

Standard Application form for students applying for a +2 or +3 studentship in the Arts and Humanities
(September 2023 entry)

1. Studentship applied for (please tick):

- 2 years FT/ 4 years PT funding (for those who have already started a PhD programme)
 3 years FT/ 6 years PT funding

2. Named studentships you wish to be considered for (see guidance for details):

- Global Majority studentship
 Philosophy Pathway studentship for female Global Majority candidates
 Broken Pipeline studentship (UK only)

3. Candidate's details:

Name:	
Application / Registration number:	
Address:	
Town:	
Postcode:	
Country:	
Telephone:	
Email address:	
Nationality/Resident Status:	

4. Project details:

Mode of Attendance a. Full time b. Part time

Project title:	Digital Ages: Exploring the Industrial, Formal, and Theoretic Implications of Hollywood's
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	Digital De-ageing Trend
Pathway:	Media and Cultural Studies
Institution:	The University of Manchester

5. PhD Proposal:

5a) Please describe the proposed research (**up to 1500 words**). The word limit includes bibliography or references, tables, figures, table/figure captions and footnotes. Please include a word count.

Context, Project Overview

Since computer-generated imagery (CGI) was first used to de-age sexagenarian actors in *X-Men: The Last Stand* (Ratner, 2006), the popularity of and discussion surrounding digital de-ageing have exponentially increased. Indeed, Hollywood released nine products in 2022 that feature digital de-ageing, nearly doubling the output of their second-most prolific year. Further, the implementation of digital de-ageing technology has become both a primary marketing draw for new releases (Loock, 2021: 221) and a forerunner in conversations about job generation and career longevity (King, 2011: 258). Despite nearly twenty years of this expanding presence, digital de-ageing—whether it be minute edits that smooth wrinkles and sharpen jawlines or comprehensive CGI re-renderings—remains predominantly effected upon white male bodies (Holliday, 2022: 231). Hollywood has still not used this technology to de-age non-white women, Asian men, or disabled people (among other minority groups). It therefore becomes evident that this rapid increase in digital de-ageing carries high entertainment, economic, and sociocultural implications.

To investigate—and ultimately argue a stance on—this trend’s broader societal effects, it is necessary to comprehensively understand its impact on film form, industry, and theory. Drawing on existing research into digitisation’s wider destabilisation of film ontology, burgeoning scholarship on digital de-ageing has begun to discuss such implications. For example, complementing Barry King’s (2011) claim that digital effects hinder corporal star image signification, scholarship on digital de-ageing focusses on the trend’s destabilisation of (white, male) star careers’ temporally-fixed nature (Holliday, 2022; Loock, 2021) and prevailing notions of ‘acting’ (Bode, 2010; Holliday, 2022). Scholars have thus begun to explore this trend’s effects on film and academic conception thereof.

Whilst such work offers compelling fodder for prospective intersectional sociological research, several inquiries into digital de-ageing’s effect on film form, industry, and theory remain relatively unexamined. These include, firstly, the role of de-ageing in ongoing discussions of the digital’s effect on cinema’s material legacies. These conversations usually take contradictory stances, either positioning digital practice as an apathetic alternative to the “motion picture heritage[s...] original [material] glory” (Usai, 2001: 1) or, conversely, a champion of the wrongfully overlooked cinematic artist (Golding, 2021: 855). There accordingly exists an opportunity to examine this technology’s relation to the elitism and nostalgia that have evidently become entangled with the desire to preserve white, male, material cinematic tradition. Second, as nascently explored by Bode, Holliday, and Loock (and, more broadly, by Prince [2012: 99-110]), this technology also generates questions surrounding the ethics of digitally manipulating stars’ bodies within a profit-driven industry. These questions, as they pertain here, concern the ethical implications of who are digitally de-aged (e.g., white men above age 60, deceased *Star Wars* actors [Holliday, 2022: 219]) and how, as well as who this practice excludes (e.g., younger actors, Black women, disabled people). Finally, further questions arise surrounding this trend’s relationship to structures of labour and narrative within the franchises and genres that consistently contribute to it (e.g., Marvel, action and fantasy).

By addressing these concerns, this project aims to formulate new frameworks that will constitute a step towards comprehensive address of digital de-ageing’s wider sociocultural implications. In doing so, it will draw upon supervisory expertise in cultural gerontology and stardom (Drs.) and build on the work done by The University of Manchester’s Centre for Digital Humanities and Virtual Reality Research Facility.

Research Questions

This project will examine the implications of digital de-ageing on film form, industrial structures, and theory via the following questions:

1. How does the digital de-ageing trend impact academic understandings of the relationship between film history, the filmic (what spectators are shown), and the pro-filmic (what the camera records)?
2. How can understanding digital de-ageing’s introduction of new temporal, ethical, and economic influences on Hollywood stardom (namely star personas and performances) help us devise theoretical frameworks



that address such changes?

3. What is it about Hollywood's generic and franchisal structures that have enabled (or occasioned) such active practice of digital de-ageing, and what implications does this have on broader modes of on-screen storytelling?

Methodological Approach

This project adopts a textual studies approach inspired by Paul Willemen's encouragement to look beyond "what a film-text gives us to see" (Vitali and Rajadhyaksha, 2013: 91). Whilst, as Willemen (2013: 113) asserts, "cinema is primarily an indexical process [(i.e., employs images and sounds to indicate other entities)], film does not and never has consisted of indices only". As such, he argues that a "bricolaged" form of textual analysis can facilitate discernment of the complex intersections between film texts, technologies, "economic structures, [... and] ideological configurations" (Willemen, 2005: 105-7). Willemen (2013: 129-33) accordingly encourages analysis of factors like governmental censorship, distributor-imposed time constraints, or, most pertinently, the "special kind of relation to [...] wealth and power" signalled by a studio's investment in digital effects. I will thus examine academic, historical, and filmic texts that contribute to Western cinema ontology with the aim of effecting an analytical scope that accounts for wider industrial and socioeconomic forces that have contributed to this digital de-ageing trend.

Following Bode, Holliday, Loock, and Willemen, this investigation of digital de-ageing builds on pertinent academic study of the digital's effect on film ontology. Consideration of this intellectual lineage encourages one to question, for instance, whether analysis of digital technology's effective de-ageing of (certain) bodies will yield new answers to André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion's (2015: 5) inquiry as to "whether cinema, in its shift to the digital, has simply made a turn" or whether it is "undergoing a true mutation". Likewise, questions arise surrounding whether such an investigation will conclusively signal digital effects, as Stephen Prince (2012: 1) observes many to believe, as "gaudy spectacle[s that have] overwhelmed good storytelling". This project will thus examine digital de-ageing through existing discussion of the cultural and ontological repercussions of digitisation.

Whilst other regions' dominant cinema industries use digital de-ageing technology (e.g., India's *Vikram* [Kanagaraj, 2022]), my case studies will consist of Hollywood-affiliated films. I choose this scope for four reasons: first, Hollywood pioneered digital de-ageing technology, and has thus continuously occupied a role in academic discussions of its supposed contributions to the 'decay' and/or 'resurrection' of (white, male, material) cinematic tradition. Second, Hollywood's filmic output is one of the most ubiquitous, and thus constitutes the bulk of material that informs Western film studies theory, particularly star studies. Third, Hollywood is the most heavily subsidised film industry in the world (Willemen, 2005: 102). This overt economic link between government and media facilitates this project's ability to support the eventual examination of the intersections between Hollywood film output, digital de-ageing technology, American economic conditions, and cultural narratives of ageing. Lastly, Hollywood dedicates millions of dollars to saturate specific genres and franchises with digitally de-aged, on-screen stars. The industry thus houses several potential individual, generic, and franchisal case studies, including action film *Gemini Man* (Lee, 2019) and *Star Wars* and *Marvel* films. Therefore, because of its prominent role in the global economy, film industry, and academic discussions of film form, stardom, franchise, and genre, Hollywood's implementation of digital de-ageing technology will likely significantly inform what dominant culture considers esteemed, artistic cinematic storytelling (and its opposite).

I note that whilst Hollywood franchises also utilise digital de-ageing technology in television programmes and video games, this project focusses solely on their forerunner, film. In conversation with a widening pool of ethical concerns surrounding digital technology, I therefore hope that this project's formal reading will advance frameworks that can inform critical engagement with digital de-ageing technology's increasing normalisation, subliminal presence, and public accessibility—which extends beyond gaming consoles/television to smartphone applications like Snapchat and FaceApp. I hope that this study will make a lasting contribution to our understanding of film as a cultural formation and to further study of both Western conceptions of the ageing process and the sociocultural ramifications of the digital.

Bibliography

- Bode, L. (2010) No Longer Themselves? Framing Digitally Enabled Posthumous 'Performance'. *Cinema Journal*, 49(4), 46-70.
- Gaudreault, A. and Marion, P. (2015) *The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age*. Columbia University Press.
- Golding, D. (2021) The memory of perfection: Digital faces and nostalgic franchise cinema. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 27(4), 855-67.
- Holliday, C. (2022) Retroframing the Future: Digital De-ageing Technologies in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 61(5), 210-37.
- King, B. (2011) Articulating digital stardom. *Celebrity Studies*, 2(3), 247-262.
- Loock, K. (2021) On the realist aesthetics of digital de-ageing in contemporary Hollywood cinema. *ORBIS*



Litterarum, 76(4), 214-225.

Prince, S. (2012) *Digital Visual Effects in Cinema: The Seduction of Reality*. Rutgers University Press.

Usai, P.C. (2001) *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Vitali, V. and Rajadhyaksha, A. (2013) Introduction to the dossier: Paul Willemen (1944-2012). *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 14(1), 85-93.

Willemen, P. (2005) For a comparative film studies. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 6(1), 98-112.

Willemen, P. (2013) Indexicality, fantasy and the digital. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 14(1), 110-35.

Word Count: 1,480

5b) Please provide information on how the proposed research engages with issues relating to Equality, Diversity, Inclusion, and Sustainability (max 100 words)

This project engages with these issues in several ways: first, it will analyse (and thus encourage critical academic attention towards) digital de-ageing technology's role in the prevalent, ongoing desire to preserve white, male cinematic heritage. Second, this project will investigate the ethics surrounding the lack of digital de-ageing of non-white, non-male stars. Third, I aim to develop theory that can be used in investigations of both Western conceptions of ageing (i.e., research that investigates potentially oppressive cultural narratives) and the de-ageing of intersectionally disadvantaged groups (diversified, for example, by age, race, gender, and ability) in a range of media.

6. Qualifications, professional/ practical experience

Year awarded	Qualification type	Qualification Subject	Awarding institution	Class or GPA
Expected 2023	Master of Arts	Film Studies	The University of Manchester	Pending
2022	Bachelor of Arts (Hons)	Drama and Film Studies	The University of Manchester	1:1
2018	Associate of Arts	Liberal Arts	Community College of Vermont	4.0 GPA

Description of professional/ practical experience (max 350 words):

My ongoing immersion within and ancillary contribution to practice-based research with Belle Vue Productions (a film practice and museological research company co-founded by) have given me foundational knowledge in academic research processes.

My 2019-2020 work transliterating the Mary Hamilton Papers with the Undergraduate Scholars Programme likewise immersed me within a rigorous, professional-level research environment during my undergraduate career. My work within this programme honed a skillset in mining texts for research-relevant information and has allowed me to establish a familiar relationship with Prof. , whose position at the University's Centre for Digital Humanities may also facilitate opportunities for further research into digitisation during this PhD.

Furthermore, I have cultivated relevant research experience in textual analysis, genre studies, digital studies, and star studies throughout and beyond my AA, BA, and MA degrees. First, my AA research into the limited applicability of Joseph Campbell's 'Hero's Journey' concept introduced me to textual analysis via my exploration of narrative trends in several texts detailing Greek myths. Second, my BA dissertation immersed me in generic and textual analysis via its examination of depictions of childhood in anti-war films. Third, my 2022 analysis of filmic and extra-textual (i.e., tabloids, merchandise) elements of Julie Andrews's screen star persona bolstered my textual analysis skills,



	increased my intimacy with star studies, and earned me an award for the Best Individual Research Project within a Hollywood stardom-focused module. My postgraduate coursework—analysing the corporeally-centred allure of comedy star Marty Feldman—and dissertation—an investigation into how video streaming platforms have shifted the nature of internet stardom—have further honed my skills in textual analysis, digital studies, and star studies. Finally, my forthcoming peer-reviewed publication on power in Melvin Van Peebles's <i>Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song</i> (1971) evidences my skills in genre studies and a form of textual analysis that once again investigates extra-textual factors (i.e., marketing and distribution) as well as the film text.
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7. Supervision

Please propose the supervisory team for your project:

Institution	Supervisor
The University of Manchester	
The University of Manchester	

8. Research Training and resource needs (max 150 words for this section)

Please give details of the anticipated research training needed for your PhD project, including difficult language training. Please give details of the kind of resources you will potentially need during your PhD. Please also indicate whether your research project will require you to undertake research abroad.

My research would benefit from training into the complex economic structures of the Hollywood industry. This project is thus suitably positioned at The University of Manchester, for department head Dr. [redacted] has consistently researched such structures and can offer insight into relevant resources.

This project will not likely require travel abroad. However, if my research into the Hollywood industry shifts towards necessitating in-person study, the project could benefit from funding for flights and accommodation.

9. Collaboration with External Partners (max 150 words for this section)

Please give details of any potential collaboration you will develop with external organisations during your PhD programme (industry, cultural organisation, government bodies etc) including possible placements.

This is not a collaborative PhD.

10. References / Transcripts

Your institution will need to attach two references and your transcript(s) from your programme application to this application form.

11. Acknowledgement

I confirm that the information I have provided in this form is complete and accurate to the best of my knowledge at this date. I fully understand that it is my responsibility to ensure that the relevant forms are submitted to the relevant office in



due time and that any missing information may render my application incomplete and ineligible. I authorise the North West Consortium DTP to disclose to the AHRC any information that is relevant to my application.

Signature: (Type Name if submitted electronically)	
Date:	

