevitably converge) are considered 'timely', age-appropriate, normative. In contrast to these mildly ageist remarks, M's retort expresses her resistance to age-appropriate behaviour, expressing her determination to age disgracefully not by wearing clothes considered age-inappropriate but through a defiant refusal to retire 'quietly', with dignity. M's refusal symbolises a rejection of prescriptive retirement, determined by notions of 'heteronormative time' (Halberstam, 2005).

M's dismissal of the faintly patronising voice of reason resonates with an earlier, similarly memorable quote. In *GoldenEye*, M's feminist accusation of Bond of being a 'sexist, misogynist dinosaur', was quoted and repeated across reviews. Whether or not M's retort – 'Dignity! To Hell with dignity! I'll retire when my goddamn job is finally done' – catches on as an anti-ageist slogan remains to be seen. M's resistance to this normative recommendation (to retire) might be neutralised later in the film but her altercation with Mallory effectively challenges normative expectations of ageing 'gracefully'. The transition between anti-ageist rebellion and M's recuperation into an age-appropriate, normative timeline occurs in one particular scene. Facing a Parliament committee, M is being questioned on the work of the

agency. In defence of her agency's work, she recites the final verses of Alfred Tennyson's poem 'Ulysses' to strengthen her argument:

M: *Though much is taken, much abides; and though*

We are not now that strength which in old days

Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are...

One equal temper of heroic hearts,

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Skyfall (2012)

These lines associate old age with nostalgia and loss and express acceptance of transformations that come with the passage of time. M identifies as a widow – 'my late husband was a great lover of poetry' – before reciting one of the canonical poems in English literature. At this moment, M is framed by traditional notions of family, literary heritage and nation, an intertextual convergence which evokes the actress' widowhood as well as her pedigree as a classical theatre actress. M's transgressions are thus recuperated through traditional notions of female gender (strengthened by autobiographical facts) and set the scene for the character's demise. One final temporal breach occurs when M joins Bond in what is to be *her* last mission. The vehicle chosen for their drive to Scotland is the Aston Martin DB5 first unveiled in *Goldfinger* (Broccoli et al., 1964). As they drive off, M asks 'Where are we going?' – and Bond announces 'Back in time'.

If a female M was introduced to modernise Bond (Britton, 2005), M's death, Dench's departure from the Bond set and consequent (re)introduction of a male M signify a return to a previous Bond formula. M's death cannot be seen as a mere device to move the franchise into

another direction, since previous changes in direction did not seem to require the death of a formulaic character to be incorporated into the narrative. Q and Moneypenny's absence in *Casino Royale*, for instance, was never addressed diegetically. M's death symbolises more than the end of a Bond era; her disappearance allows a return to an ideological past, with a particular mode of representation. From a feminist perspective, M can be read as a powerful female figure who is punished for seeking to occupy the patriarchal space in the Bond film (not unlike the *femme fatale* figure in film noir); her punishment 'a desperate reassertion of control on the part of the threatened male subject' (Doane, 1991, p. 2).

Whereas in previous Bond films M repeatedly refused to conform to conventional gender roles, in *Skyfall* M is restored to the traditional role of a vulnerable female character whom Bond fails to protect. It would seem that her death, rather than more action and screen presence, make M eligible as 'ultimate Bond girl' (see, for instance, Bradshaw, 2012). Ultimately, M's death allows a return to an earlier Bond – Moneypenny (Naomi Harris) is back in an all male space (on her desk outside 'new' M's office) and Mallory (Ralph Fiennes) is revealed as the new M. Bond's promise of 'going back in time' is kept as viewers witness the end of Bond's Dench-era and concomitant gender politics. Restoring patriarchy might not have been Barbara Broccoli's and Michael Wilson's intention when deciding to write out M as a character. The conflation of certain formulaic elements – such as Q and Moneypenny – with a return to a male M, does, nonetheless, suggest a reactionary turn. Viewers are faced with 'the relic of the Cold War resurrected for a new generation', as the writers of *Vagenda Mag* lament, indeed, there is 'a man back behind the leather-clad traditional door as The Boss with his pretty secretary outside' (Anonymous, 2012a).

When analysing the representation of women and ageing, the death of an older female character is certainly not uncommon and it is impossible to dissociate a feminist reading from an age-focused cultural critique of such a portrayal. In his study of death-bed scenes, Mark

Gallagher suggests that ‘women still become ill and die so regularly that narrative explanations are scarcely necessary’ (2009, p. 214). He argues that deathbed scenes are essential for ‘narrative progression’ as they tend ‘to bookend or catalyze narrative action’ (p. 210). Elizabeth Markson notes that one of the functions of the elderly female character in film is to pass her wisdom ‘on to the next generation’ (2003, p. 97). Kathleen Woodward suggests that our youth-centred, mass-mediated society seems to conspire, rendering ‘the older female body paradoxically both hypervisible and invisible. [...] The logic of the disappearing female body would seem to be this: first we see it, then we don’t’ (Woodward, 2006, p. 163). Considering both Gallagher’s and Markson’s interpretation of female characters’ death in film, one could assume that these older women are considered obsolete or ‘a burden’. Woodward implies that the ageing female body is made visible and perceptible as such only to be made to disappear. All of these interpretations resonate with the representation of an ageing M, who is asked to retire and who is made hypervisible as an older woman only to be made to disappear.

In terms of temporality, it appears that M is coerced into acting her age and her chronological age ‘catches up’ with her, although this is not to say that the effects of time are physical (as this phrase would usually suggest). For M, acting her age means reaching two of the most important milestones within the length of one Bond film: first, her retirement, one of the social markers of life course; and second, death, the last paradigmatic marker of life experience (Halberstam, 2005, p. 2). As Russo contends:

Acting one’s age, in a certain sense, can be understood as a caution against risk-taking, with higher and higher stakes associated with advanced chronological age until finally, acting one’s age means to die.

(1999, p. 27)

In line with *Skyfall*’s time-aware 50th anniversary celebration of the Bond franchise, chronological time is made relevant and inescapable. Contrary to *Casino Royale*, which

allowed viewers to endorse ‘asynchronous modes of time’ (Port, 2012, p. 5), with Dench’s M challenging normative timelines, *Skyfall* reasserts and reinstitutes normative temporality. Shot by a fire arm, M’s ageing process is accelerated, moving rapidly through the phases ascribed to conventional ‘narratives of decline’ (Gullette, 2004) – from injury to lack of mobility and rapidly, to the end of life.

Approaching *Skyfall* as one of our contemporary narratives about ageing, which according to Baars ‘express aging experiences and articulate in public debates how major issues of aging should be seen and dealt with’ (2012, pp. 161-162), we can draw the following conclusions in terms of underlying meanings of ageing. With M’s death (at retirement age), one great ageing related fear is disavowed – the great fear of ‘assisted living’ (Woodward, 2012). Deep old age, dependency and vulnerability (Hallam, Hockey, & Howarth, 1999) are avoided through this choice to have M ‘killed off’. As she peacefully passes away in Bond’s arms, the viewer’s ageing anxieties are soothed. In light of this interpretation, I have to disagree with O’Neill’s suggestion that *Skyfall* has an ‘intergenerational flavour’ (2013) and that it might challenge ageism and ageist behaviour. Contrarily to O’Neill’s remark, *Skyfall* reduces ageing and old age to its more conventional or even stereotypical conception; it construes its older characters as obsolete individuals, who are easily replaceable; it reinforces the binary opposition between old and young and obliterates any instances of queer temporality viewers might have expected from Dench’s character. Indeed, where previous Bond films allowed M to subvert gender- and age-appropriate roles, as well as normative temporality, *Skyfall* represents a return to gender and age normativity.

This does not eradicate the possibility of claiming Dench’s M as a role model, as was my intention in this article, illustrating how audiences might find instances of resistance to normative concepts of gender and ageing even in the most unlikely film genres. Not unlike Kribernegg’s call for gerontologists to become ‘resisting readers’ (2013), mainstream film

audiences could adopt subversive viewing practices and read mainstream films and characters “against the grain”, as lesbian/feminist theorist have proposed in the past, in order to make up ‘for the lack of representation of ourselves’ (Mackey, 2001, p. 86 ; see also Dobinson, 2000; Smyth, 1995). Would it be possible to resist *Skyfall*’s age-appropriate narrative closure and imagine an alternative future for M?¹² Envisaging the possibility of Dench’s return as M proves a fruitful disruption of normativity and its materialisation through M’s intertextual reappearance in a promotional comic sketch¹³ demonstrates this character’s ubiquity as a cultural symbol of defiance.

¹² Something Ellsworth’s resistant readers managed in the context of another film (1990, p. 193).

¹³ See Weinstein video, available from <http://youtu.be/C6lHHjUBa6k> (retrieved 16th November 2013).

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