Still Rare, Still Ridiculed:
Portrayals of Senior Characters On Screen in Popular Films from 2015 and 2016

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The purpose of the present investigation is to assess the depiction of senior characters in popular films from 2016. To do so, a secondary analysis was conducted of the 100 top-grossing films of 2016, building on a yearly report authored by the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative. Every speaking or named character appearing on screen was evaluated quantitatively for demographic attributes (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, LGBT status). Qualitatively, every senior character age 60 or older (*n*=458) was assessed for additional variables related to employment and health. Further, primary and secondary senior characters (*n*=93) were examined in a qualitative analysis. The leisure activities, relationships, and health profile of these characters were of interest. Finally, each film featuring a primary or secondary senior character was scoured for the presence of ageist comments.

Prevalence of Senior Characters. Out of the 4,288 speaking or named characters with a discernible age, only 10.7% (*n*=458) were 60 years of age or older. This point statistic is 9.2% below U.S. Census (19.9%), and virtually identical to the percentage found in 2015 (11%).

Only 9 films out of 100 featured seniors within ±2 percentage points of U.S. Census, which is 4 more than the number of films in 2015. Nine films failed to depict one senior speaking character on screen.

In terms of gender, 26.4% of all senior characters were female (73.6% male). This calculates into a ratio of 2.78 senior male characters to every 1 senior female character. The percentage of senior women on screen in 2016 is virtually identical (-.08) to the percentage of senior women on screen in 2015 (27.2%).

Looking at the race/ethnicity of senior characters, a full 77.1% were White, 11.8% Black, 1.2% Hispanic/Latino, 5.4% Asian, and 4.5% were mixed or from an Other racial/ethnic group.

Only 22.9% of senior characters were depicted from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, which is below the U.S. Census for this age group (24.1%). However, this is 5% greater than the percentage of underrepresented seniors on screen across the 100 top films of 2015.

Only three senior characters were LGBT identified across the 100 top films of 2016. Each of these senior characters was a gay male, with two in supporting roles and one inconsequential to the plot. Senior females that are Lesbian or Bisexual were completely missing from the entire sample. Not one senior character was transgender in 2015 or 2016.

A total of 39 movies did not portray a single female senior speaking character. Focusing on women of color, this number jumps significantly higher. Fully 88 movies did not have a single Black senior woman on screen and 95 were lacking Asian women 60 and above. Across the full sample of 100 movies, not one had a Latina senior character that talked or was named over the course of the entire plot.

In terms of leads/co leads, a total of 6 of the 100 top films starred a senior protagonist. Two of the male leads were Black. Only one white senior female drove the action across the 100 top movies of 2016. Looking to ensemble films, only one included a senior character 60 years of age or older. No women of color over 60 years of age were included in leading/co leading roles nor did they function prominently in a part of an ensemble cast across 100 films.

Employment of Senior Characters. In total, 65.9% (*n*=302) of seniors were employed, while 34.1% (*n*=156) were not. Senior males (73.6%) were more likely than senior females (44.6%) to have a job.

While White senior characters held a greater share of jobs (77.5) than senior characters from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups (22.5%), overall there was little difference in the percentage of seniors from these groups who were employed. Two-thirds of all White characters (67.6%) and of underrepresented (66%) characters had a job.

Males (85.2%) held a greater share of high clout occupations than females (14.8%). This is a ratio of 5.8 males to every one female in a high clout occupation.

Examining a few of the sectors in which females held high clout positions, just four female seniors held political power. Law enforcement, intelligence, and armed services included just one fictional female senior in command. Finally, no senior females were depicted in influential positions in the science, technology, and engineering sector.

84.1% of characters in high clout jobs were White while 15.8% were from underrepresented groups. Seven underrepresented seniors filled prestigious posts in politics and government (3 served as royals or rulers), 1 was a high-ranking scientist in the STE field, 1 worked in business and finance, 1 in the legal arena, 1 in academia, and 2 in law enforcement and military roles. The lone senior underrepresented female in a prestigious occupation worked in the law enforcement sector.

Health Issues of Senior Characters. Of the 458 senior characters across 100 films, 10% were depicted with a health issue during the plot. Most health problems were faced by senior men (63%), while 37% of health issues were the province of senior women. Nearly three-quarters (70.7%) of health problems were experienced by White characters, while 29.3% of health problems occurred among characters from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups.

Most health problems (80.4%) fell into a category of mental, physical, or communicative impairments. A few seniors (8.7%) were in recovery from accident or injury, while 6.5% had a physical illness and 4.3% had a non-specified health issue.

Few (10.5%) senior characters died in popular films. Three-quarters (77.1%) of the seniors who perished were male, while 22.9% were female. Of the seniors whose race/ethnicity was captured, a full 73.3% of the seniors who died were White, with 26.7% from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups.

The cause of death for senior characters was examined. An overwhelming percentage—87.5%—of seniors died as the result of aggression by others or from self-inflicted wounds. This included being shot, stabbed, pushed through a window, the victim of an explosion, or drowning. Just 4.2% of seniors died due to a medical issue, while 8.3% died from a non-specific or natural cause.

Leisure Time Activities of Senior Characters. The leisure activities of 93 leading and supporting senior characters were assessed. One-quarter 24.7% of leading/supporting seniors pursued a hobby or had a discernible interest. Slightly more leading/supporting seniors (28%) attended events.

Nearly one-quarter (22.6%) of seniors traveled during the films analyzed. These could be short or long trips to domestic, international, or even fantastical realms (e.g., Troll Country, Dream Country, Geotopia).

Roughly one-quarter (23.7%) of seniors in film consumed media, which included newspapers, books, television, or films. Of the seniors using media, males consumed more (77.3%) than females (22.7%) and White characters (72.7%) more than underrepresented characters (31.8%).

Media use was further broken down into news/informational program consumption and television viewing. Both were relatively rare among all seniors. Just 15% of all seniors spent time with news, which represents 63.6% of seniors who engaged with media at all. The same percentage of seniors (15%) were shown watching television.

A full 40.9% of seniors were shown utilizing technology. This is an 11.8% percentage point increase over the percentage of leading/supporting seniors shown using technology in 2015. Of tech users, males (76.3%) outnumbered females (23.1%). Looking more closely at device use, of those seniors using technology, 63.2% utilized a cell phone. A full 55.3% of the seniors who used technology worked on a computer.

Ageist Comments. A total of 57 films featured leading or supporting senior characters. Of those, 44% or 25 contained ageist comments. Of the films with an ageist comment, 16% contained self-references made by seniors, 32% contained comments made by other characters, and 52% included ageist comments made by both seniors and by other characters.

Nearly three-quarters (84%) of the films with ageist references had general comments related to age. A full 56% of films included comments about health, including mental well-being, memory, and hearing. Nearly one-quarter (24%) of movies with ageist comments featured statements about appearance and smell. Finally, 24% of movies with ageist comments included derogatory references to death.

Nearly 20% of the U.S. population is age 60 or older.[1] Seniors also comprise 13% of the ticket buyers at the U.S./Canada box office.[2] Yet, our previous studies have illuminated that on screen, seniors are missing and misrepresented.[3] The purpose of the present investigation is to extend this research by assessing the depiction of senior characters in popular films from 2016. To do so, a secondary analysis was conducted of the 100 top-grossing films of 2016, building on a yearly report authored by the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative.[4] Every speaking or named character appearing on screen was evaluated quantitatively for demographic attributes (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, LGBT status).[5] Qualitatively, every senior character age 60 or older (*n*=458) was assessed for additional variables related to employment and health.[6]

FIGURE 1
SENIOR SPEAKING CHARACTERS OVERALL
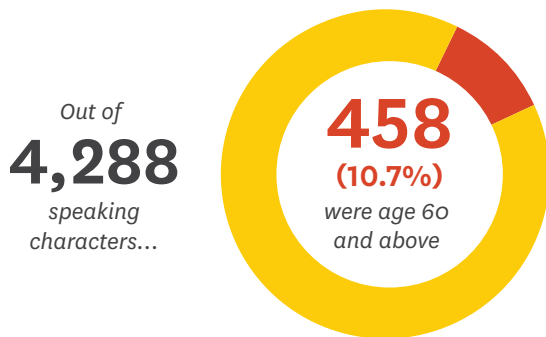
Out of
4,288
speaking characters...

458
(10.7%)
were age 60 and above

Further, primary and secondary senior characters (*n*=93) were examined in a qualitative analysis.[7] The leisure activities, relationships, and health profile of these characters were of interest. Finally, each film featuring a primary or secondary senior character was scoured for the presence of ageist comments. Below, the results of the investigation are presented in five major areas. Where relevant, over time comparisons are drawn to films from 2015.[8]

#1 What is the Demographic Profile of Seniors On Screen?

Out of the 4,288 speaking or named characters with a discernible age, only 10.7% (*n*=458) were 60 years of age or older. This point statistic is not only 9.2% below U.S. Census (19.9%), but virtually identical to the percentage found in 2015 (11%). Only 9 films out of 100 featured seniors within +2 percentage points of U.S. Census, which is 4 more than the number of films in 2015.

For senior characters only, gender, race/ethnicity, and LGBT standing were assessed. In terms of gender, 26.4% of all senior characters were female (73.6% male). This calculates into a ratio of 2.78 senior male characters to every 1 senior female character. The percentage of senior women on screen in 2016 is virtually identical (-.08) to the percentage of senior women on screen in 2015 (27.2%).

TABLE 1
SENIOR SPEAKING CHARACTERS BY GENDER AND YEAR
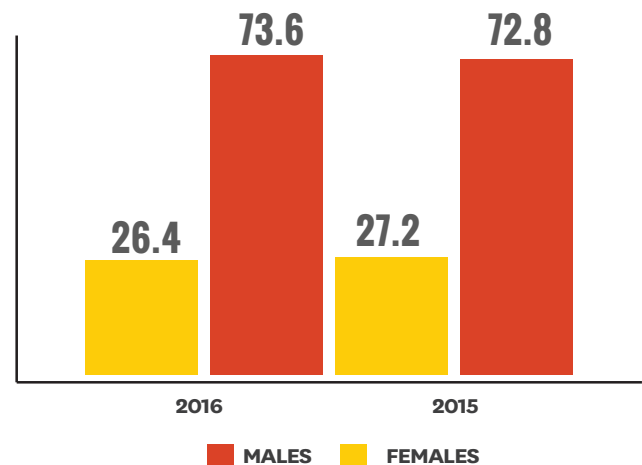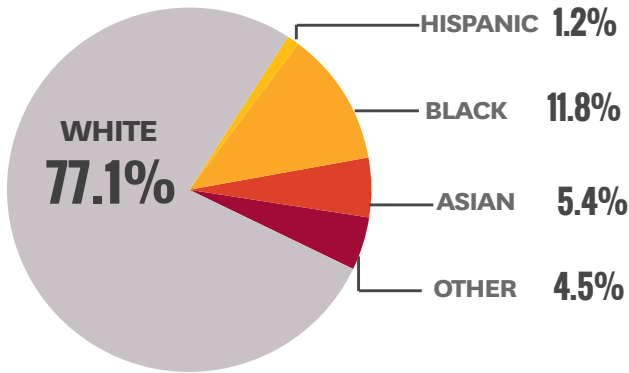
Senior speaking characters by gender, in percentages

	2016	2015
MALES	73.6	72.8
FEMALES	26.4	27.2

FIGURE 2
RACE/ETHNICITY OF SENIOR CHARACTERS

HISPANIC **1.2%**

BLACK **11.8%**

WHITE
77.1%

ASIAN **5.4%**

OTHER **4.5%**

% of underrepresented senior characters: **22.9%**

For race/ethnicity of senior characters, a full 77.1% were White, 11.8% Black, 1.2% Hispanic/Latino, 5.4% Asian, and 4.5% were mixed or from an Other racial/ethnic group. In total, only 22.9% of senior characters were depicted from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, which is below the U.S. Census for this age group (24.1%).[9] However, this is 5% greater than the percentage of underrepresented seniors on screen across the 100 top films of 2015.

Turning to apparent sexuality, only three senior characters were LGBT identified across the 100 top films of 2016. Each of these senior characters was a gay male, with two in supporting roles and one inconsequential to the plot. Two of these characters were White and one was a brief depiction of an anthropomorphized animal. These findings indicate that senior females that are Lesbian or Bisexual were completely missing from the entire sample. 2016 did not differ from 2015, where only two gay male senior characters appeared across the 100 top movies. Not one senior character was transgender in 2015 or 2016.

Looking at the percentage of seniors on screen only by demographic measures fails to reveal the distribution of characters aged 60 and above across the sample. As a result, an additional "invisibility" analysis was undertaken which focused on how many of the 100 top films of 2016 were missing seniors altogether. Nine films failed to depict one senior speaking character on screen. Given the lack of gender and racial/ethnic diversity on screen, we were curious how many movies did not depict at least one senior woman on screen as well as senior women from specific racial/ethnic groups.

TABLE 2
UNDERREPRESENTED FEMALE SENIORS BY YEAR
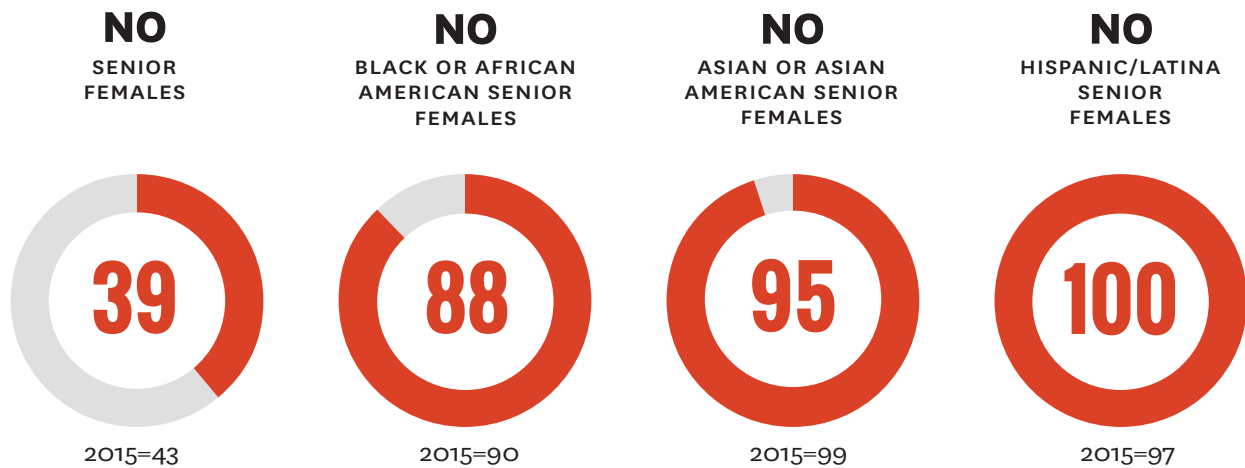
Percentage of underrepresented female seniors

23.6%

24.1%
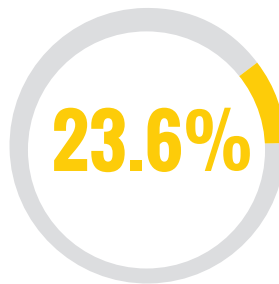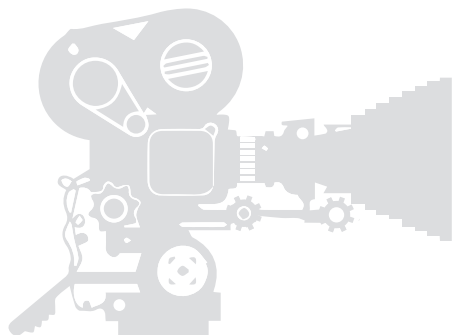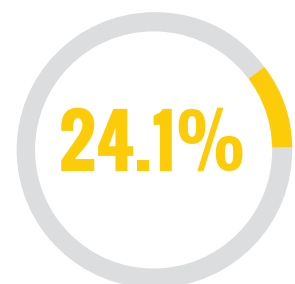
2016

2015

TABLE 3
INVISIBILITY OF SENIOR WOMEN BY YEAR

Of the 100 top films of 2016, the number of films with...

NO SENIOR FEMALES	**NO** BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN SENIOR FEMALES	**NO** ASIAN OR ASIAN AMERICAN SENIOR FEMALES	**NO** HISPANIC/LATINA SENIOR FEMALES
39	**88**	**95**	**100**
2015=43	2015=90	2015=99	2015=97

A total of 39 movies did not portray a single female senior speaking character. Focusing on women of color, this number jumps significantly higher. Fully 88 movies do not have a single Black senior woman on screen and 95 were lacking Asian women 60 and above. Across the full sample of 100 movies, not one has a Latina senior character that talked or was named over the course of the entire plot. This is a complete erasure of underrepresented senior women.

Slight fluctuations in the number of films missing underrepresented senior female characters were observed between 2015 and 2016. Table 3 demonstrates that the number of films missing Black or Asian senior women decreased in 2016. However, the number of films missing Latina seniors increased in 2016. Despite these small changes, senior females from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups are nearly invisible in popular films.

The above analyses examined the prevalence and demographics of all senior speaking characters. Now, we turn our attention to leading characters that drive the storylines. In terms of leads/co leads, a total of 6 of the 100 top films starred a senior protagonist which is lower than 2015 (*n*=10). Five of these actors were male, yet one played a female in *Boo! A Madea Halloween*. Two of these male leads were Black (Tyler Perry, Denzel Washington). Only one white senior female (Meryl Streep) drove the action across the 100 top movies of 2016. Looking to ensemble films, only one included a senior character 60 years of age or older. That additional role was filled by a Black male (Danny Glover) in *Almost Christmas*. Together, these findings reveal that the only racial diversity on screen in leading roles involves Black senior males. No women of color over 60 years of age were included in leading/co leading roles nor did they function prominently in a part of an ensemble cast across 100 films.

FIGURE 3
LEADING FEMALE SENIOR CHARACTERS BY YEAR

	2016	**2015**
# of films with female senior leads or co leads	🧍	🧍🧍🧍
# of films with female senior leads in ensembles	0	🧍🧍🧍🧍

#2 What is the Employment Profile of Seniors On Screen?

Senior characters (*n*=458) were qualitatively examined for aspects of employment across all 100 movies.[10] In total, 65.9% (*n*=302) of seniors were employed, while 34.1% (*n*=156) were not. Senior males (73.6%, *n*=248) were more likely than senior females (44.6%, *n*=54) to have a job. While White senior characters held a greater share of jobs (77.5%, *n*=221) than senior characters from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups (22.5%, *n*=64), overall there was little difference in the percentage of seniors from these groups who were employed. Two-thirds of all White characters (67.6%) and of underrepresented (66%) characters had a job.

Looking more closely at the occupational profile of senior characters, the level of clout or prestige was evaluated. Males (85.2%, *n*=75) held a greater share of positions with occupational importance than females (14.8%, *n*=13). This is a ratio of 5.8 males to every one female in a high clout occupation. This is consistent with our findings across popular films from 2015, Academy Award-nominated fare, and popular television series.[11]

Table 4 illuminates the distribution of occupational clout by gender for seniors. Clearly, male senior characters held positions of influence across all the sectors evaluated. Female seniors, however, are rare. Just four female seniors held political power. This consisted of a female running a major city, two females in foreign governments (i.e., German Chancellor, British Home Secretary), and a depiction of the British Queen—a non-elected role. In 2016, a year when senior women were in the running for or held notable political offices across the globe, film failed to represent this reality.

Similarly, law enforcement, intelligence, and armed services included just one fictional female senior in command. In fact, the lone female character in this position held it in a distant future. This character was the only underrepresented female senior to hold a high clout position. The portrayal may illustrate that senior women will gain ground in this sector in the future. But it does little to showcase the current percentage of senior women wielding influence in law enforcement in present day America.

TABLE 4
OCCUPATIONAL CLOUT OF EMPLOYED SENIOR CHARACTERS BY GENDER

MEASURE	♂	♀
% IN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENGINEERING (*e.g., NASA CEO, Private Lab Scientist*)	100% (*n*=4)	0
% IN POLITICS (*e.g., Presidents, Prime Ministers, Senators, Royals*)	89.5% (*n*=34)	10.5% (*n*=4)
% IN BUSINESS/FINANCIAL (*e.g., Executive Officers, Directors of Companies & Institutions*)	64.3% (*n*=9)	35.7% (*n*=5)
% IN LAW (*e.g., Chief State Justices, Department of Justice Head, Attorney General*)	66.7% (*n*=2)	33.3% (*n*=1)
% IN ACADEMIA (*e.g., Principals & Headmasters*)	66.7% (*n*=2)	33.3% (*n*=1)
% IN HEALTHCARE (*e.g., CMOs, Physicians, Surgeons*)	100% (*n*=5)	0
% IN LAW ENFORCEMENT, INTELLIGENCE, & ARMED FORCES (*e.g., Generals, Directors, Chiefs*)	94.1% (*n*=16)	5.9% (*n*=1)
% IN OTHER (*e.g., Journalism, Religion, Entertainment*)	75% (*n*=3)	25% (*n*=1)
TOTAL	**75**	**13**

The business and financial sector did include five female seniors. These depictions featured women investors or those running large companies or other institutions. All of the women with high-clout occupations in this sector were White.
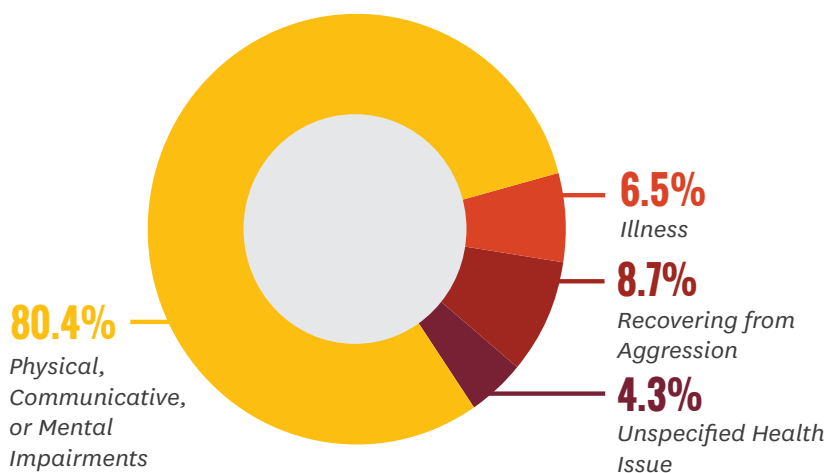
One further area in which a disparity exists is in the science, technology, and engineering sector. No senior females were depicted in influential STEM positions. Given public concern that younger viewers are not seeing a lack of female role models in scientific fields, the exclusion of older female characters is notable.

Turning to seniors from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, 84.1% (*n*=69) of characters in high clout jobs were White while 15.8% (*n*=13) were from underrepresented groups. Seven underrepresented seniors filled prestigious posts in politics and government (3 served as royals or rulers), 1 was a high-ranking scientist in the STE field, 1 worked in business and finance, 1 in the legal arena, 1 in academia, and 2 in law enforcement and military roles. This final sector included, as previously mentioned, the lone senior underrepresented female in a prestigious occupation.

Overall, the occupational picture for seniors in film is mixed. Over 60% of seniors were shown with a job in the films analyzed. However, males were more likely than females to be employed. In high clout positions this disparity was exacerbated, as male seniors were over five times as likely to be shown in high-powered jobs. White characters were also more likely than characters from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups to be depicted in prominent occupations. Clearly, the world of work depicted in film is divorced from a reality in which powerful, diverse seniors occupy high-level jobs.

#3 What is the Health & Wellness Profile of Seniors On Screen?

FIGURE 4
HEALTH-RELATED ISSUES OF SENIOR CHARACTERS

6.5%
Illness

8.7%
Recovering from Aggression

4.3%
Unspecified Health Issue

80.4%
Physical, Communicative, or Mental Impairments

Note: Chart represents the 46 characters aged 60 and above who appeared with a health issue across the plot. Chart totals to 100%.

Of the 458 senior characters across 100 films, 10% (*n*=46) were depicted with a health issue during the plot.[12] Most health problems were faced by senior men (63%, *n*=29), while 37% (*n*=17) of health issues were the province of senior women. Nearly three-quarters (70.7%, *n*=29) of health problems were experienced by White characters, while 29.3% (*n*=12) of health problems occurred among characters from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. Five characters with health issues were anthropomorphized animals whose race/ethnicity was not discernible.

The health issues of senior characters were classified into four mutually exclusive categories (see Figure 4). Most health problems (80.4%, n=37) fell into a category of mental, physical, or communicative impairments. These included blindness, mobility impairments, hearing problems, and even mental health issues. A few seniors (8.7%, n=4) were in recovery from accident or injury, while 6.5% (n=3) had a physical illness (e.g., diabetes, liver failure, syphilis) and 4.3% (n=2) had a non-specified health issue (e.g., coma, other hospitalization).

Only 7% of seniors (n=32) utilized an assistive device or medicines. Most of those seniors used a wheelchair, cane, or other mobility device (65.6%, n=21) while 18.8% (n=6) took medicines or other chemical remedies. The remaining 15.6% (n=5) used both types of assistive devices. These findings demonstrate that assistive devices are rare in film.

Additionally, the death of senior characters was explored. Few (10.5%, n=48) senior characters died in popular films. Three-quarters (77.1%, n=37) of the seniors who perished were male, while 22.9% (n=11) were female. Of the seniors whose race/ethnicity was captured, a full 73.3% (n=33) of the seniors who died were White, with 26.7% (n=12) from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups.

TABLE 5
**MAJOR CAUSES OF DEATH: SENIORS IN FILM VS. U.S.**

100 TOP FILMS	U.S.
1. Violence	1. Heart Disease
2. No Specific Cause Given	2. Malignant Neoplasms
3. Illness	3. Chronic Lower Respiratory Diseases

Note: Table represents the 48 characters aged 60 and above who died across the course of the plot.

As with previous reports, the cause of death for senior characters was examined. In the U.S., senior mortality is primarily the result of illnesses such as heart disease, cancer, or respiratory ailments.[13] However, in film the leading cause of senior death is violence. An overwhelming percentage—87.5% (n=42)—of seniors died as the result of aggression by others or from self-inflicted wounds. This included being shot, stabbed, pushed through a window, the victim of an explosion, or drowning. Just 4.2% (n=2) of seniors died due to a medical issue, while 8.3% (n=4) died from a non-specific or natural cause.

The results from this section are almost identical to the findings on popular films from 2015.[14] While in 2016, a larger share of seniors with health issues had physical, communicative, or mental impairments, overall seniors were primarily healthy. This is also consistent with the health profile of senior characters in television and in Academy Award-nominated films.[15] Though few senior characters died in the films examined, most (87.5%) perished due to aggression. Seniors also died from diseases (4.2%) and 8.3% died of non-specific or natural causes. These findings communicate to the viewing audience that health issues rarely face senior characters and paints a grim picture of death. Importantly, for both senior audiences and younger viewers, the health realities of aging appear to be absent on screen.

TABLE 6
LEISURE TIME ACTIVITY OF SENIOR CHARACTERS
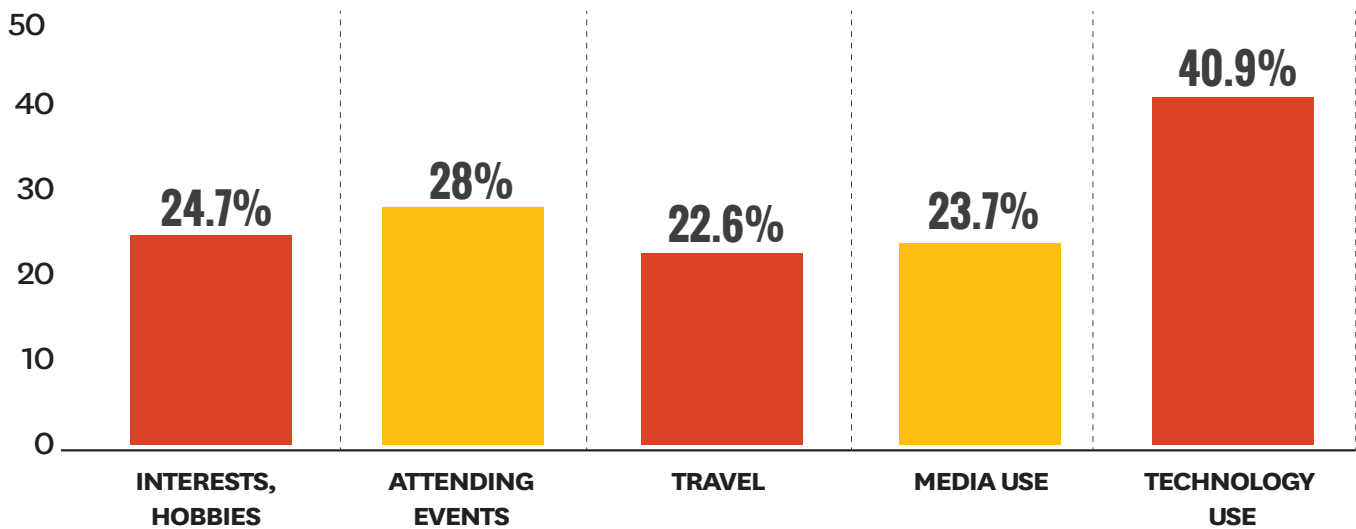
Note: Percent out of the 93 leading and supporting characters aged 60 and above. Columns do not total to 100%. Subtracting each percentage from 100% reveals the percent of characters not shown with a particular leisure-time activity.

#4 What is the Leisure-Time Profile of Seniors On Screen?

The next section focus on a smaller subset of senior characters: those who held leading or supporting roles in film. A total of 93 leading and supporting senior characters appeared across 57 films. For each of these characters, leisure time activities were examined. Leisure pursuits were those outside of work and actions required to care for oneself. Table 6 outlines the leisure activities of senior characters.

One-quarter 24.7% (n=23) of leading/supporting seniors pursued a hobby or had a discernible interest. These included dancing, meditating, fishing, genealogy, and musical pursuits like playing piano and singing. Of the seniors with hobbies, males (78.3%, n=18) were more likely to be shown with interests than females (21.7%, n=5). Most seniors with hobbies or interests were White (71.4%, n=15), with 28.6% from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. Two seniors with hobbies/activities were anthropomorphized animals with no race/ethnicity.

Slightly more leading/supporting seniors (28%, n=26) attended events. These were parties, weddings, funerals, and public events. Event attendance was split equally across males (50%, n=13) and females (50%, n=13), while characters from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups comprised 42.9% (n=9) of attendees and White seniors 57.1% (n=12). Five seniors that attended events were non-humans who did not have a race/ethnicity.

Nearly one-quarter 22.6% (n=21) of seniors traveled during the films analyzed. These could be short or long trips to domestic, international, or even fantastical realms (e.g., Troll Country, Dream Country, Geotopia). Males (71.4%, n=15) were more often travelers than females (28.6%, n=6). Of the travelers, one-third (n=6) were from underrepresented groups and two-thirds (n=12) were White, with three characters from non-human species.

Turning to pursuits at home, the media use profile of senior characters was of interest. Seniors watch over six hours per day of television, and the over-50 demographic consumes the largest share of news.[16] However, just 23.7% (*n*=22) of seniors in film consumed media, which included newspapers, books, television, or films. Of the seniors using media, males consumed more (77.3%, *n*=17) than females (22.7%, *n*=5) and White characters (72.7%, *n*=16) more than underrepresented characters (31.8%, *n*=7).

Media use was further broken down into news/informational program consumption and television viewing. Both were relatively rare among all seniors. Just 15% of all seniors (*n*=14) spent time with news, which represents 63.6% of seniors who engaged with media at all. The same percentage of seniors (15%, *n*=14) were shown watching television.

Technology use was assessed for leading/supporting seniors as well. A full 40.9% of seniors were shown utilizing technology in the films studied. This is an 11.8% percentage point increase over the percentage of leading/supporting seniors shown using technology in 2015. Of tech users, males (76.3%, *n*=29) outnumbered females (23.1%, *n*=9). However, while females overall (34.6%, *n*=9 of 26) were less likely than males overall (43.3%, *n*=29 of 67) to use technology, the difference was less pronounced. In terms of race/ethnicity, nearly three-quarters (73.7%, *n*=28) of tech users were White and less than one-quarter (21%, *n*=8) were from underrepresented groups. The gap again narrows somewhat as 51.8% (*n*=28 of 54) of White characters and 34.8% (*n*=8 of 23) of underrepresented characters overall were tech users. Looking more closely at device use, of those seniors using technology, 63.2% (*n*=24) utilized a cell phone. A full 55.3% (*n*=21) of the seniors who used technology worked on a computer.

The trends above suggest that leisure activities are not the focus of senior characters in film. This may be due to the nature of storytelling, but few senior characters illustrate the variety of pastimes that in reality older individuals enjoy. Particularly when it comes to media use, film does not portray the habits of older Americans. One encouraging sign is the increase in portrayals of tech use; as a generation of American tech users age, their technology habits will follow them. Putting more tech in the hands of seniors in film is one step toward more accurately representing the abilities and activities of real-world seniors.

#5 How Much Ageism Surrounds Seniors On Screen?

A total of 57 films featured leading or supporting senior characters. Of those, 44% or 25 contained ageist comments. An ageist comment consisted of a verbal or nonverbal reference to aging or negative aspects related to growing old or to seniors' lives. Ageist comments could be generated by a senior or by another character. Of the films with an ageist comment, 16% (*n*=4) contained self-references made by seniors, 32% (*n*=8) contained comments made by other characters, and 52% (*n*=13) included ageist comments made by both seniors and by other characters.

The nature of ageist comments also was explored. Nearly three-quarters (84%, *n*=21) of the films with ageist references had general comments related to age. Examples include:

"Why are you wasting your time talking to a grumpy old rat?"
"Okay, well, I'm tired of talking to you old people, so I'm gonna go upstairs."
"He's old and decrepit!"

A full 56% of films included comments about health, including mental well-being, memory, and hearing. The incidence of these comments is surprising, given that few seniors faced health issues in the stories told. Examples of this category include:

"Should I call an ambulance? No, that'll make him feel old."
"You shouldn't waste your time with a crazy old man."
"Look at that, she remembers me."

Nearly one-quarter (24%) of movies with ageist comments featured statements about appearance and smell. For example, comment such as:

"You better get married. You're starting to look old."
"You've been eating all that bad shit—that's why your ass looks so frail."
"Just look at you dear. Wow! You don't look a day over 90!"

Finally, 24% of movies with ageist comments included derogatory references to death. Comments in this category included:

"You may have lots of time, but for me every breath is a cliffhanger."
"Oh Granny. My sweet, malicious Granny. Why does it always have to be the old ones who go first?"
"You're not gonna die on me, are you?"

These results are in line with our previous research on films from 2015, Academy Award-nominated movies, and even popular television series.[17] Across these studies, it is clear that ageism is an acceptable aspect of storytelling. However, for senior viewers, these comments may have adverse effects. Priming of negative age-related stereotypes among seniors has been linked to unfavorable health outcomes such as cardiovascular reactions and memory activities.[18] Though writers may intend to poke fun at aging by comically exaggerating stereotypes of older characters, the effects may not be funny at all.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this investigation was to assess the prevalence and portrayal of senior characters in 100 popular films from 2016. The results of the study, across both quantitative and qualitative data, reveal that little has changed in the depiction of seniors since 2015.

SENIORS ARE RARE IN ON SCREEN ROLES

Characters age 60 and older represented just 10.7% of all speaking characters across the 100 most popular films of 2016. In reality, seniors are 19.9% of the U.S. population[19] and 13% of the ticket buyers at the box office.[20] The percentage of senior speaking characters in this study is not different than the percentage of seniors in popular films from 2015, Academy Award-nominated movies over the past 3 years, or in popular television series from 2016-17.[21] It is clear from this body of work that senior characters are routinely marginalized across media platforms, despite their presence in the audience.

Apart from underrepresentation, the diversity of seniors is not depicted in film. Slightly more than one-quarter of senior characters were female (26.4%), and 39 films were devoid of any senior female speaking characters. Just 22.9% of senior characters were from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. The invisibility of senior females from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups was also staggering: 88 films were missing Black/African American senior women, 95 were missing Asian senior women, and out of 100 movies, not one included a Latina senior. The LGBT community is also missing in film. Only three senior LGBT characters appeared across the films examined, and not one of these was a senior woman. The image of a senior character in film is that of a straight, white male—a far cry from reality.

EMPLOYMENT FOR SENIORS IS NOT EQUAL

The jobs of senior characters were explored, with the findings affirming our results from 2015: seniors face a gendered job market. A handful of senior females are at the pinnacle of various industry sectors, while male seniors were over five times as likely to hold leadership positions. This is also the case for seniors from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups—especially diverse senior women. These disparities may convey to younger viewers that senior women or seniors from underrepresented groups do not have an important place in the hierarchy of different organizations. It may also communicate to older viewers—particularly females—that their contributions to the workforce are of little value.

SENIORS ON SCREEN LIVES CONFLICT WITH REALITY

Seniors in film enjoy good health, as only 10% of senior characters were shown with a health problem. Additionally, while few seniors died, the overwhelming cause of senior death was violence. These two on-screen realities present a skewed picture of the issues confronting seniors off-screen. Moreover, the consequences of viewing these depictions may affect how senior audiences think about their own vulnerabilities. As a result, seniors may fear aggression from others more than the very real (and sometimes preventable) health risks they face.

The leisure time activities of seniors were also catalogued. Roughly one-quarter of seniors pursued hobbies, attended events, traveled, or spent time with media. Additionally, 40.9% of seniors used technology during the films analyzed. Although this is an increase from 2015, the leisure pursuits of seniors remain largely unexplored in film.

SENIORS FACE AGEISM ON SCREEN

Across four reports, we have documented the prevalence of ageist comments facing senior characters on screen in film and television content. In 2016, 44% of the 100 top-grossing films featuring a leading or supporting senior character featured one or more ageist comments. These comments demeaned or disparaged seniors for their age, their health, their memory, and even included statements related to death. Research reveals that priming stereotypes related to aging can have negative effects on seniors' health and well-being.[22] By including ageist comments in films, writers may be priming the very stereotypes that can harm audiences.

Three limitations of the study must be noted. First, only 100 top-grossing films from 2016 were evaluated. While large, this sample does not include less popular movies that may (or may not) include more senior characters or appeal to older audiences. Examining a broader array of films might alter the results presented here. Second, only films with leading and supporting senior characters were analyzed for the presence of ageist comments

and other qualitative indicators. Assessing more characters or films with only inconsequential senior characters might prove important for scholars who are curious about how seniors are treated in those movies. Finally, while the results of this study and our other work provide a crucial look at the portrayal of seniors, more research is needed on the effects of these depictions on both younger and older audiences.

In conclusion, top-grossing movies continue to under- and misrepresent seniors on screen. In reality, the aging process is diverse, as is the generation of individuals who are currently age 60 and older. Our popular cultural narratives do not present the stories and experiences of seniors. As a result, viewers miss out on rich depictions that can confront our stereotypes about older individuals and broaden our views about what it means to age today.

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FOOTNOTES

1. U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.). *Age Groups and Sex: 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates*. Available: https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_15_5YR_S0101&prodType=table

2. MPAA Theatrical Market Statistics (2016). Retrieved from https://www.mpaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/MPAA-Theatrical-Market-Statistics-2016_Final.pdf.

3. Smith, S.L., Pieper, K., & Choueiti, M. (2016). *The Rare and Ridiculed: Senior Citizens in the 100 Top Films of 2015*. Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative, USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. Report prepared for Humana. Smith, S.L., Choueiti, M., & Pieper, K. (2017). *Over Sixty, Underestimated: A Look at Aging on the "Silver" Screen in Best Picture Nominated Films*. Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative, USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. Report prepared for Humana. Smith, S.L., Pieper, K., Choueiti, M., & Tofan, A., DePauw, A-M., & Case, A. (2017). *Seniors on the Small Screen: Aging in Popular Television Content*. Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative, USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. Report prepared for Humana.

4. Smith, S.L., Choueiti, M., & Pieper, K. (2017). *Inequality in 900 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBT, and Disability from 2007-2016*. Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative, USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism.

5. Variable definitions, methodology for identifying characters, and training and reliability procedures are outlined in Smith et al. (2017). The report is available at the MDSC Initiative website (http://annenberg.usc.edu/aii). Measures relevant to the secondary analysis conducted in this study are reported in the footnotes.

6. Character age was reliably determined by research assistants by sorting characters into one of the following categories: child (age 0-5), elementary school age (age 6-12), teen (age 13-20), young adult (age 21-39), middle age (age 40-64), or elderly (age 65 and older). To evaluate senior characters, another group of research assistants further examined each character designated as middle age or elderly. The birthdate of the actor playing the character was looked up using online databases such as IMDbPro.com, Variety Insight, Studio System, or other online sources. When actors were playing characters roughly the same age, the actor's age at the time of release was used to determine the character's age. When the age of the character was provided, or when the actors were aged up or down, the information provided about the character was used. For characters and actors whose age was not provided, a judgment of apparent age (younger than 60 versus age 60 or older) was rendered. All disagreements were arbitrated and a final decision was made by one of the study authors (Choueiti).

Five qualitative measures were assessed for every character age 60 and older (n=458). Research assistants evaluated whether the character possessed a job, their health status, their use of an assistive device, the depiction of their home, and aspects of their physical appearance. A minimum of three research assistants viewed every film in the sample to complete these measures, taking detailed notes for each variable. Their answers were compiled and any discrepancies adjudicated by a senior team member and checked by one of the study authors (Choueiti).

7. Leading and supporting senior characters (*n*=93) were analyzed for an additional series of qualitative measures. These focused on cognitive functioning, independent living, physical activity, leisure time activities, relationships, concerns, additional details surrounding employment, and the presence of ageist comments. Two research assistants viewed every film with a leading or supporting senior character and provided detailed notes on these portrayals. The answers provided for each character were discussed with one of the study authors (Pieper) and all disagreements were resolved. For all qualitative data, no reliability was calculated. Thus, all judgments should be interpreted with caution.

Two senior supporting characters appeared as both human and supernatural characters over the course of storytelling. As these characters were the same age whether human or supernatural, information revealed across the plot was combined into a single line of data. Separating these characters into distinct lines of data for each "type" (i.e., human, supernatural) would yield a total of 95 leading or supporting senior characters.

8. As with other Annenberg Inclusion Initiative reports, differences of 5% or greater are regarded as significant and meaningful.

9. U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). *Population 60 Years and Over in the United States.*

2016 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Available: https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_16_1YR_S0102&prodType=table

10. Coders were asked to determine if each senior character was depicted with a job (yes/no). If yes, coders provided a description of the occupation as well as an indication of whether the character had a high status position. Senior members of the research team reviewed each occupational description and sorted it into one of 20 industry sectors before determining if the position was one of occupational clout within that sector. This method was used previously in our 2015 report, as well as in prior reports on film. For information on the methodology behind coding occupation, see the following reports: Gender Bias Without Borders, Gender Roles & Occupations in Film and Television, Occupational Portrayals in G-Rated Films.

11. Smith, Pieper, & Choueiti. (2016). Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper. (2017a). Smith, Pieper, Choueiti, Tofan, DePauw, & Case. (2017b).

12. For each senior character, coders determined if that character faced a health problem (yes/no). If yes, the coder provided a description of that health issue. Each health concern was coded by a study author into one of four categories: recovery from aggression or accidents, living with physical illness, living with physical, mental, or communicative impairments, or non-specific illness. This same procedure was used for the 2015 analysis.

Coders also indicated when assistive devices were used by seniors (yes/no). The type of assistive device was classified as either an assistive device (i.e., wheelchair, cane), medical/chemical device (i.e., medication), or both. As above, one of the senior members of the research team coded each assistive device into these categories.

Coders evaluated whether each senior character died during the film (yes/no). The cause of death was described and coded into one of three categories: violence (i.e., an act of force by self or other, possibly including an object, intended to harm the character), non-specific or natural causes (i.e., natural aging process results in death without other injury and/or disease), or illness (i.e., disease).

13. National Center for Health Statistics (2014). *Table 20. Leading causes 16 of death and numbers of deaths, by age: United States, 1980 and 2014*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Available: http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/hus/contents2015.htm#020

14. Smith, Pieper, & Choueiti. (2016).

15. Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper. (2017a). Smith, Pieper, Choueiti, Tofan, DePauw, & Case. (2017b).

16. The Nielsen Company (2017). *The Nielsen Total Audience Report Q1 2017*. The Nielsen Company (2017). *The Nielsen Total Audience Report Q4 2016*.

17. Smith, Pieper, & Choueiti. (2016). Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper. (2017a). Smith, Pieper, Choueiti, Tofan, DePauw, & Case. (2017b).

18. For review, see Levy, B.R. & Banaji, M.R. (2002). Implicit ageism. In T.D. Nelson (Ed.) *Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice against Older Persons*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

19. U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.). *Age Groups and Sex: 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates*. Available: https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_15_5YR_S0101&prodType=table

20. MPAA Theatrical Market Statistics (2016). Retrieved from https://www.mpaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/MPAA-Theatrical-Market-Statistics-2016_Final.pdf.

21. Smith, Pieper, & Choueiti. (2016). Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper. (2017a). Smith, Pieper, Choueiti, Tofan, DePauw, & Case. (2017b).

22. For review, see Levy, B. (2003). Mind matters: Cognitive and physical effects of aging self-stereotypes. *Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences, 58B*(4) p. 203-211.

LIST OF FILMS IN THE 2016 SAMPLE

Rogue One: A Star Wars Story

Finding Dory

Captain America: Civil War

The Secret Life of Pets

The Jungle Book (2016)

Deadpool

Zootopia

Batman v Superman:
    Dawn of Justice

Suicide Squad

Sing

Moana

Fantastic Beasts and Where To
    Find Them

Doctor Strange

Hidden Figures

Jason Bourne

Star Trek Beyond

X-Men: Apocalypse

Trolls

La La Land

Kung Fu Panda 3

Ghostbusters (2016)

Central Intelligence

The Legend of Tarzan

Sully

Bad Moms

The Angry Birds Movie

Independence Day: Resurgence

The Conjuring 2

Arrival

Passengers (2016)

Sausage Party

The Magnificent Seven (2016)

Ride Along 2

Don't Breathe

Miss Peregrine's Home for
    Peculiar Children

The Accountant

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles:
    Out of the Shadows

The Purge: Election Year

Alice Through the Looking Glass

Pete's Dragon (2016)

The Girl on the Train (2016)

Boo! A Madea Halloween

Storks

10 Cloverfield Lane

Lights Out

Hacksaw Ridge

The Divergent Series: Allegiant

Now You See Me 2

Ice Age: Collision Course

The Boss

London Has Fallen

Miracles from Heaven

Deepwater Horizon

Why Him?

My Big Fat Greek Wedding 2

Jack Reacher: Never Go Back

Fences

Me Before You

The BFG

Neighbors 2: Sorority Rising

The Shallows

Office Christmas Party

Assassin's Creed

Barbershop: The Next Cut

13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers
    of Benghazi

Lion

The Huntsman: Winter's War

Kubo and the Two Strings

Manchester by the Sea

Warcraft

How to Be Single

Mike and Dave Need Wedding Dates

War Dogs

Almost Christmas

Money Monster

Allied

Nerve

Risen

The Nice Guys

The Boy (2016)

Dirty Grandpa

Ouija: Origin of Evil

The 5th Wave

Inferno

Mother's Day

Patriots Day

Gods of Egypt

Collateral Beauty

Hail, Caesar!

When the Bough Breaks

Zoolander 2

Moonlight (2016)

The Finest Hours

Florence Foster Jenkins

Hell or High Water

The Forest

Ben-Hur (2016)

The Witch

Bridget Jones's Baby

Whiskey Tango Foxtrot