

## From Margo Channing to Margaret Elliot: The Aging Actress, Age Performance, and the Dictates of Aging in Joseph Mankiewicz's *All about Eve* and Stuart Heisler's *The Star*

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*Bette Davis played the role of an aging actress in different films throughout her career. In Joseph Mankiewicz's All about Eve (1950), Davis performs one of her most highly acclaimed parts as Margo Channing, a mature actress who must face the decline of her acting career upon the arrival of a younger and ambitious counterpart. Only two years later, in Stuart Heisler's The Star (1952), Davis once more played the role of an aging actress, Margaret Elliot, who refuses to accept that her career as an actress has come to an end, thus taking a bleaker approach in comparison with Mankiewicz's film. Bearing in mind the intertextuality existing between both films, since All about Eve and The Star address the figure of the aging actress and are both considered self-referential films insofar as they are films about the film industry, this article will analyse how these two films address the performance of aging on and off screen, as actresses switch roles between acting younger or older in relation to characters that function as mirrors of aging, and how they eventually come to terms with the dictates of aging and their own aging process as women.*

### Introduction

Drawing on Mary Russo's notion of 'the female grotesque,'<sup>1</sup> which mostly depicts female aging as a process of decline, as this figure focuses on the disturbing qualities of women's aging process, Anne Morey has drawn attention to the character of the celebrated actress in classic films of the 1950s and 1960s,<sup>2</sup> who faces the decline of her career in acting, and whose histrionic performance both on and off screen reveals the performative features of aging. These films usually acquire an outstanding self-referential quality insofar as the main character is shown playing roles on stage or on screen as an actress, but also reveals a predisposition for performance in her everyday life, as a result of her zealous commitment to performance, but also due to the prevailing discourses of female aging, as she finds herself acting according to them, but also against them. This pervasive inclination to perform even transcends these films, as the character

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1. Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1.

2. Anne Morey, "Grotesquerie as Marker of Success in Aging Female Stars," in *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope: Forms and Functions of Female Celebrity* (eds.) S. Holmes and D. Negra (New York: Continuum, 2011), 107.

of the aging actress is, after all, played by an actress who knows about the ins and outs of show business and has also devoted her life to acting. In the context of performance studies, Anne Basting underlines the intersection existing between aging and gender due to the performative quality that characterises both of them, and points out the potential transformative quality of performance.<sup>3</sup> In the field of gender studies, Judith Butler argues that gender is performed through a series of repeated practices in time,<sup>4</sup> which ultimately disclose the impossibility of exact repetition, thus finding an entry into transformability through performance which leads to its subversion. In analogy, the ways in which aging is displayed on screen and off screen in films often call attention to the performative quality of aging, as critics such as Margaret Gullette unveil that actors are often asked to act younger or older.<sup>5</sup> In the context of film studies, Deborah Jermyn claims that female aging in films can be interpreted from a subversive or a compliant perspective, since the embodiment of female aging may respond to a conventionally condescending representation, or rather, by means of this discomfiting portrayal, female aging can also be depicted from a dissident and critical perspective.<sup>6</sup> As a result of these ambivalent interpretations, Jermyn further argues that there is a need to revisit portrayals of female aging in classic films revolving around actresses who underscore the performative dimension of female aging with a view to analyse how female aging is represented and to transform how it is perceived.

In a series of films extending over the span of years, American actress Bette Davis played the role of an aging cinema star who was forced to face the decline of her career owing to the pressures and dictates of aging that prevailed in the Hollywood star system. In resemblance with the actresses that she played on screen, Bette Davis also had to struggle to keep on playing leading parts in her later years and had to face the dictates of female aging that prevailed at the time on and off screen in the world of show business. In fact, it is acknowledged that Bette Davis landed her role as Jane in Robert Aldrich's film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* by means of placing an ad in a Hollywood publication to find employment as an actress, as, in spite of her fame, she had difficulties in being cast in a new film in her later years. Throughout her career, Bette Davis participated in different films which displayed a critical approach towards the way aging actresses were treated in their later years and had to face the decline of

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3. Anne Basting, *The Stages of Age: Performing Age in Contemporary American Culture* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 7.

4. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2007).

5. Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

6. Deborah Jermyn, "'Get a Life, Ladies. Your Old One Is Not Coming Back': Ageing, Ageism and the Lifespan of Female Celebrity," *Celebrity Studies* 3, no. 1 (2012): 5.

their careers, addressing the issue of how they complied with the dictates of aging, but also struggled against them.

One of the first films in which Bette Davis played the role of an actress was Joseph Mankiewicz's film *All about Eve* (1950), in which Davis was cast as Margo Channing, an actress at the peak of her career who must begin to face her decline as a stage performer, as she grows older and feels that her lifetime roles are better suited to younger actresses, such as Eve Harrington, her younger counterpart on stage. Only two years after *All about Eve* came out, Davis once more played the role of an aging actress in Stuart Heisler's film *The Star* (1952). Although Heisler's film has always stood in the shadow of Mankiewicz's masterpiece, both films focus on the character of the aging actress and present significant intertextual links and parallelisms that can be established between them in terms of the main female character and how she approaches the aging process from a public and personal perspective, how she complies with the established dictates of female aging, but also subverts them, and how her performance of female aging lays bare its performative quality and pave the way for its subsequent perception and transformation. Nonetheless, in contrast with the character of Margo Channing in *All about Eve*, whose status as a great star is not overtly put into question, in *The Star*, Davis is cast as Margaret Elliot, an actress who must face the decline of her acting career and is reluctant to abandon her roles as a young actress on screen and her status as a cinema star off screen, in spite of the fact that she is no longer considered for leading roles.

This article aims to provide a comparative analysis of both films based on the analysis of the intertextuality existing between a series of scenes, the identification of the performative quality of female aging not only on screen but also off screen, how these actresses perceive their aging process from a personal perspective, and how they finally decide to envision their aging process in compliance or against the prevailing dictates of aging. In order to provide this analysis, the article will be structured into different sections, first addressing how these actresses suffer a process of decline, commodification and alienation as a result of the established discourses of female aging. Since the discourse of gender is also inherently associated with the discourse of aging, the ways in which these actresses comply and subvert the dictates of gender will also be analysed. Given the self-referential quality of these films, as they are films which explicitly address the art of performance, the continuous proclivity toward performing on behalf of these actresses will also be tackled. Finally, scenes which display dualities, mirror effects and the presence of doubles will also be given special attention, as they contribute to underlining the performative quality of aging, as characters act younger or older in relation to others.

### **Splendour and Decline: The Twilight Characterisation of the Aging Actress**

As Margaret Gullette asserts, aging has traditionally been associated with a life stage characterised by decay and decline,<sup>7</sup> and this reflects on the way the two female protagonists of *All about Eve* and *The Star* feel that they are perceived by the gaze of others. Although both Margo Channing and Margaret Elliot have been considered highly-acclaimed actresses, Margo is aware that she is approaching the later years of her career as an actress, whereas Margaret is reluctant to give in to reality and accept that her golden years as a cinema star have long gone by. Having reached the peak of her career, Margo is still praised as a theatre actress and retires from stage out of her own will, while Margaret is no longer cast in leading roles in spite of the fact she continually clings to the hope of coming back and playing a leading role in a new film.

In the opening scene of *All about Eve*, which depicts an award ceremony, where Eve is considered the youngest actress to win such coveted award, critic Addison DeWitt's voice over introduces Margo Channing as "a great star and true star," adding that "she never was or will be anything less or anything else," thus attesting her highly-acclaimed status as a theatre actress, even if, in so saying, he is also subtly referring to Margo's maturity, as she has had a long career which has extended for years. In *The Star*, Margaret Elliot's Academy Award is displayed on a shelf in her living room, thus conjuring up traces of her past splendour and evincing that she was also a celebrated cinema star who enjoyed great popularity among critics and admirers. Nonetheless, throughout the film, Margaret often repeats a recurrent litany which echoes the words "going, going, gone," as a reverberating and constant reminder of her virtually non-existent past glamour and fame, even if she is mostly reluctant to accept the bleak reality.

In Mankiewicz's film, when playwright Lloyd Richards offers Margo a role in his new play, she begins to feel hesitant whether she will be able to perform the part of a younger woman once more, as she admits that she has turned forty and the character that she is asked to play is around twenty. Nonetheless, Richards strongly disagrees and expresses she will be perfect for the role, thus affirming, "Margo, you haven't got any age," while Margo ironically retorts that "Miss Channing is ageless." Conversely, in *The Star*, Margaret asks her agent, Harry, to find her a part that is intended for a younger actress in a new film, on the grounds that she was a star and, although Harry agrees with this assertion, he also adds that something took the place of "that fresh, dewy quality" that used to characterise her in the past, hence disclosing that she is no longer suitable for this kind of role owing to her age.

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7. Gullette, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997).

When Margo realises that Eve has been chosen as her understudy in the play she is performing, Margo gives vent to her theatrical and histrionic manners with Richards, stating that “all playwrights should be dead for three hundred years,” whereas Richards retorts that “the stars never die and never change.” In spite of his inability to cope with Margo’s temperament, as a playwright, Richards once more unveils his total admiration for Margo as an actress, stating that her status as a star will never be questioned and referring explicitly to her everlasting and unchangeable qualities as an actress. Conversely, in *The Star*, Margaret’s daughter, Gretchen, confesses that children at school tease her saying that her mother is a washed-up actress who no longer makes pictures. Gretchen thus tells her mother that she knows she used to be a star, but then asks her whether she still is, ultimately compelling her mother to claim that “if you are star, you don’t stop being a star,” as if Margaret was also trying to convince herself with her words.

As Margo becomes more insecure and jealous as a result of Eve’s pervasive presence, Margo’s fiancé, Bill, who is also the director of the play, convinces her that her tantrums are entirely out of place and that she is “a great actress at the peak of her career.” Conversely, in *The Star*, when Margaret meets Jim Johanssen, a former actor whom she helped in the past with whom she starts a relationship, he reminds her that “it’s no disgrace to be through with pictures,” trying to make her understand that her acting career has come to an end. Nonetheless, Margaret insists that she has never done anything but act, and that it will never be over, thus indulging in make-believe to convince herself that her next role in a film will grant her the fame she used to enjoy in the past.

### **The Rise and Fall of a Cinema Star: Aging, Commodification, Alienation**

As Jodi Brooks argues, the image of aging stars is often marked as “both frozen and transitory”<sup>8</sup> at the same time, since, both Margo and Margaret feel haunted by their youthful image at this stage of their career. As actresses who have attained fame and popularity, Margo and Margaret have carved a public image that seems to have little to do with their true selves, as if their image as stars arose as a mask or a Jungian persona that was overlaid on them, and involved a role which they were also required to play off screen and that contrasted with their inner self and stood in front of their shadow. In Mankiewicz’s film, as Margo talks to her friend Karen, she confesses, “I want Bill — I want him to want me — but me — not Margo Channing — and if I can’t tell them apart, how can he?”, thus pointing out the overlapping of her two selves as

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8. Jodi Brooks, “Performing Aging/Performance Crisis (for Norma Desmond, Margo Channing, Baby Jane and Sister George),” in *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (ed.) K. Woodward (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 233.

a public figure and as a woman, which often intermingles and renders her incapable of separating one from the other. Besides, Margo fears that Bill is truly in love with her persona, her public image as Margo Channing, the glamorous actress, instead of herself, and dreads that, as she grows older and is banished from stage, "ten years from now, Margo Channing will have ceased to exist," and along with her, Bill's faithful devotion to her. In Heisler's film, Margaret has already reached this stage that Margo dreads, since, in her case, Margaret's public image as a glamorous actress has already been left behind although she still struggles to hold on to it. In one of the first scenes of the film, when Margaret and her agent are discussing the possibility of her comeback, a waitress appears to recognise Margaret, but needs to ask her in order to make sure if Margaret is actually the glamorous actress Margaret Elliot. Even though this scene proves that her admirers still remember her, it also shows that the passage of time has had some effect on her and that Margaret's public image as an actress, her persona, has been relegated to its shadow.

In the course of an argument between playwright and actress, since Margo admits that she feels the need to change some of the lines in the script so that the audience will continue coming to the theatre to attend the play, Richards retorts to Margo, "I shall never understand the weird process by which a body with a voice suddenly fancies itself a mind." Through his words, as a playwright, Richards ironically refers to the commodification of performers, as they are perceived as frozen commodities deprived of humanity at the service of the industry of show business. In a later conversation with Bill, Margo herself takes Richards' cue and refers to herself ironically as "nothing but a body with a voice" as a performer. Although these words acquire a metaphorical and ironic meaning in Mankiewicz's film, they acquire a literal sense in *The Star*, since, in the opening scene of the film, Margaret passes by an auction in which her personal belongings are being sold, thus symbolically highlighting the process of commodification that Margaret has undergone as a former cinema star, whose image has been frozen in time, as the presenter entices those who have gathered into buying the exhibited items by referring to what Margaret had represented as an actress in her golden years.

In Heisler's film, Margaret strives to hold on to her former image as a glamorous actress, although her looks no longer seem to match those which characterised her as a cinema star. When Margaret spends one night in prison for driving while being drunk, even if she repeatedly asserts that she is Margaret Elliot, the rest of the prisoners believe she is pretending to be someone else and her identity is thus called into question. The dazzling and innocent-looking image of Margaret Elliot as a star does not match the gaunt and scruffy of their new companion, to the extent that one of the prisoners retorts, "what a coincidence, I'm Snow White," as if she were also playing the part of a purely gentle character, suspecting that Margaret is also pretending to be someone else. The fact that Margaret is no longer recognised as Margaret Elliot leads her to suffer an

increasing process of alienation, inasmuch as Margaret seems no longer able to match the former exultant image of Margaret Elliot that everybody used to know. Hence, there is a wide gap between her persona as recognised by the public and Margaret's actual appearance, insofar as there is also an outstanding difference between the public image Margaret still wishes to project and that of her actual projected self.

Similarly, it is also unveiled that Margo feels increasingly detached from the roles conceived for younger actresses that she is still offered as she grows older. The age gap between the role she is supposed to play and her own age also contributes to widening the gap between her public image and her own self, hence stressing further the process of alienation established between her two selves. Margo's anticipated fears finally find verbal reflection in Addison's critical review published in the paper, which, to Margo's shock, refers to the "lamentable practice in our Theater of permitting [...] mature actresses to continue playing roles requiring a youth and vigor of which they retain but a dim memory." Margo thus feels she cannot longer hold on to her former public image as her own appearance grows increasingly detached from that she tries to match upon acting on the stage.

While Addison's views on aging actresses seem to confirm Margo's fears and even consider the possibility of retiring from acting, in Heisler's film, Margaret rather chooses to ignore prejudices about age even though she must suffer them in her everyday life. Margaret becomes particularly aware of prejudices between her former image and her current aging looks, when she begins to work as a shop assistant and two customers recognise her, although one of them retorts that she cannot be Margaret Elliot on the grounds that the actress is much better looking than the shop assistant that they have in front of them. At first, Margaret pretends to be an anonymous person, however, when she realises that the customers feel shocked, Margaret's ego is hurt and finally unveils that, "I am Margaret Elliot and I intend to stay Margaret Elliot," hence reinstating her intention to hold on to her image as a cinema star and resume her career as an actress. However, Margaret's words also unveil her fluctuation between these two roles, between Margaret as an aging anonymous person subjected to the effects of aging and Margaret Elliot as the youthful cinema star whose image remains frozen in the memories of her admirers.

### **Performing Gender: Independent Women and Displays of Femininity**

In Mankiewicz's film, when Eve gets to know Margo as an admirer and is invited to Margo's dressing room after one of her performances, Eve concedes that she believes that "part of Miss Channing's greatness lies in her ability to choose the best plays." Margo is always cast as the leading actress in plays that her friend and playwright, Lloyd Richards, writes for her, and she is directed by

her fiancé and theatre and cinema director, Bill Sampson. Thanks to this successful collaboration and Margo's skills as an actress, for many years, Margo has been considered one of the most talented performers on stage. Conversely, in *The Star*, Margaret's financial strain is rooted in her will to manage her own career in show business and become a financially independent entrepreneur. She unveils to Jim the turning point that instigated her decline as an actress: her will to produce her own pictures and thus be able to exert some control over the cinema industry, which increasingly detached her from the roles that she used to play and cemented the dusk of her career. As a result of her daring endeavour, Margaret is gradually banished from the star system and, as she grows older, she is no longer offered the kind of leading roles that turned her into a star and made her the recipient of an Academy Award, as a confirmation of her public acceptance within the film industry.

As a successful and financially independent woman, Margo ponders about everything she had to sacrifice in order to devote her life entirely to the theatre. As Margo confesses to her friend Karen, it is a "funny business, a woman's career — the things you drop on your way up the ladder, so you can move faster — you forget you'll need them again when you go back to being a woman — that's one career all females have in common." Margo thus expresses the dilemma that women often face between devoting their lives to a career or to raising a family. It is mostly when she compares herself with Eve, who is mostly characterised by femininity, subservience and modesty, even if it is just in appearance, that Margo is mostly reminded of how she has had to renounce 'being' a woman and sacrifice family life to be on top of show business. In Heisler's film, it is also implied that Margaret's personal life has also suffered the consequences of her success as a business woman who was economically independent. Margaret unveils that she was the breadwinner of the couple when she was married, and that the reason why her husband divorced her was that she was too busy with her career and that he could not bear playing second fiddle in relation to his wife. Her divorce, her inability to see her daughter Gretchen as much as she would like to, and the lack of support on behalf of those who only stood by her side when her films were lucrative display that Margaret has been symbolically punished for having achieved success as a financially independent woman as well as for having chosen to take control of her career and the roles to play on screen.

As Susan Sontag asserts, gender can be approached as performance in itself to the point that "to be a woman is to be an actress", and this is displayed in scenes in which these two actresses give vent to performing femininity.<sup>9</sup> Both Margo and Margaret have relationships with men who are younger than them, which contribute to underlining further their aging process from their own

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9. Susan Sontag, "The Double Standard of Aging," in *The Other within Us: Feminist Explorations of Women and Aging* (ed.) Marilyn Pearsall (Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), 22.



perspective. At this stage of her career, Margo's increasing insecurity lies in her awareness that she is growing old, particularly in comparison with Eve's youthful appearance. As Margo is talking to Richards about her next role in his play, she admits that she is not twenty anymore, but forty years of age, confessing that "that slipped out, I hadn't quite made up my mind to admit it — now I feel as if I'd suddenly taken all my clothes off," thus revealing that, for an actress, the revelation of her age feels so intimate as the act of stripping herself of her clothes. In contrast, Margo states that her fiancé, Bill is thirty-two, and "he looks thirty-two — he looked it five years ago, he'll look it twenty years from now," thus referring to how the dictates of aging seem to treat women and men differently, and stressing that women are made to grow older earlier. Nonetheless, in spite of Margo's increasing hesitation and vulnerability as she grows older, Bill shows her loyalty and devotion to her both as her director and fiancé. In *The Star*, Margaret starts a relationship with Jim, who bails her out from prison in exchange for having procured him a role in a film many years before. At the time, Margaret was a glamorous actress at the peak of her career and Jim was a young boy playing his first role in a film. However, the tables have been turned, and now Margaret is bankrupt and Jim is the manager of a prosperous ship company who welcomes Margaret in her house after she is evicted from her apartment for not being able to pay the rent. The age difference between Margaret and Jim is evocative of that of Margo and Bill, and it is even more remarkable. Nonetheless, in contrast with Margo, whose fiancé convinces her that she is still at the peak of her career, as she grows older, Margaret seems incapable of letting go of her past splendour until it is Jim, who, despite his youth, shows a more realistic bent of mind and gradually persuades her to renounce her dreams as her years as a youthful glamorous star are over.

The act of performing off stage or off screen on behalf of these actresses also extends to gender, whose performative qualities were identified by Judith Butler as paving the ground for its subversion.<sup>10</sup> Upon discussing her career as an actress and how it has conditioned her personal life, Margo contends that, as regards "being a woman — sooner or later we've all got to work at it," thus unveiling that gender is also counterfeited and performed. Margo identifies traits of remarkable femininity in Eve which she associates with youth, and which Margo believes that she no longer possesses. Out of this alleged deficiency, Margo feels the need to stress her femininity and work on 'being' a woman, often giving in to outbursts of jealousy to draw Bill's attention so that he proves he is still in love with her. In *The Star*, when Margaret starts a relationship with Jim, he confesses that he fell in love with her when he met her in her youth, and Margaret works at making him confess whether he is still in love with her. When he retorts that the only thing that seems to be left is her ego, Margaret runs away and shows her vulnerability as she enters a drugstore to buy sleeping pills, but, instead, steals a flask of

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10. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2007.

perfume, which compels her to run into Jim's arms and ask him for help in an overtly displayed performance of femininity.

### Writing the Script: Interaction Between Fact and Fiction

The titles of the plays and films in which Margo and Eve play a role often carry ironic and subtle references to the performance that is taking place off stage. The play in which Margo acts as leading actress is called *Aged in Wood*, and it is precisely when she is performing this role that Margo begins to call into question whether she is still a suitable actress to play characters who are younger than herself. Drawing further on this metaphor, the title of the play also alludes to Margo's consolidated career as one of the most talented stage actresses of her generation who has aged in wood like good wine. The next play that the playwright Lloyd Richards writes for Margo is titled *Footsteps in the Ceiling*, which subtly evokes actions that take place off the centre of the stage. Eve immediately admits that she likes the title, in an ironic reference to her own habit of performing also off stage. The interaction between fact and fiction through overt and self-referential displays of performance is also exhibited at Bill's birthday party, when Bill and Margo move upstairs to resume their argument and one of the guests, Addison, deliberately states, "we'll miss the third act — they're going to play it off stage," hence once more underlining the parallelisms that are established between theatrical performance on stage and off stage.

In analogy, in *The Star*, given her lifetime devotion to acting, Margaret often establishes correspondences between circumstances which befall her in real life and roles which she has performed as an actress in her films. When Margaret is convicted for drink-driving, she tells Jim that, in one of her films, she once played a girl who was arrested and, ironically, Jim responds saying that next time she will know better how to play the role as a result of this lifetime experience. When Jim begins to show affection towards her, Margaret recalls the role she played in her film *Night Court*, and states that this is also the reason why the character she played in the film was bailed out from prison, as the male protagonist felt romantically attracted towards her. Similarly, as Jim is fixing one of his boats, Margaret establishes parallelisms with a scene from the film *Vacation for a Lady*, thinking of Jim and herself as the main characters in the film. Owing to Margaret's tendency to make connections between her films and real life, Jim eventually accuses Margaret of being incapable of "thinking beyond a script," and even of mixing up her roles in her films with the different parts she is also metaphorically asked to perform in real life.

### Performative Tendencies: Playing on and off Stage

The inborn qualities as actresses of both Margo and Margaret often transcend the stage or the screen, as they often find themselves in need to resort to pretence and make-believe in real life, thus displaying a perpetual predisposition for performance also in their everyday routines which comes hand in hand with the self-referential discourse characterising these two films. In *All about Eve*, her personal assistant, Birdie, notices how Margo begins to act differently and displays some feigned and affected gentleness as soon as she meets Eve in the dressing room, even to the extent that Birdie declares, in relation to Margo's changed behaviour, that "all of a sudden she's playing Hamlet's mother." In analogy, Eve starts narrating the sad story of her life —which Addison will later reveal is all fake— and how, in her childhood, she grew extremely fond of acting to the point of confessing that she "couldn't tell the real from the unreal except that the unreal seemed more real," thus subtly admitting, from the very beginning, her tendency to lie and make things up. Similarly, in *The Star*, Margaret confesses that she has never done anything else but act, and always looks forward to her next role in a new film, although it is gradually unveiled that she also feels the need to resort to acting and make believe in her everyday life. When she visits her daughter Gretchen, Margaret pretends that she is going to start a new film soon and that she is still a famous actress, while, as she tries to hold back her tears, she makes explicit references to acting, stating that "some people cry when they're happy, and they laugh when they are mad, isn't that funny?" thus subtly drawing attention to theatricality and the need to pretend also in real life.

The stage thus extends further beyond the walls of the theatre in Mankiewicz's film, since it is off stage that Eve looks up to Margo in order to attain her expertise, whereas Margo identifies Eve as the embodiment of compliance and gentleness which she finds lacking in herself. As Margo claims, Eve is "so young, so feminine and helpless" and she embodies "so many things I want to be for Bill." Nonetheless, at this stage, Margo still remains oblivious of Eve's fondness for deceit and make-believe, as Eve projects a public image which does not match her actual mischievous personality. This scenario gives way to a reverberation of performances, since, owing to Eve's presence, Margo feels increasingly vulnerable, although she holds on to her image of a temperamental and strong-minded star. In front of Margo, Eve acts as a kind and humble young girl, even though, she is, in fact, concealing her boundless ambition and cunning disposition. As Margo feels more defenceless, Eve grows stronger, so that both of them end up mirroring each other's performances, Margo's replicating Eve's feigned frailty and Eve's reproducing Margo's determined behaviour, thus blurring the vague boundaries separating simulation from reality. Eve's character combines her performances on stage as Margo's understudy with brilliant performances off stage which make everybody believe her humility and compliance are inherent traits in her personality. When Eve gives a brilliant

performance although she was only supposed to read Margo's part in the script, Margo begins to unmask Eve as a character, stating that acting "doesn't just happen," but it is "carefully rehearsed I have no doubt, over and over," hence unveiling Eve's propensity to deceit and pretence also off stage. Margo's tendency to perform not only as an actress on stage but also in real life is also made explicit when she feels threatened by Eve's presence, as she believes that Eve is not only capable of banishing her from stage, but also of detaching her from her friends and even her fiancé. As they are having an argument, Bill tells Margo that "there are certain characteristics for which you are famous — onstage and off," thus alluding to Margo's tendency to resort to her performing skills and her traits as a diva also in real life.

In *The Star*, Margaret's increasing incapacity to distinguish fact from fiction is symbolically illustrated by a replica of a perfume flask. As she can no longer afford it, Margaret decides to steal a flask of the expensive perfume that she used to buy, but she eventually finds out that the flagon was just a sample and, in truth, contains only coloured water. In relation to the flask, Jim tells Margaret, "you thought it was real — it's the story of your life," thus establishing a parallelism between Margaret's mistaking the flask of coloured water for perfume and her propensity to take her own delusions as if they were actual facts. Similarly, when Margaret attends an interview for a post as a shop assistant in a shopping mall, she faithfully reproduces the script that she had carefully been rehearsing with Jim to conceal her real identity as Margaret Elliot. After she is given the job, Margaret tells Jim, "I gave one of my best performances," thus making it explicit that she played a role, also off screen, precisely to conceal the fact that she is an actress so as to be considered for another job which ironically has nothing to do with acting.

In Mankiewicz's film, Eve's arrival, as she declares herself to be Margo's fervent admirer, comes hand in hand with Margo's increasing hesitance whether she will be able to retain her status as a great star for much longer, which often leads her to give in to melodramatic theatrical performances off stage. Margo indulges in heavy drinking at Bill Sampson's birthday party and quarrels with him, as he despises Margo's "paranoid insecurity" and her turn for theatricality. Taking Bill's cue, Margo eventually exclaims "cut! print it! what happens in the next reel?", thus acknowledging the histrionic and overstated qualities of her demeanour, resembling those of a scene in a film. In *The Star*, drinking also leads Margaret to give in to melodrama and the full display of her performing habits, although, if Margo's performative ways show that her reasons to worry are mostly overstated, conversely, Margaret's situation is so desperate that she rather resorts to performance to escape her bleak reality. Driving her car while she is drinking and holding her Academy Award, Margaret pretends that she is a tourist guide, making a tour around the mansions of celebrities. When she stumbles upon her former house, which she had to sell as a result of bankruptcy, she holds her Oscar, as if she is about to deliver her acceptance speech, and

explains that, “this was the home of the wealthy, exciting, glamorous Margaret Elliot,” hence indulging in an overtly melodramatic performance that underpins her desperation and tragic circumstances.

In *All about Eve*, it is Margo herself who, upon deciding to retire from acting, she tells her friends, “no more make believe — off stage or on,” once more confessing explicitly how she has also been resorting to performance off stage. Conversely, though, Margaret’s inclination toward performance in *The Star* is used for the sake of self-deceit, as she often finds herself lying to herself and taking her own lies for real in the hope that they will actually come true. When Margaret makes a test for a role in a new film, she informs all the papers about it, although she still does not know for sure whether she is going to be given the part. Margaret eventually confesses to Jim that her reason for acting so is that she feels that, if she pretends that she has already been granted the role, her self-deceit will actually transform into reality.

### Performing Age: Dualities, Mirrors, and Doubles

As Lucy Fischer claims, specular moments in which characters gaze at themselves in the mirror denote a sense of doubling between the aging image reflected in the mirror and a youthful image frozen in time that becomes superimposed.<sup>11</sup> Different scenes in these two films display posters, photographs, film frames and mirrors which contribute to juxtaposing younger and older images of the female protagonists that arise as personifications of their doubles. From a psychoanalytical approach, mirror scenes often bring to mind Jacques Lacan’s premises about the infant’s mirror stage, in which, aware of its fragmented body, the child fantasises about the idealised image of unity which is projected in the mirror in contrast with its still developing body. In the same way, these aging actresses fantasise about the frozen image of their youth as symbolically reflected on younger doubles which act as their mirrors.

In *All about Eve*, when Margo enters the theatre for a reading, she stands in front of a poster advertising the play she is performing in. The poster shows a caricaturised image of the female protagonist in the play, looking like a child’s doll, which contributes further to accentuating the character’s youth, while it also arises as a haunting reminder of Eve, who will also perform this role in the play as Margo’s understudy. The youthful image of the doll on the poster stands in front of the actress who is playing it, hence creating a mirror effect, which joins, but also extricates, younger and aging selves that symbolically look at each other. In the initial scene of *The Star*, when Margaret passes by an auction where her

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11. Lucy Fischer, “Sunset Boulevard: Fading Stars,” in *The Other within Us: Feminist Explorations of Women and Aging* (ed.) Marilyn Pearsall (New York: Westview/Harper, 1997), 171.

belongings are being sold, she also stares at an advertising poster displaying a picture of herself in youth, as if it were a mirror which reflects back her younger self in contrast with her actual aging self. This scene evokes Margaret's wishful-thinking of revisiting her golden years as an actress, which were also the years of her youth, while it also denotes Margaret is wedged in self-delusion, as she still believes these years are not over yet.

In *All about Eve*, as she is taking Margo's costume in the play to fetch it to the wardrobe mistress, Eve looks at herself in the mirror while she holds up the dress against her body and starts making bows and emulating Margo's gestures which Eve observed carefully from backstage after the play. Although Eve believes she is alone, Margo is now symbolically backstage and stares at Eve as she is looking at herself in the mirror, in a reverberation of mirror scenes whereby Margo is looking at her symbolic younger self, Eve, and is figuratively fantasising with her mirrored younger self that she has in front of her. In Heisler's film, Margaret's attention is drawn to a magazine cover displayed in a shop window, showing the young face of Barbara Lawrence — who was played by actress Barbara Lawrence herself in the film — a younger star with whom Margaret competes for a role in a film. Once more, as if it were a mirror, Barbara's younger image on the magazine cover arises as an ideal that Margaret would like to match in order to regain her past splendour.

In Mankiewicz's film, Eve's presence unleashes Margo's dread and anxieties about her aging process. As Margo becomes increasingly conscious of her age, she gives Eve a dress on the grounds that she feels it is "too seventeenish" for herself, while Eve gives it no further importance and replies to Margo, "as though you were an old lady," although her words carry more insight than she actually seems to imply at first sight. Nonetheless, if Eve's presence accentuates Margo's age, to the extent that Margo symbolically regards Eve as the younger mirror self that she would like to match, Eve constantly studies Margo's behaviour as if it were a play, trying to imitate her gestures in order to become the experiences and revered actress that Margo is. In this respect, if Eve's presence accentuates Margo's aging but also her latent will to retain Eve's youth and act younger, Margo's presence stresses Eve's innocent-looking appearance, but also Eve's inner desire to acquire Margo's expertise and act older. In fact, in the opening scene in the film, as Addison introduces Eve, he states that she is "young in years, but whose heart is as old as the Theater," thus establishing a schism between what she appears to be and what she really is also in terms of aging. In this respect, Margo and Eve act as mirror images of each other, aging and younger selves of one another, which overlap, but also remain opposed to one another.

The corresponding contrast between younger and aging selves is also brought to the fore in Heisler's film. In *The Star*, convincing herself that she still retains her young-looking image as if time had not gone by, Margaret aspires to be cast in the leading role of an eighteen-year-old girl in a film. Nonetheless, Margaret is finally chosen for the supporting role of the protagonist's older sister,

who is around forty, thus matching Margaret's own age more closely. In the process of being characterised for the role, Margaret is put on some make-up and is made to wear clothes of darkish colours — thus resorting to what Gullette terms as age effects— which emphasise her aging traits and make her look older than her age.<sup>12</sup> As a reversal of previous mirror images, in which Margaret stares at a younger image of herself as an ideal, when she enters Barbara Lawrence's dress room and looks at herself in the mirror, Margaret cannot accept her aged traits which characterise her for the role. In this respect, this scene is evocative of Kathleen Woodward's mirror stage of old age,<sup>13</sup> in which, in contrast with Lacan's mirror stage, the aging person feels unable to identify with the aging image that the mirror reflects back as a symbolic fragmented self which contrasts with its unified identity as an adult person. As Leni Marshall admits, though, the subject's reluctance to accept its aging self as reflected in the mirror paves the way for transforming it with a final view to accept it.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, Margaret transforms her looks and adjusts her hair, make-up and clothes to convey a more youthful appearance. When the director sees her, he states that she looks too young for this part, and Margaret defends herself saying that "women at forty-two these days don't have to look ready for the old ladies' home." Besides, when she rehearses for a take, Margaret ignores the director's instructions and, instead of playing the character according to its age, Margaret performs it "like a young girl", as the director says, thus creating an entirely parodic effect, as she acts younger when she is supposed to act older.

In *All about Eve*, Margo gradually becomes more aware of the age gap widening between the young characters that she is offered to play, whose age remains frozen in time, and Margo Channing as an actress, who, despite her fame and success, is subjected to the effects of the passage of time. When Margo realises Eve has replaced her in the reading of the play and has performed her character magnificently, Margo exclaims to Richards, the playwright, "it must have been a revelation to have your twenty-four-old character played by a twenty-four-year old actress," thus subtly acknowledging that Eve appears to be a more suitable actress to play the character in terms of its age. Besides, when Eve unveils to Karen that she intends to take up the role of Cora and Karen reminds her that Richards wrote that part for Margo, Eve responds that "it could have been fifteen years ago," but "it's my part now," hence affirming that Margo is no longer suited to play twenty-old-characters any more. It is thus claimed that Margo has often been requested to act younger and play a younger character than her age. In *The Star*, Margaret decides to stick to her former younger characters

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12. Gullette, *Aged by Culture*, 2004, 168.

13. Kathleen Woodward, "The Mirror Stage of Old Age," in *Memory and Desire: Aging, Literature, Psychoanalysis* (eds.) Kathleen Woodward and Murray M. Schwartz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 97-113.

14. Leni Marshall, Through (with) the Looking Glass: Revisiting Lacan and Woodward in 'Méconnaissance,' the Mirror Stage of Old Age. *Feminist Formations* 24, no. 2 (2012): 63.

and play them young with disastrous effects. When she sees herself on the screen, acting young when she should be acting old, she realises her performance betrays itself and it is through her feigned and contrived acting that she gains insight into her situation and gives in to reality. Moreover, the actor that her character is talking to in this scene pertinently tells her, “you used to be quite a girl — you think you’re still one?” in a self-referential comment which underlines the change that Margaret has gone through both as an actress and as an aging woman. It is hence ironic that Margaret gives in to reality when she sees it projected on the screen, thus only gaining insight into truth and reality through acting and performance.

When Margo decides to retire from acting voluntarily, while Eve is at the peak of her career, it is assumed that a younger aspiring actress, Phoebe, who is reminiscent of Eve in her younger years, will play the same role that Eve played with regard to Margo, beginning as Eve’s understudy and eventually replacing her. Once more, it is through the presence of the other, of a double, who performs one’s own role that reality becomes more evident. In a final scene, Phoebe puts on Eve’s dress and holds her award in front of a mirror in a scene that replicates what Eve did with Margo. It is thus assumed that, as happened with Margo when Eve came along, Phoebe will replace Eve as she also grows older. In *The Star*, it is also through a mirror scene which blurs performances on screen and off screen that Margaret gains insight into her situation and makes her decision to retire from acting. Margaret is eventually offered another role, but, in this case, she is not required to play a younger or older character, but she is actually asked to play herself on the screen, as she is offered the role of an aging star who is always looking forward to the next part to play in a film. As the agent explains it to her, she is required to play one of those kinds of actresses who are constantly playing, those who permanently “think of themselves, what they look like, and what kind of impression they’re making.” It is once more ironic that Margaret is only able to gain insight into reality once it offers itself as feigned, as a performance, whereas she is unable to face the facts in real life. When she realises that the person that the script is describing matches her own situation in life, she refuses to accept the role and decides to give up acting.

## Conclusions

Although her role as Margo Channing in Mankiewicz’s film *All about Eve* granted Bette Davis great praise, only two years later, in Heisler’s film *The Star*, she would also play a similar role as an aging actress facing the decline of her career. As self-reflective films which explicitly deal with show business, film-making and performance on and off screen, both can be interpreted as complementing each other, although they also present some differing aspects in their approach.



Both films, *All about Eve* and *The Star* portray an aging actress —Margo Channing and Margaret Elliot— who was once a star, but is compelled to relinquish her former status as a result of the prevailing discourses of gender and aging. Both Margo and Margaret display an egotistic personality which is indicative of their roles as divas in the star system, although they are also portrayed as vulnerable women who feel increasingly hesitant at this crucial stage in their careers. As actresses, both Margo and Margaret display a proclivity for performance which transcends the stage or the screen, with histrionic gestures and temperamental demeanours which denote their devotion to the performing profession, which they use for their own benefit, although they also feel permanently required to play a role in their everyday lives. However, if in *All about Eve*, in spite of her fear and hesitance about the effects that her aging process may have on her career, Margo is still highly-acclaimed as an actress, conversely, in *The Star*, Margaret's golden years as an actress seem long gone by and, although some admirers still remember her, she is no longer offered any leading role in a film, as a result of which she undergoes serious economic difficulties.

Hence, despite the manifest intertextual links which paves the way for a comparative analysis between both films, *All about Eve* and *The Star* display a different approach in the characterisation of the aging actress. Margo mostly takes a realistic approach to her situation and keeps her feet on the ground, as her suspicions about Eve, which initially seemed overstated, are ultimately revealed to be not without foundation. In contrast, Margaret is prone to delusions of grandeur, she is unwilling to accept the fact that she is no longer the star she used to be, and she still clings on to hope and to her former image as a young actress. Hence, notwithstanding her inclination for drama, Margo displays a greater sense of self-possession, whereas Margaret's desperation and financial strain mostly turn her into a contemptible character. Besides, although both Margo and Margaret ultimately decide to renounce their career as actresses, Margo takes this decision voluntarily, as she believes she can no longer play the same roles she used to play as a younger actress, whereas Margaret is rather obliged to succumb to reality and unwillingly accept that her career as an actress has come to an end.

In Mankiewicz's film, Margo finds her counterpart and double in the character of Eve, who personifies the youth and freshness that Margo would like to retain at this stage of her career, although Eve's duplicity and limitless ambition eventually turn her into a villainess, thus, conversely characterising Margo as the heroine of the film, although both Margo and Eve replicate each other as doubles, since they find in one another what they apparently seem to lack. In contrast, in Heisler's film, although she also rivals with a younger actress —Barbara Lawrence, who happens to play herself in the film in a self-referential allusion—, Margaret rather arises as an anti-heroine, who acts as her own double, as her present self often tries to hold on to her former self as a star. Margaret's vulnerability and mental instability already prefigure Bette Davis' later grotesque and histrionic role as Jane in Robert Aldrich's film *What Ever Happened to Baby*

*Jane?*, which addresses how show business treats its youngest stars once they grow old and how they face mental disorders and disability as a result of their circumstances, as Sally Chivers claims.<sup>15</sup> Bette Davis' roles as Margo Channing, Margaret Elliot and Baby Jane thus move from a brighter to a bleaker portrait of the actress as an aging woman.

In Mankiewicz's film, Margo is asked to perform younger characters on stage, while Eve aspires to emulate Margo's maturity as an actress on stage. Margo would like to retain Eve's youth, and Eve would like to possess Margo's maturity as an actress. It is thus by means of Eve that Margo gains insight into her own process of aging, and it is through emulating Margo that Eve grows more aware of possessing the youth that Margo no longer seems to rejoice. As mirrors of each other, the performance of aging allows them to transform the way they approach their own aging process. Besides, it is unveiled that aging is a cyclical process, as Phoebe is ready to symbolically take over Eve's role and play the same part that Eve used to perform with Margo. In Heisler's film, for Margaret, performance implies her own personal way to understand reality, but also the means to transform it, as it is through performance that she lets go of her past splendour and is forced to make up a new identity of her own that will allow her to be herself.

By means of a concatenation of dualities, mirror scenes and doubles which overlap and entangle the characters' younger and aging selves, these films draw attention to the performative quality of aging, as characters are asked to play younger or older according to the prevailing dictates of aging. By means of the presence of symbolic others, characters gain insight into their aging process, as Margo becomes aware that she is growing old through Eve's presence, and in her solipsism, Margaret believes she can still cling to the frozen image of her youth as a glamorous actress until she is offered the role to play herself in a film and it is precisely through this fictional part that she is asked to perform that she becomes aware of her own circumstances as an aging actress. Performance of aging thus paves the way to raise awareness as regards aging, but also to transform age expectations and how characters are supposed to act according to their age. In this respect, both films share an ambiguous ending, since, away from the stage and the screen, both Margo and Margaret are finally allowed to act as themselves, although their decision to abandon acting is also informed by the prejudices of aging that prevail in show business. Hence, it is assumed that the performance off stage and off screen that they have also been entertaining will still go on, since it is not only show business which demands women to act according to age and gender, but also cultural discourses which condition the process of female aging.

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15. Sally Chivers, "Baby Jane Grew Up: The Dramatic Intersection of Age with Disability," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 36, no. 2 (2006): 211-227.

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