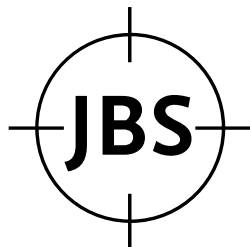


“The Oldest Bond Girl Ever”

Discourses of Female Ageing and the Older Woman of the Bond Franchise

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On 4 December 2014, the much-anticipated announcement was made by director Sam Mendes that *Spectre* (2015) would be the title of the 24th Bond film. The cast list was announced during the live-streamed press event held on the 007 Stage at Pinewood Studios London, including Bond regulars Ben Wishaw as Q, Naomie Harris as Eve Moneypenny, and, of course, Daniel Craig returning as James Bond. The film’s new “Bond ladies” were also introduced, with Italian-born actor Monica Bellucci as Lucia Sciarra. This particular casting choice met with considerable surprise both on the internet and in the press, where most of the immediate coverage focused on Bellucci’s age of 50, and there was speculation as to the role she might play within the Bondian formula. In the following days and months, the excitable commentary on Bellucci making history as the “oldest Bond Girl ever” – only four years older than Craig at 46 – further generated a great deal of popular discussion about the ages of other women in the history of the franchise and controversy about the age differences between Bond and his various love interests since the first Bond film *Dr. No* (1962). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Roger Moore’s Bond films (1973-1985) were most heavily criticised for the widening age gaps between the star and his female co-stars (Furness 2015b, n.p.),



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although there have been significant age differences between Bond and the lead “Bond Girls” during the recent Craig era (2006-2021). Other gender and age-based calculations circulated, such as that Bond’s previous female love interests were around 29 years old on average (ibid.). In contrast, Honor Blackman was most often singled out for mention as another older woman when she played Pussy Galore in *Goldfinger* (1964) (Reynolds 2015, n.p.). In promotional interviews, Bellucci framed her presence in a “Bond Girl” role as revolutionary, and when later claiming “[w]e’ve never seen this before, an older woman seducing Bond”, she speaks about Sciarra in terms of positive visibility and mature sexuality (Edwardes 2015, 8). Whilst using *Spectre* as the main case study film, this research will draw on the wider discourses at play during a cultural moment that presented a distinct opportunity to reflect on problematic negotiations of gender, age, and sexuality over more than fifty years of the women of Bond.

With the release of the latest Bond film, promotional materials typically give such focus to the casting and characterisation of the women. In particular, there is usually recognition of the problematic treatment of past women in the long-running franchise, and an attempt to promote an alternative impression by asserting some form of change or progress (Luckett 2020, 153; Lindner and Funnell 2023, 4). In the case of Sciarra, rather than attempt to distance the character from the series’ history of sexual objectification, Bellucci was presented as a sexy older woman. The “older woman” is defined here in comparison to Craig and the “Bond Girls” of previous films, but clearly is not merely a descriptive label. Nearly a year on from the surprise announcement about her casting, just prior to *Spectre*’s UK cinema release in December 2015, Craig’s corrective response to an interviewer who asked about Bond “succumbing to the charms of an older woman” in the film was picked up by the media and enthusiastically celebrated. “I think you mean the charms of a woman *his own age*”, Craig challenged: “We’re talking about Monica Bellucci, for heaven’s sake. When someone like that wants to be a Bond girl, you just count yourself lucky!” (qtd. in Sturm 2015, n.p.) Articles headlined “Daniel Craig explains why calling Monica Bellucci an ‘older woman’ is ridiculous” (Saul 2015) and “Daniel Craig Responds Brilliantly To Ageist Monica Bellucci Comments” (*Marie Claire* 2015), as well as Craig’s comment, were widely shared as an example of the current Bond actor heroically calling out the sexism and ageism of the franchise, the film industry (“This is what a feminist looks like!” exclaimed Liz Rafferty [2015] at *TV Guide*), and the (male) interviewer’s question.

More generally, the labels used to define the women of Bond have long been debated, and this article has already noted phrases most often in use at the

time of production – Bond lady, Bond woman, and the more traditional “Bond Girl” – which come inscribed with, among other associations, age-related connotations. As Moya Luckett points out, “[b]oth a reference to individual girls and their collective identity, the term ‘Bond Girl’ operates as a catch-all for every young woman in the franchise and as something more nuanced” (150). As such, the “Bond Girl” label – commonly assigned to women in the franchise and widely used by the media – is especially well known and highly contested for a number of reasons which will be discussed in the section below. But the “Bond Girl” is best understood as a “cultural, textual and promotional category” (ibid, 151), and these different but interrelated workings will inform the approaches taken throughout this article. Craig’s reaction also calls attention to the high-profile cultural image of Bellucci as a celebrity which was defined well in advance of her appearance in the Bond film. Bellucci gained recognition as a fashion model and developed an international acting career in European and Hollywood cinema. Some notable films in the early 2000s include *Malèna* (2000), *Irréversible* (2002), *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), and the blockbuster *The Matrix* franchise (*Reloaded* and *Revolutions*, both in 2003) and she has starred in advertising campaigns for luxury brands such as Dior and Dolce & Gabbana. In the lead up to *Spectre*, Bellucci’s established beauty image and celebrity associations became embedded within the Bond tradition of women.

With the franchise history of the women of Bond in mind, this article sets out to examine the representation and significance of Bellucci off- and on-screen in the role of Sciarra across the official promotional interviews, magazines, and other media coverage on *Spectre* – all of which I draw from in the context of discourses about gender and ageing. Other academic attention to the Bond franchise from a gender and ageing studies perspective has most notably focused on recurring characters like Bond and M. The later Craig-era Bond films – *Skyfall* (2012), *Spectre*, and *No Time to Die* (2021) – have been directly concerned with the ageing James Bond character (as he develops from the novice Double-0 of *Casino Royale* [2006] to become a middle-aged agent), the ageing body of the action hero (Dodds 2014), and mortality (Schwanebeck 2022). There has also been scholarly interest in the significant role Judi Dench’s M has played in the franchise (Krainski 2014; Funnell 2015; Pua 2018), her (late) film stardom and her celebrity persona (Williams 2015). The second section of this article will make particular use of some ideas and approaches from scholarship on older women in the media, especially critiques of postfeminist discourse and culture, to consider how Bellucci’s celebrity was mobilised and constructed during the film’s

promotion. The final section will focus on the representation and reception of Sciarra in *Spectre* to relate this characterisation to previous models of femininity in the franchise. By interrogating discourses around the representation of the older woman of the Bond film, this article contributes to research on the shifting relations between the franchise and contextual factors, and reflects on broader arguments made about ageing femininity and popular culture.

THE BOND WOMAN OR THE “MATURE” “BOND GIRL”

As already mentioned, “Bond Girl” has long been recognised as an evocative, powerful and problematic label assigned to women in relation to the Bond character and widely used in the promotion of the Bond films. When Bellucci joined the cast of *Spectre* she instantly made news as the oldest “Bond Girl”, although there were numerous interviews in which she contended that she was a “Bond woman”. Previously, both Bellucci and her costar Léa Seydoux were introduced by Mendes at the press announcement not as “Bond Girls” but as the film’s “Bond ladies”. “I can’t say I’m a Bond girl because I’m too mature to be a Bond girl”, Bellucci later told *The Guardian*: “I say Bond lady; Bond woman” (qtd in. Smith 2015, n.p.). Another story in the press suggests that when Bellucci was approached about a role in the next Bond film, her first thought was that she might be auditioning to play the new M: “I’m not a girl, I’m a woman, I’m a mature woman. Do I have to replace Judi Dench?”. She reportedly asked “Why do you call me? I’m 50 years old... what am I going to do in James Bond?” (qtd. in Furness 2015a, 11). When Bellucci told this story in interviews, she did so in the context of claims that her casting in the film was ground-breaking, but it is worth pausing to consider what the figure of M might tell us about the treatment of women in the franchise after a certain age. After all, Dench played M, the head of MI6, in seven Bond films before the character was killed in *Skyfall* (but made a final appearance in *Spectre*). From her first scenes in *GoldenEye* (1995), “Dench’s M is presented as a complex character, a strong and independent older woman” (Boyce 2015, 276), and during the Pierce Brosnan (1995-2002) and Craig eras the development of the M-James Bond relationship is often central to the plot of the film. Whilst there is agreement that Dench’s “M is increasingly defined by her age” (78 at the time of *Skyfall*’s release) (ibid., 279), there have been varying interpretations of how this impacts on her female authority, including readings of the maternal (Boyce; Holliday 2015), and a compelling case can be made that over time the character is reinscribed into the patriarchy (Pua). Although, it has been argued that in many ways Dench’s M transgresses stereotypes and the character is able to disrupt normative age and gender roles (Krainitski). What is also notable about

this portrayal of ageing femininity across the films is that the M character is without any sexual agency whatever and certainly in relationship to Bond (Pua).

By contrast, the headline-making comments from Bellucci above demonstrate how the traditional “Bond Girl” is inexorably linked to notions of youthful femininity and sexuality, an image which was constructed from the outset of the film franchise. Popular and academic conversation about the “Bond Girl” label, gender politics, and feminism is extensive and ongoing, from criticisms of sexism and the foundational argument that “any discussion which accepts the terms of reference suggested by the phrase [...] is committed to constructing female gender identities and forms of sexuality in relation to the norms of masculinity supplied by the figure of Bond” (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 241), to those offering alternative perspectives that encourage reclamation or reappropriation because “the Bond Girl tag ought not to be synonymous with the negative associations that patriarchy attaches to language” (Germanà 2020, 15). The use of the word “girl” is culturally contested. On the Bond franchise Lisa Funnell writes that “use of the term girl to describe these (professional) women is deeply problematic, as it diminishes their narrative capacity and social importance” (2018, 12). Monica Germanà observes that “the term ‘Girl’ also signals the apparent infantilization of women, whose ‘girlhood’ is not placed on the same hierarchical level as Bond’s ‘manhood’” (15). Within this context, Germanà goes on to refer to Bellucci’s apparent rejection of the “Bond Girl” label, but judges that these comments are “more to do with age [...] than feminist resistance to the ‘Girl’ category” (ibid.). Indeed, as might be expected, in promotional interviews Bellucci professed her admiration for past and present “Bond Girls”, the franchise’s longer history, and the Bond character. For example, in a pre-release teaser video about “The Women of Spectre” (2015), Bellucci spoke about her respect for all the “Bond Girls” but especially her co-star Seydoux, who plays the film’s female lead, Dr. Madeline Swann, appreciatively saying that she is “beautiful, very talented, she’s a great James Bond Girl”.

The comparisons made between the two women playing James Bond’s love interests also built anticipation during the film’s production. In this respect, the video about “The Women of Spectre” is useful to outline in some detail. The video promised to give fans some background and introduce the characters of Swann and Sciarra: “In *Spectre*, the two women who Bond hooks up with, both have great mystery, they both have depths”, Mendes says from the film set. The short video gives equal time and attention toward both women. There is behind-the-scenes footage that illustrates the actors during filming, portraying different

character types with links to the terrorist organisation SPECTRE, according to the latest plot synopsis at the time. From the video we learn that “soulful, feisty, complicated” Swann is a psychologist working at a private medical clinic in the Austrian alps. Seydoux summarises what we can expect from her character: “She’s a doctor, she’s intelligent and very sensitive”. By contrast, Sciarra is presented in plot terms as an “Italian widow with secrets. Her *mafioso* husband is killed and she risks the same thing happening to her”. However, the word used repeatedly in the film’s official publicity to describe Bellucci and Sciarra is “seductive”. In this case, Mendes emphasises that Bellucci was cast because she made sense in the story and for the ages of the characters, and because she is “a seductive presence in real life and in the movies”. Although Seydoux is very obviously younger than Bellucci, Mendes also talks about the role of Swann requiring an actor “with a certain amount of life experience and maturity” because she is a pivotal character in the film. This is the closest the video comes to explicitly identifying the roles they play in terms of primary and secondary female characters. It is interesting that, rather than presenting the women as contrasting in this sense, here the idea that a female character might be mature in her self-reliance or mission is another way of positioning her as “a woman” and not “a girl”, and in the history of the franchise may recall the likes of Pussy Galore played by Honor Blackman in *Goldfinger*.

In the early sixties, Blackman was the first established female actor to play a “Bond Girl”, and in the UK publicity for the film especially traded on the action-based fame she had already gained as Cathy Gale in the television series *The Avengers* (1961-1963) (Herwin 2008, 130). Scholars have previously examined the representation and cultural significance of Pussy Galore as a lesbian character in order to bring into focus some of the key issues at stake in the treatment of gender and sexuality in the Bond films (Ladenson 2009). However, Blackman’s presence in the franchise is especially relevant to this article for other reasons, given that, in *Goldfinger*, she was, at 39 years old, older than Connery by five years, earning her the label of an older woman. Historical research on the promotion of *Goldfinger* demonstrates that the significance of Blackman’s age was publicly acknowledged in a press release when she spoke “with refreshing candor” about her latest role in the Bond film. She said that “It used to be that an actress didn’t stand a chance unless she was a 20-year-old”, but added “I think it certainly is a sign of improved standards of public taste that, at my age, I am still able to look forward to the greatest opportunities of my career” (“*Goldfinger* Press Release” 1964, n.p.). In the trade press, *Box Office* magazine considered Pussy Galore “a strikingly sexy personal pilot to Goldfinger, whose maturity and voluptuousness

as a woman will cause some stir when she is seen in America” (Gruner 1964, n.p.). However, this perhaps raises some questions about the extent to which the otherwise independent character of Pussy Galore might be distinguished from the popular perception of how women were portrayed in the films of the early 1960s, and the opinion that “[t]he Bond starlets represented a *Playboy* male-fantasy image of female sexuality: well-scrubbed, big-breasted, long-haired and sexually available” (Chapman 2007, 95). It is significant that this section has focused on how promotional materials and publicity discourses frame and shape expectations of female characters as new and progressive prior to release of the latest Bond film. Yet to some extent, the “Bond Girl” image, mainly emphasising the women’s physical appearance and status as sexual companions, also remains predominant for the older woman of Bond.

The “Bond Girl” image has been a vital part of promotion throughout the history of the Bond franchise. This is especially evident in men’s magazines that conform to male standards of female beauty, which inevitably present the women of Bond as eroticised objects (Hines and Jones 2020; Hines 2018). Both new “Bond Girls” were photographed and profiled for the March 2015 issue of the British men’s lifestyle magazine, *Loaded*. Bellucci had featured on such covers throughout her career (e.g. *Arena*, April 1996; *Maxim*, May 2003; *Esquire*, July 2017). However, Seydoux and not Bellucci was the cover star of the 007 preview promoting *Spectre*. Inside the magazine, Bellucci received a four-page profile which gives background on her career, from years spent modelling to her breakthrough appearance in *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992) and other notable Hollywood and international film roles. Although it is observed that this “back catalogue [...] shows she is far more than a pair of boobs”, she is primarily offered to *Loaded* readers as highly erotically connotated – “famed for her nude scenes”, “the voluptuous diva”, “[c]urvaceous and clear-skinned, Bellucci [...] looks incredible for her age” – photographed in a classic reclining pose (Nicholls 2015, 70). Despite the previous statement, the profile is focused around how Bellucci’s body, femininity, and sex appeal continue to fit the beauty standards of her youth to predict that in the Bond film role “it’s likely that the vixen will be poured into a tight cocktail dress that shows off the famous assets she displayed when making her big screen debut as one of Dracula’s bare-breasted brides” (ibid.). Some months later, the November 2015 issue of British *GQ* advertised a “007 special” with photography by Rankin. The magazine’s cover features a full-length portrait of Bellucci posing in an embrace with Craig, which can easily be analysed through the lens of the male gaze to present the male star as “powerful ideal ego”

and the female star's specularity (Mulvey 1975, 12; 14). Inside the magazine, Rankin is interviewed for the magazine's "Shooting Bond" feature, in which he comments on his experiences capturing key images from the making of the film. He explains that the magazine cover was shot at Pinewood during a break after Bellucci and Craig had just filmed a scene together: "Monica especially can really turn it on when she wants to. Uninhibited, not worried about age or aesthetic" (qtd. in Heaf 2015, 219). The same magazine issue includes a short interview article that accompanies a photograph taken by Mariano Vivanco; this time Bellucci is reclining on a luxuriant ottoman in the glamorous Dolce & Gabbana black dress she wears on the cover and in the film. The anchoring text – "Monica Bellucci on sex scenes, being the oldest Bond 'girl' and her 20-year wait to entrap the world's most famous secret agent" (McGurk 2015, 223) – and the Q&A, which consists of one column next to the photo that is the dominant element across the double-page spread, reinforces the image as a fetishised spectacle.

Another monthly lifestyle publication that featured Bellucci on the cover seems more unusual, certainly when it comes to magazine coverage on the latest "Bond Girls". Bellucci's casting gave *Saga* magazine the opportunity to celebrate on the October 2015 cover: "We've been expecting you... Monica Bellucci: finally, a Bond woman over 50!". The portrait of Bellucci here is less highly sexualised than in the men's magazines discussed above but is clearly designed to present being an older woman as attractive and desirable to its UK target readers (both women and men) in the over-50 age group.¹ On the cover is the magazine's tagline: "What you read when you grow up"; the main image is Bellucci – dressed in jeans, a shirt, and a neck scarf – to promote *Spectre*, whilst the other features advertised notably include laser eye surgery and National Grandparents Day. Inside, the issue's seven-page feature gives 24 facts about the history of the SPECTRE organisation in relation to the Bond formula, including at number 17: "Ah the Bond girls!", relating to Bellucci's casting and role in the film. Over the years, *Saga* magazine has featured some Bond actors on the cover, like Pierce Brosnan (April 2014), Ralph Fiennes (October 2012), and Sean Connery (May 2006), equally matched by women over 50, such as Judi Dench (November 2005, February 2012, September 2017), Jane Seymour (September 2023), and Honor Blackman (November 2006, April 2015). Of these women on the *Saga* covers, Dench and Blackman are older women of Bond already mentioned in this section, although by comparison with Bellucci both were later in life when they were fea-

1 The photographs used in *Saga* also appear on the cover and inside the women's fashion magazine *Elle* France, in February 2015. The anchoring text of the cover in *Elle* France reads "Monica Bellucci: age gives me new strength".

tured by the magazine. Taking the November 2006 *Saga* issue, which featured the 79-year-old Blackman on its cover, Joanne Garde-Hansen analyses the magazine's contradictory representation of her ageing female body in recognition that "the discourses of older female celebrities are ones that starkly remind the audience that the sustainability of sexual attractiveness is one of the most highly valued personal commodities in the media market" (2012, 162).

BELLUCCI AND AGEING FEMALE CELEBRITY

Closer attention to *Saga* magazine from October 2015 can be used to bring into focus how Monica Bellucci's star image and celebrity was mobilised and constructed during the promotion of *Spectre* in relation to beauty and sexual attractiveness. Here and elsewhere, Bellucci is valued for her ability to embody aspects of "successful ageing", a concept which originates from gerontology and is explored by feminist media scholars in relation to the new visibility of older female stars in mainstream cinema. Josephine Dolan discusses how successful ageing is a form of gendered "regulatory regime" that is especially challenging for women:

The constitution of a feminised successful aging is most apparent when it becomes little more than an extension [...] of what Naomi Wolf (1990) terms 'The Beauty Myth'; that is, a set of normalised and regulatory discourses of ideal feminine beauty implicitly privileging aspects of youth over that of old age. (2013, 346)

This extension can be recognised in the image and text on the *Saga* cover, and inside the magazine where the youthful-looking Bellucci is described as bringing "A touch of over-50s glamour" to the latest Bond film (Harrison 2015, 53). The full interview with Bellucci, which appears in an extended Q&A format, positions her as "living proof that beauty is ageless" and the questions asked by the interviewer make persistent reference to her beauty, which is normatively associated with sexual desirability and physical bodily ideals (Allen 2015, n.p.). It is notable that, in this case, the Q&A approach means that Bellucci's voice can directly respond to and ostensibly resist these expectations: "There is too much emphasis on the physical aspect of beauty and attraction when it comes to women"; "True sexiness is in the mind, the imagination – not in the body"; "Women need to believe in themselves and understand that they can still project sensuality and beauty as they get older" (ibid.). Yet it is possible to read such resistance to me-

dia-generated beauty ideals as redirecting older readers instead toward a post-feminist logic of individualism, choice, and empowerment (Gill 2007).

Looking at the mainstream UK press, other successful ageing discourses can be recognised in relation to Bellucci's promotional appearances during the film's production. When the details of the new Bond film were announced, Bellucci's physical characteristics were the subject of extensive commentary in the media and among fans. Noting that "Monica Bellucci [...] was a voluptuous vision at this week's line-up", the *Daily Telegraph* asserted that "[t]hese are vintage times for women" (Betts 2014, 33). Alongside Bellucci – front and centre, photographed wearing the below-the-knee black and red polka dot Dolce & Gabbana dress at the *Spectre* photocall – the accompanying image includes images of Glenn Close, Robin Wright, Helen Mirren, and Julianne Moore, some of the other "ageless" women of Hollywood over 50 who are also mentioned. The article opines that Bellucci had stolen the show at the Bond launch event: "[t]he more whippersnapperish beauties were all very well, but it was Monica who left the world at once shaken and stirred" (ibid.). The "raven tressed, Umbrian siren" is expressively described as "making va-va-voom" at Pinewood Studios, whilst "Craig lurked amiably next to her looking like someone's jowly grandad" (ibid.). According to this journalist, key to Bellucci's "powerful appeal" is that she "does not merely look good, she looks like herself: milky rather than tanned, sumptuously brunette rather than banally highlighted, lavishly curvaceous rather than modishly skeletal" (ibid.). Two days later, the *Times2* supplement was similarly complimentary about the outfit: "[m]odest but sexy, V-neck but not too low, the dress was figure-hugging but not too tight. It was a textbook example of Dolce & Gabbana at its best, doing feminine tailoring for real women" (Rose 2014, 3), adding that "Bellucci has framed her magnificent embonpoint but without being tarty and the sheer shiffon sleeves gave a sexy hint of flesh while also covering up an area about which many women are unconfident" (ibid.). This kind of admiration is unsurprising since, as Dolan observes, age appropriateness – "most typically associated with dress codes" – is "pivotal to the ascriptions brought to bear on ageing femininity" (2018, 40). Such articles therefore praise Bellucci for looking ("herself") and dressing age- and body- appropriately whilst also being (age-) appropriately sexy.

It is evident that the media discourse circulating around Bellucci's casting and role in *Spectre* is connected to the wider "shifts in the acceptability of 'older' female sexuality" in production of the "new" construction of the "sexy midlife woman" (Hinchliff 2014, 67). During the same week as Bellucci's casting announcement, Glenda Cooper wrote an opinion article for the *Sunday Telegraph* on

“Women who prove there’s life after 50”, where she referred to three recent celebrity headlines that highlighted the growing visibility of older female sexuality in media culture: the Bond casting announcement about Bellucci, the former Conservative politician Edwina Currie talking openly about her sex life during her TV appearance in *I’m a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here* (2002-), and Madonna’s topless, bondage-inspired magazine shoot. Cooper humorously commented “[t]hank goodness [...] for the [...] middle-aged women out there behaving badly” (2014, 33). In recognition of this type of media representation, Sharron Hinchcliff has argued that “the increasing attention paid to women in their [...] fifties in terms of sexual agency, sexual attractiveness and sexual expression, in films, music, videos and television programmes, is indicative of the sexualisation of midlife” (65). When Hinchcliff explores the impact of ageing on women in the media, she observes that postfeminism and neoliberalism has ensured that the constraints that are closely tied to idealised versions of femininity continue to impact on older women. Along these lines, in the *Sunday Telegraph* article, Cooper further argues that “I can’t pretend that I see Bond girls (or as Bellucci recasts them, Bond women) as the natural heirs to Emmeline Pankhurst”, but nevertheless ends on a positive endorsement of the presence of an older female love interest in the franchise: “in a world that still needs to acknowledge that fiftysomethings are not invisible, I will defend to the death their right to go on a date with 007 – and then dump him” (33).

Another relevant idea that has evolved in relationship to successful female ageing and contemporary celebrity culture has been what Deborah Jermyn terms the “menopausal turn”. To provide some context, Jermyn describes how “in recent years, the UK has witnessed an unprecedented period of pronounced public cultural conversation and promotion around a newly inflected era of menopause consciousness and comprehension”, which has the benefit of greater social awareness of the menopause such as celebrities are capable of eliciting (2023, 2, 7). Although Bellucci cannot be said to undertake anything like the sort of “celebrity menopause activism” that Jermyn associates with figures such as Mariella Frostrup and Davina McCall (5), it is noteworthy that she became part of this emergent cultural conversation in the lead up to the release of the Bond film. In a *Guardian* article on “life after 50”, Frostrup characteristically reflects on her own experience as a menopausal woman to give testimony, and in doing so mentions “Bond girl” Bellucci as evidence of a welcome “social revolution, quiet, forceful and emphatic” for older women (2015, n.p.). More directly, when *Daily*

Mail journalist Charlotte Edwardes suggested during a promotional interview that most women don't embrace the menopause, Bellucci reportedly responded:

"But menopause is a natural thing, it is not a sickness [...] OK, the body at the beginning will get a bit mad. But after a few months, or one year, it's going to be OK. This is a natural process of life. I am not nervous about it at all". [Bellucci] already decided to take "natural remedies" (bioidentical hormones, derived from plants, which are said to mimic natural hormones more closely) rather than HRT. (8)

Bellucci adds: "Anyway the menopause is going to be great: no periods any more" (ibid.). This part of the interview gives the profile feature its upbeat headline "Bond girl Monica: Why I'm looking forward to the menopause", picked up in other press commentary that "Monica predicts that the menopause is around the corner but while some may feel afflicted, she's ready to embrace it" (Rutter 2015, n.p.). The accompanying image to the *Daily Mail* interview is a photograph of Bellucci wearing Dolce & Gabbana lipstick captioned "Loving Life", showing the reader a model attitude toward (youthful) ageing femininity. However, in asking what the predominant "face of the menopause" looks like in the menopausal turn, Jermyn recommends that "while a new willingness to speak about menopause is in principle to be welcomed, this is of course dependent on the terms of the conversation", and remarks that such "[w]hite, wealthy, non-disabled and normatively attractive celebrity figures" do not speak to issues of diversity (3; 4).

There are also ways in which Bellucci's celebrity reflects "the contradictory discourses surrounding the sexuality of the 'older woman' in recent popular culture" (Wearing 2012, 145) that can be closely tied to her national identity and physical appearance. When Sadie Wearing examines the discourses around Helen Mirren in relation to the aging female body, she identifies how "[n]ationalised terms" may "serve to evoke a sense of ownership and closeness, and also distance or mystery" of the sexually active older woman through star and celebrity constructions (152). Charlotte Rampling is another noted example of how this process might operate – William Brown refers to her star persona as equated with "sexually active and/or aggressive women" (2014, 58) in negotiation of transnational stardom (as a British actress in French productions). Discussing Rampling as ageing female star, Brown draws on the argument that a foreign female star working in Hollywood cinema will "run the risk of being nothing more than an 'exotic' body to be looked at" (ibid.), in order to reflect on the tensions

that emerge with the sexualised older woman on screen. Relatedly but differently, what is striking is how often Bellucci is referred to through codes of (trans)nationally marked exoticism and sexual allure, using terms like “Franco-Italian exotic-totty fruitiness” (Curtis 2014, 15), and “La Bella-Lucci! The most exotic Bond woman yet” (Nicholls). In February 2015 the official photocall in Rome that marked the Italian stage of the production of *Spectre* visually evoked Bellucci’s strong association with what has been called the “Bella Italiana” national stereotype (Gundle 2007; 2008). The press photographs of Bellucci and Craig posed on a balcony sparked a flurry of articles – the *Mail Online* marveled at both the “exquisite backdrop” of the Roman Forum and Colosseum, and Bellucci’s display of “youthful” Italian female beauty,

svelte in a knee-length dress that clung to every inch of her enviable curves, which were gently kissed by the Italian sunlight. She was a vision with glossy hair swept over one shoulder and she emulated a natural, wind machine moment as she swung the locks out of the breeze on the balcony of the building. Keeping it classic, Monica paired her scarlet dress with black heels to elongate her frame and complement her raven tresses. (Freeth 2015, n.p.)

The language employed in this account of the photocall further illustrates how Bellucci is made to embody a certain type of “Italian-ness” very much in accordance with specific ideas of feminine beauty in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which which used to export an image of the nation (Gundle 2007). Historian Stephen Gundle describes how post-war actors like Gina Lollobrigida and Sophie Loren had acquired iconic status, “[w]ith their long dark hair, olive skin, shapely figures”; he adds that in contrast to other national stereotypes of beauty (such as “the performative stillness of the English rose”), “the Italian beauty is mobile and vibrant” (2008, 137). However, as Gundle also observes, in the age of celebrity, Bellucci is operating in a “fundamentally different context” (2007, 260) to the past female Italian beauty stars with whom she is often compared, meaning that even though the concept of the “Bella Italiana” persists there are shifts and changes. Although beyond the scope of this article to discuss in detail, there is also reason to briefly comment on Bellucci’s long-term association with Dolce & Gabbana. Bellucci has starred in numerous ad campaigns for the luxury Italian brand over the years, and often wears the label connotative of the mythic ideas and lifestyle of “Italianicity” (Barthes 1977, 32-51; Dallabona 2014),

which became part of the production and promotion discourses of the Bond film.

LUCIA SCIARRA IN *SPECTRE*

So far, this article has focused on media discourses generated by promotional materials in the lead up to *Spectre*'s release and around Bellucci's role in the film. But what of the on-screen representation of Lucia Sciarra? This section draws on textual and reception approaches in order to address the characterisation of Sciarra in relation to previous models of femininity in the Bond franchise. *Spectre* was released to commercial success but mixed critical reception regarding the self-referentiality and application of elements of the Bond formula (Chapman 2024, 221-222). For good reason, the portrayal of Sciarra was among the most criticised of the film's issues by fans and in mainstream press reviews where the feeling was that, at best, the older woman of Bond was a missed opportunity for the franchise (Summers and Alberge 2015, 11). To understand why we might return to the problematic representational politics that are associated with the "Bond Girl" label and image, but which also impact on other female character types and the roles played by women in the history of Bond.

Firstly, however, given that the film's promotion strongly emphasised the importance of Bellucci's character to set the plot in motion, it is worth briefly describing how Lucia Sciarra performs this function. In *Spectre*, Sciarra is the wife of the high-ranking SPECTRE assassin whom Bond kills in Mexico during the pre-credit action sequence. Her character appears in a funeral sequence in Rome when she meets Bond, but this encounter is interrupted when two bodyguards approach them to escort her home. In the next sequence, at Sciarra's villa, Bond saves her life by killing the two men, and although she angrily responds that he has signed her death warrant by killing her husband, she tells him about a secret meeting which is about to take place that night to find a replacement SPECTRE agent. After spending the night together, Bond tells Sciarra that he will put her under the care of his CIA friend Felix Leiter, and he leaves with the information he needs for the mission. Bond goes on to defeat SPECTRE's plan to control a global surveillance network to gain power, but at the end of the film he opts to retire from the British Secret Service for a life with young love interest Madeline Swann. Because Sciarra does not appear in any further scenes, her fate is unknown, and she remains a minor character. Benjamin Lee, a critic for *The Guardian*, commented in his review that this role meant that Bellucci was "sorely underused" (2015, n.p.). *The Sunday Times* reported on the "[o]utcry over Bellucci's 007 minutes on screen" and reflected on accusations of tokenism given

that “[t]he hype was that *Spectre* would mark the moment when Bond, attracted for the first time to an older, strong-willed woman, finally adjusted his behaviour”, having asked the age-old question: “is defeating sexism just too great a challenge for James Bond?” (Summers and Alberge, 11).

In many respects, Sciarra’s limited screen time is no different from other secondary “Bond Girl” love interests of the past. There is an obvious comparison to be made with Jill Masterson in *Goldfinger*, played by Shirley Eaton, who also played an iconic role in the film’s promotion as a “Golden Girl”. Although over five decades divide the two women appearing in the franchise, and Sciarra and Masterson are cultural products of particular socio-historical circumstances, the roles they play in the Bondian production ideology is strikingly similar. Like Masterson, Sciarra is only on screen for minutes; she is affiliated with a criminal but becomes Bond’s lover; and, as such, it can be argued that since both women are defined exclusively by their relationships with men neither has any real autonomy in the film. Both women are also replaced as love interests by a lead female protagonist who builds a stronger and more intimate relationship with Bond (Funnell 2008, 63). In *Goldfinger* this lead “Bond Girl” is, of course, Pussy Galore, the film’s older female character; whereas in *Spectre*, Swann is a younger woman, signaling a reversion to the normalised age gap between Bond and his primary love interest. Charles Burnetts observes how “[t]he Bond films work on a definitive contrast between the primary Bond Girl and secondary, or ‘fluffer’, female characters” (2015, 61). He explains that the secondary female character can be likened to “‘fluffers’ in the porn industry, they keep the male ‘agent’ aroused until the primary sexual object [...] arrives, at which time they disappear off-screen” (ibid., 60). Burnetts is concerned with the women that Bond seduces in the middle part of the film, but this aspect of the typology might be applied to Masterson and Sciarra during the opening sequences of *Goldfinger* and *Spectre*. In the case of Masterson, “[h]er role is reduced to that of trophy to be fought over by Bond and Goldfinger” (Herwin, 130). Shortly after Masterson has slept with Bond, she is killed – her death by gold paint produces an erotic spectacle in the film and in popular culture – giving Bond motivation for revenge, although this narrative function is far less memorable than the “Golden Girl” image. While Sciarra’s treatment is similarly illustrative of the disposability of women within the Bond films’ narrative economy no matter the age, there is a difference because she is not killed on screen. But although Sciarra may well survive, she nonetheless disappears from the film. Writing in the *Sunday Telegraph* David Thomas classified Bellucci (alongside Eaton, Gemma Arterton, Madonna, and

others) as “belong[ing] to a very specific group in 007 canon: the Barely There Bond Girl” (2015, 29). Reviews editor of *Little White Lies* David Jenkins voiced the popular concern that: “[d]espite what the build-up led you to believe, Bellucci's part is in keeping with the antiquated role of the Bond girl. [Bond] needs some information from her so he is straight into her bed and then straight out of it again” (qtd. in Summers and Alberge, 11).

The sex scene between Sciarra and Bond is significant to discuss both for its portrayal of (older) female sexuality and its ideological purpose. In the scene inside Sciarra's opulent Italian villa, Bond reveals that he killed Sciarra's husband, to which she reacts angrily but he kisses her as he unzips her dress and manages to extract information from her as items of her clothing are removed. When Tony Bennett analyses the codes which regulate the relationships between Bond and female characters in Ian Fleming's books, he identifies the “sexist code” related to women and describes how the plots work to “reposition” a woman who is “out-of-place” (1982, n.p.). This out-of-placeness might mean that a female character is in service of the villain and/or she is she is emotionally or physically “damaged” in some way, making her resistant to Bond, and his mission to “rescue” her is also a mission to restore the patriarchal order (Chapman 2015, 15). This sexist code has been adopted and adapted within the gendered relations of the Bond franchise, but taking this view on the sexual encounter between Sciarra and Bond in *Spectre* demonstrates how the sexual politics of the films are in many ways very traditional. This reading is further supported by the fact that Sciarra is introduced and defined as Marco Sciarra's widow by the funeral sequence, meaning that although she is allied with SPECTRE, the death of her husband causes her to become a damsel-in-distress/victim who requires saving by Bond. In the press reception, responses to this aspect of the scene were especially negative. As imaginatively described by Camilla Long in a review for *The Sunday Times*,

[i]t is a gorgeous, mouthwatering scene; except Bond urgently has to seduce her. Lucia has barely taken off her veil before 007 smooshes her up against a heritage mirror and snogs her like a camel trying to retrieve dates from a hanging basket. (2015, n.p.)

Long compares this sex scene with the “creepy-rapey” moment in *Skyfall* when Bond slides into a shower to “surprise” Séverine (Bérénice Marlohe), a woman who he knows to have a history of sexual exploitation by men. Séverine is another traditional “Bond Girl” from the Craig era who is also the “kept woman” of

the villain and needs to be rescued, which Bond agrees to in exchange for a meeting with Raoul Silva (Javier Bardem). Not only is Séverine cold-bloodedly killed by Silva, but Funnell comments that she “is offered neither sympathy nor narrative agency” (Funnell 2018, 18), making her disempowered throughout her brief appearance in the film. These remarks could well apply to the treatment of Sciarra, although perhaps she is left alive; the film never clarifies this. It is notable, however, that during the promotion for *Spectre* Bellucci offered a markedly different perspective on the Sciarra-Bond sexual encounter: “the chemistry and attraction between them is so strong and she realizes her feminine power over him” (“*Spectre* Production Notes” 2015, n.p.). In interview profiles about her casting and role in the film prior to release, Bellucci framed this interpretation in a broader media discourse about the positive visibility of older female sexuality (Wilde 2015). Yet in practice the tone of the encounter was felt by many to imply a “slightly glum fling” (Halligan 2015, n.p.), and another writer observed of Sciarra that: “[i]t’s sad [...] the last we see of her is her pouting on the bed in suspenders saying, ‘Don’t leave me, James’” (qtd. in Summers and Alberge, 11). In the *Daily Telegraph*, Alison Pearson suggested that the Bond production team “definitely missed a trick, I think, not having Bellucci seduce Bond and then leave him between the sheets for a more pressing engagement” (2015, 25).

Another way to approach these scenes intertextually and reflect on any claims made about empowerment is to draw on the meanings of body and costume. In this respect, given Bellucci’s portrayal of Sciarra, paying close attention to fashion and female beauty is distinctively valuable. This article has already discussed Bellucci’s established celebrity image and relationship to the fashion industry, and after *Spectre* was released her costumes and sexual appeal in the film also received mention. On Bellucci’s appearance, the *Daily Mail*’s fashion, beauty, and lifestyle magazine enquired “How does she do that?” to admirably remark that “[e]ffortlessly beautiful, she [...] manages to make long hair look chic and glamorous rather than ageing” (2015, 60). Whilst encouraging readers to “embrace your inner Bond girl” to look like Bellucci, the *Daily Mirror* style section observed that at the funeral she “sizzles in an all-black outfit” (which the newspaper’s readers might recreate at the high street on a budget) (Graafland 2015, n.p.). Since the script required Sciarra to be dressed for a funeral, costume designer Jany Temime has described how she designed an outfit that was inspired by “the classical Italian actresses, like Sophia Loren, to give her a beautiful, sexy, classic-woman look – that sort of sexual maturity that Monica Bellucci exudes” (qtd. in Davidson 2015, n.p.). To assist in presenting the widow character,

the traditional black clothes Sciarra wears provide a visual contrast to the stark white marble columns of the portico where her husband's funeral takes place, and a black veil is used to create a moment of mystery and suspense for Bond and the audience (Chapman 2022, 48). Elsewhere in the press it was noted that Bellucci's "smouldering widow" is also signified by the lingerie she is dressed in for the ("so brief") sex scene (Pearson, 25). Sciarra wears the lingerie – a black corset and suspenders – after her encounter with Bond, as he prepares to leave her for his mission. The cultural history of corset-wearing is long and complicated, being representative of both freedom and constraint depending on context, meaning that, as Germanà observes, such items of clothing "retain semantic ambiguity in the Bond Girls' attire" (184). In the prior scene, Sciarra wears a black dress, which Bond removes as he questions her about SPECTRE: "the unveiling of sensitive information is parallel to the unveiling of the female body as [Sciarra] spills the beans while her sharply-tailored dress [...] drops to the floor" (Germanà, 186). In analysing the "Bond Girls", fashion, and gender, Germanà also makes an interesting connection to two Dolce & Gabbana adverts that Bellucci appeared in during the 1990s, directed by Giuseppe Tornatore, where she also played a stereotypical widow. Similar to the scene in *Spectre*, these adverts "play on the fetishistic allure of lingerie" and use nostalgic images of Italian culture to give additional context to Bellucci's appearance in the film (ibid.).²

Finally, Sciarra's association with the terrorist organisation SPECTRE provides a further opportunity to read the character through the ideology of ageing and femininity within the franchise. Scholars such as Tony Garland (2009) and Funnell (2011) have examined the role of villainous women in the films. In her discussion of female villainy in the 1960s, Funnell identifies how the most dangerous women of the decade were depicted as either "the oversexed siren" – represented by Fiona Volpe (Luciana Paluzzi) in *Thunderball* (1965) and Helga Brandt (Karin Dor) in *You Only Live Twice* (1967) – or "the middle-aged sexual deviant" – represented by Rosa Klebb (Lotte Lenya) in *From Russia with Love* (1963) and Irma Bunt (Ilse Steppat) in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1969) (2011, 201). These two categories of villainous woman affiliated with SPECTRE were therefore distinguished "through reference to the key factors of age and sexual availability" but perform a similar function: to threaten and strengthen Bond's heroic masculinity (ibid.). Funnell describes how female villains shift through phases of representation (in response to the changing waves of feminism) to often be given a

2 As an aside, it should be said that connections might equally be drawn from the costuming and associations of other female widows in the Bond films, such as the highly suspicious Madame Boitier in *Thunderball* (Chapman 2022, 48).

greater degree of freedom and movement in the films than the traditional “Bond Girl” types, but who also frequently receive punishment for their transgression of gender and sexual roles. Prior to *Spectre*’s release, speculation was rife about whether Bellucci’s character might be a villainous woman, with some predicting she could play the infamous founder and head of SPECTRE, Blofeld: “[t]he next Bond baddie should be a woman”, *Guardian* critic Peter Bradshaw asserted during production, taking issue with the celebration of Bellucci’s casting as *de facto* progressive, asking “What about letting Bellucci (or Julianne Moore, or Meryl Streep, or Celia Imrie, or Viola Davis) have a crack the only recent decent role in any Bond film – the villain?” (2015, n.p.). Bradshaw reflected on the limited roles for mature women in the Bond films (other than “the grumpy old role of spy chief M”) and deliberated over “the idea of Bond being seriously tested or threatened by a powerful woman – who might even have one or two good lines? Might even win some preliminary skirmishes? That would be revolutionary” (ibid.). Yet the possibility of an older woman playing the film’s arch-villain to date remains unexplored by the franchise.

CONCLUSION

Existing scholarship on the women of Bond from gender and ageing studies perspectives has considered the portrayal of Bond’s boss M by Judi Dench, but the “Bond Girl” may also include older women. This article has focused on the cultural, promotional, and textual significances of an older woman of Bond in *Spectre* to explore and test ways in which popular and academic discourses of female ageing may be negotiated by and applied to the “Bond Girl” label, publicity image, and role in the Bondian formula. In so doing, this study has considered a number of contexts and readings that demonstrate the ways in which Bellucci’s casting and Sciarra’s characterisation offer important insights into the representational politics at work in the recent phase of the Bond franchise. The case study of the “mature” “Bond Girl” within the conventions of the Bond franchise also has significance for approaches to ageing female celebrity and the older woman in the media. As has rightly been noted in the growing body of work from feminist media scholars, celebrity case studies become a productive site for analysis of the complex ways in which discourses on ageing femininity circulate (Holmes and Jermyn 2015, 16). As discussed in this article, opinions on the women of Bond – and the “Bond Girl” label and image in particular – are debated in terms of gender equality and progress. This is evident in the case of Bellucci and the portrayal of Sciarra despite speculation (and publicity) about the challenge to pa-

triarchy, because in representing the character and her (brief) intimate relationship with Bond, the film largely relies on problematic “Bond Girl” stereotype. Although Sciarra’s plotline does not entail the death of yet another woman in the franchise, the article reflects on the consensus that the casting and character represented a missed opportunity. As preparations started for Bond 25, Bellucci was asked by the media about potentially reprising her Bond Girl role and it was suggested that Craig favored her return as Sciarra (Vivarelli 2017, n.p.). However, it was Seydoux who reappeared in *No Time to Die* as Bond’s love interest, contributing to reports that “Hollywood age gaps are still not narrowing” (Singh 2021, n.p.) and highlighting the gendered ageism associated with the franchise, in spite of the media’s enthusiasm for headlines about “the oldest Bond girl ever”.

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