

She's Been Away: Ageing, Madness and Memory

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Television is a popular medium that, despite its cultural centrality and significance, is rarely taken seriously. The reasons for this are many but include elitist attitudes to “mainstream tastes” and because, despite the ubiquity of screens outside of the home, it is still regarded as a domestic (and therefore feminine) medium. The general disparagement of television ignores the (many) instances of political interventions that are made across a range of genres. In this paper, I focus on a single TV drama that challenges dominant paradigms of both ageing and madness which has, therefore, the potential to intervene in social consciousness and the formation of social memory. *She's Been Away* (BBC 1, 1989) was written by Stephen Poliakoff, directed by Peter Hall and broadcast as a part of the BBC's *Screen One* (1989-1997) series. The play of memory in *She's Been Away* reverberates with the cultural fear of ageing coupled with that other unthinkable, mental illness.

In the years since *She's Been Away* was first broadcast we have witnessed a proliferation of images of older people (especially women) across a range of media and genres, but rather than presenting us with new ways of thinking about age and ageing, representations cohere to a series of somewhat retrogressive images. (There is a debate to be had about the ways in which men as well as women are represented as equally narrow/reductive constructions, but for the sake of consistency with my case study, I want to focus on women here.) The contemporary figures are familiar to us: the woman who has aged “successfully”, she who is young-looking, full of youthful vigour and conventionally attractive; all traces of life experience are erased. This construct is a repudiation of the horrors of ageing. The other enduring trope is older woman as ancient crone, enfeebled and vulnerable; again, experience and history are eradicated. Both constructs are two sides of the same coin that carries a lot of currency: the strenuous disavowal of ageing processes. Commonly in developed economies age and ageing elicits disgust and fear, a problem to be solved, the older person a presence to be repelled; we must not be reminded of our mortality. But this may also be linked to what is seen as a “problem” of an ageing society where we are living longer and threaten to drain on precious resources.¹

It is against this background that I consider *She's Been Away*. Rather than acting as a cipher for a denial of mortality through the effacement of history and experience, the older woman is constructed with the positive hue of the Bakhtinian grotesque body. A feminist critique of contemporary patriarchal structures is mounted through the mobilisation of an elderly woman's memories that, once excavated, liberate her and act as a force for empowerment for a younger woman. Here we are presented with a model of female friendship formed *because* of the old age of one of the protagonists, not *despite* it. As such, this drama is unusual in that it offers possibilities related to ageing – the space to be unruly, to produce something new – that are often absent from mainstream representations that are mostly narratives of decline and loss.

The play

Some broadcast context: As with any television production, there is a long history that gives shape and form to it. The political economy of the television industry and broadcasting policy, shifts in aesthetics and the development of technologies all impact on a production as much as cultural tastes and contemporary social concerns. This is no less true of *She's Been Away*, and although there is not the space to fully discuss the historical here, it is important that we understand something of the context in which it was broadcast. As stated earlier, *She's Been Away* was broadcast as a part of the BBC's anthology series *Screen One* meaning that it was devised for a mainstream audience in the UK. With the introduction of *Screen One* in 1989 the BBC had an already established reputation for producing challenging dramas (albeit of uneven quality) through its anthology series of plays such as those that comprised *The Wednesday Play* (1964-70), *Play for Today* (1970-1984) and *Play of the Month* (1965-1983), the authors of which embraced television as a platform for social engagement and a means to address the popular imagination. According to Lez Cooke, one of the reasons for the demise of the single play on British television in the 1980s was the political climate that made it difficult to get "radical or progressive drama commissioned ... and virtually impossible after *Play for Today* ended in 1984" (141). However, against the backdrop of increasing conservatism Channel 4 was launched in 1982. As a public service broadcaster, the new channel had (still has) a remit to cater to diverse tastes and audiences and to represent minority voices; Channel 4 had to broadcast material that offered a different diet to that which was

available through the BBC and ITV. The advent of Channel 4 not only increased competition to the already established broadcasters through its diet of edgy and innovative programming, it also had a commitment to film production allowing for its commissions to have a theatrical release as well as being shown in its *Film on Four* series.² *Screen One* was the BBC's response to this changing ecology of the television landscape by providing a showcase for feature-length, made for TV films.³ This is the context in which *She's Been Away* was produced.

Critical reviews of the play were mixed. It was described by Andrew Lycett as “a notable coup” for the BBC Drama department because *She's Been Away* was chosen as “the official British” entry for the Venice Film Festival in September, a month before it was broadcast on television; it won Best Actress prize for both Dame Peggy Ashcroft and Geraldine James. A rather more negative position was adopted by Hugh Herbert who said, “Whatever its effect in the foetid atmosphere of Venice, in the corner of the living room this oversold mush of realistic social comment, fantasy, and Laingian psychology only works at all for me because of Ashcroft. To whom many thanks.” (*The Guardian*, October 9, 1989).

On the other hand Richard Jeffery commented that

It's typical English BBC drama stuff. Tightly scripted by Stephen Poliakoff, invisibly directed by Peter Hall, impeccably acted by a top-class cast of stage and small-screen professionals too rarely seen on the big screen. “She's Been Away” is a funny anecdotal, thought-provoking drama of a woman liberated—and, almost incidentally, a scathing critique of Britain today, and particularly the ruling class. (*The Daily Yomiuri*, October 27, 1990)

I have been unable to access audience responses to the drama, but *She's Been Away* is now available through YouTube where comments are posted by viewers. One response is as follows: “Thanks for posting this. I watched it probably 20 years ago on PBS, and it's haunted me ever since” (Youtube). The notion that the play has remained in the subconscious of at least one viewer is perhaps an indication the power of a television text to produce (haunted) memory. It is not my intention to rehearse the strengths or weaknesses of the play; I merely offer these as examples of the ways in

which it was received at the time. My intention is to focus on the figure of the older woman and the interesting ways in which she mobilises questions concerning patriarchal structures, our approach to the “mad”, and our understanding of how memory works to construct a sense of ourselves.

The narrative: *She's Been Away*'s narrative centres on Lillian (Peggy Ashcroft) and begins with her ejection from the psychiatric hospital where she had spent more than 60 years of her life. With no other family, and despite being all but strangers, Lillian is sent to live with her highly successful City financier nephew Hugh (James Fox), his wife Harriet (Geraldine James), and their young son Dominic (Jackson Kyle). The family's nervousness of this mad old woman, irritation by the moral obligation to house her, and fear of the disruption she signals are counterbalanced by their well-meaning attempts to reintegrate her into everyday life. Nonetheless, despite their efforts, Lillian remains frustratingly mute and a mystery to her hosts. However, her back story, the reason for her confinement as a young girl, is revealed through a series of flashbacks triggered at key moments following her discharge from hospital and signal the gradual unlocking of her own memories while at the same time equipping the audience with insight into and knowledge of the conditions that produced the aberrant behaviour that resulted in years of hospitalisation. The series of flashbacks to Lillian's past reveal the young Lillian's (Rebecca Pidgeon) unruly refusal to conform to traditional constructions of femininity, her argumentative, sexually desiring, and defiant self displayed through her disdain for, and resistance to, normative structures. This gives shape and meaning to the now mostly mute older woman who still displays defiance and resistance through her silence and an apparently naïve series of misbehaviours. Lillian's past and her present combine to provide a narrative of female subjugation that mirrors that of Harriet who, despite (because of?) her privilege and wealth, is stifled by her kind but patronising husband and infantilised by her very young son, both of whom embody the patriarchal order and symbolise the ways in which it is reproduced across generations. Over time, a bond between Lillian and Harriet is formed that works to liberate both women. The combined forces of Lillian's age along with her refusal to conform to discourses of traditional femininity are those which eventually work to liberate the unfortunate Harriet. As such, this is both a celebration of the unruly older woman and a meditation on the power of memory to

produce counter-discourse. And it is the mobilisation of memory that is the catalyst for development and movement.

Prosthetic memory

Returning to the play's narrative, Lillian's disruptive presence and 'out of place behaviour' is made intelligible through the movement between Lillian's old and young self which operates as the vehicle through which a powerful argument emerges. As a narrative device this works because of prosthetic memory defined by Alison Landsberg as that memory which

emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative ... In this moment of contact, an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history ... [T]he person ... does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live. The resulting prosthetic memory has the ability to shape that person's subjectivity and politics. (2)

Enabled by cultural technologies such as film (and in this case, television), Landsberg argues that the "circulation of images and narratives about the past" (2) offer the possibility of an "interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site" (2). This formulation of prosthetic memory offers a vital key to the understanding of the processes at work in *She's Been Away*. The play is an experiential site in which an older woman is positioned as powerful, as transgressive, and whose memories are shared with the audience (but not the other protagonists in the play), meaning that we become sutured into the disruption. The sociopolitical importance of this is evident because as Annette Kuhn says, memory has social as well as personal resonance (298). And according to Anna Reading "the concept of social memory signals that what is being addressed is beyond but not distinct from the individual ... Social memory is taken to include aspects of culture as well as social practices and structures" (5).

So, in this play the figure of the mad old woman reverberates with familiar but unspoken fears of ageing and decline, but our ideas of what she represents undergo

transformation as the narrative unfolds creating a new set of prosthetic and social memories that reposition the older woman in an entirely different light: as Lillian reconstitutes herself through her memories she is reconfiguring our expectations as an audience.

The opening sequence of any TV programme is designed to position the audience, to set up expectations and to lead us into the narrative/s. That memory is important to *She's Been Away* is signalled right at the start as the credits accompany a slow pan across a collection of old broken stuff discarded on a table in a gloomily lit room, a jumble of belongings – bric-a-brac, pictures, hats, a doll - all dust and decay – accompanied by the elegiac music which returns at points throughout at moments when memory is evoked. The series of inanimate objects provides what Kuhn calls a “performance of memory” described as a series of snapshots, flashes, vignettes “which are not sequential and have more in common with poetry than classical narrative” (299). It is the poetry of the discarded belongings and the memories they symbolise that produces the affect that frames the ways in which we see and experience much of the play.

The long forgotten items displayed at the beginning are present again when Hugh and Harriet arrive to collect Aunt Lillian. The objects standing in for the past residents of the hospital and their stories; glancing over them the nurse says, “isn't it odd what some people want to keep” as they move on to meet Lillian: Lillian who “doesn't understand anything,” “Doesn't remember anything.” There is an equivalent here made between the apparently valueless but once treasured belongings and the empty vessel that is the old woman as she is removed from the hospital in which she has lived for 60 years. The refrain “she doesn't remember anything” is repeated throughout the drama as Lillian's silence is interpreted as emptiness, symbolic of old age, especially female old age, which has nothing to say, no wisdom to impart. As such, the lack of memory signals, to the other characters in the play, an evacuation of self. More, Lillian triggers the dynamic of disgust and fascination that mark her as abject, an issue I will return to later.

Returning with Hugh and Harriet to their home, the same home that Lillian had grown up in, memories are activated not through a guided tour through the family tree or the

old family photographs that Hugh shows her in his attempt to engage (Hugh to Lillian as she sates mutely at the images, “You really don’t remember anything, do you?”), but through the shape and structure of the house itself – the doors peered through, the encounters with individuals who peopled her past, and the repetition of events: the spaces in which the young and old Lillian disgraces herself. These memories become prosthetic through a layering in which the past and present-day are co-present suturing the audience experience into Lillian’s own. The first time this occurs is when Lillian catches sight of the now old Edward with whom she was in love when they were both young. This memory is particularly potent because it is triggered by being at a party held in the same rooms as the one held 60 years before during which the young and excitable Lillian declared her love and sexual desire for Edward, and in a near-delirious state disrupts the polite calm of the gathered adults. Now, peering through the doorway, Lillian pauses as she sees elderly Edward and his brother. Unnoticed by anyone apart from the audience, Lillian closes the wooden framed doors so that we see her in mid-close up framed by the glass and wooden bars as the memory music fades in. What follows is a sequence that takes us through the narrative of Lillian’s young self and the events leading to her incarceration. Viewed as an object of curiosity by guests at the long-ago party and the source of embarrassment and shame for her father, Edward publicly spurns her – “Edward, why are you doing this?” – his rejection, his complicity with normative structures, provoke Lillian’s virulent anger and distress.

Images of madness

What is striking is the ways in which Poliakoff draws on familiar tropes of madness and old age and then subverts them by the process of prosthetic memory through which viewers confront their own expectations and cultural knowledge. The date of this production is not coincidental: in the UK during the 1980s and into the 1990s, many of the Victorian psychiatric hospitals were closed down with patients being tipped out to be cared for in the community. On the one hand, by the late 1980s, the ideas of controversial psychiatrist R. D. Laing are more widely known. Even if the audience is unaware of the specifics of Laing’s work, the debate that took place during the 1960s and 1970s continues to have resonances well beyond the moment at which Laing was held in high esteem. His claims that mental illness is a product of

toxic cultural and social forces continues to have a purchase both on the psychiatric profession and in the popular consciousness (hence the rather sniffy reference to Laingian psychology in Herbert's 1989 review cited above).

On the other hand, this move to close hospitals increased the anxieties that linked mental illness with violence (Philo *et al.*) as well as giving rise to more subtle worries: how can we tell who are the mad Other now that there are no boundaries separating Them from Us? As Simon Cross argues, the popular imaginings of madness have deep and complex historical roots that, despite shifts in definitions (from mad to mentally ill), diagnoses and treatments, remain tied to traditional notions of the mad as criminal, violent, as objects of fear. These discourses of madness work to position the mentally ill person as Other, the ones outside offering a reassuring difference that suggesting that the "devastation of mental illness is not likely to happen to ourselves or the people around us" (Cross 199).⁴ So, in the social context of late 1980s Britain, the repeated scenes in *She's Been Away* of the hospital building in a state of collapse and decay provoke memories of these places as the stuff of gothic fiction, of horror and darkness, as spaces that contain the otherwise uncontainable. This popular imagining is then is coupled with the figure of the mad old crone, the despised (a "gentle vegetable") or simply ignored older woman rendered invisible because of her age. The stuff of horror indeed!

The confluence of old age and madness threatens to produce an abject figure occupying an "'uninhabitable' subject position, eliciting shame and disgust that must be cast outside the sense of self and identity" (Ringrose and Walkerdine 234). And the abject performs a powerful regulatory purpose.

The boundary of the body as well as the distinction between internal and external is established through the ejection ... of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness ... What constitutes through division the "inner and "outer" worlds of the subject is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control. (Butler cited in Ringrose and Walkerdine 234)

In the context of *She's Been Away*, the young and old Lillian are, initially, clearly abject, but the process of abjection is disturbed because of the use of memory and the ways in which it becomes prosthetic; Lillian's memories are a part of the narrative known only to the audience making us complicit in both her silence and her knowledge. And because of this complicity Lillian can no longer be outside the symbolic order, the space she occupies may be liminal in terms of how she is positioned by the other protagonists, but we share that space with her. Her refusal to be charming or grateful or communicative gradually repositions Lillian from object of abject horror to a coherent subject.

Intergenerational continuities

This is all well and good but these processes might have remained at the level of the unintelligible if it were not for the dynamic between Harriet and Lillian through which narrative progression occurs. Difficult to characterise, their relationship is not quite that of mother and daughter as a familial tie is evidently absent, neither is it a friendship between peers. What links them is the continuity of a feminine self repressed by patriarchy. Where Lillian's excitability and artistic potential were obstructed by the construction of her as insane and resultant confinement in a psychiatric hospital, Harriet's acting career was thwarted through entombment in a marriage with a well-meaning but ultimately controlling husband; it is as if the feminist movement of the 1970s had not taken place. Now Harriet's new pregnancy will perpetuate the order of things reproducing the generational line and reinforcing the containment within which she finds herself. We already know that Harriet's precocious son Dominic is an echo of his father – concern that the family home is properly insured; warnings to the (male) obstetrician of possible law suits should the gender of the unborn child be mistaken... So what if this next baby is male also? Delighted by the pregnancy, Hugh and Dominic accompany Harriet to the first scan. The hospital room in which the procedure is being performed is so dark that the faces of the doctor, husband, and son are barely visible. The rest of the room is in complete darkness producing a claustrophobia that we imagine is a reflection of Harriet's state of mind as she lies motionless on the hospital bed. "She's doing everything alright, is she?" whispers Hugh to the physician as they gather in a conspiratorial huddle away from the bed. Off camera, Hugh discusses his wife's progress while the screen is

filled with a close up of Harriet as she overhears: “My wife can be, how shall I put it ... my wife can be, um, a tiny bit scatty.” Harriet, however, remains silent.

This scene is evocative of the atmosphere of suffocation and hopelessness articulated in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s novel *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) in which a woman is driven insane by her well-meaning but paternalistic husband described by the first person narrator as “very careful and loving” (5) and who refers to his wife as “a blessed little goose” (6). Both texts present men speaking while the women do not. However, in *The Yellow Wallpaper* the unnamed woman is alone with her silence having only her diary to record her thoughts, while the narrative of *She’s Been Away* offers the outlet of sharing repressed rage with an older woman; Lillian’s refusal to communicate mirrors Harriet’s inability to speak. And this is the point of connection that ultimately liberates both.

Particularly useful in thinking about this intergenerational relationship is Kathleen Woodward’s concept of sociality. Recalling a day, a moment that best expressed her relationship with her grandmother, Woodward says that what she (Woodward) experienced was “certainly nothing less than a palpable *sociality*, a convivial ease” (81). She describes this inter-generational sociality as a “plumb line – one that has specific gravity and weight to it” (84). Drawing on Jessica Benjamin’s term “emotional attunement” and Lawrence Grossberg’s “theorization of the affective economy of mood (in its ‘positive’ manifestation)”, Woodward describes the mood of her memory as one of “fluent companionship” (82). If not exactly fluent, Woodward’s formulation helps us understand the kind of companionship based on an emotional attunement that characterises the friendship emerging between Harriet and Lillian despite and because of the years that separate them in age. The convivial ease between them is gradually emerging, producing a plumb-line that joins them and which is eventually characterised by grit and steel. This is made apparent during the scene in the family home immediately following the hospital scan when Harriet and Lillian sit together in silence while the extra-diegetic memory music plays linking the two women in the present day. The silence is broken when a panicked Harriet rehearses the mantra: “I mustn’t panic, I mustn’t panic, I mustn’t panic, I mustn’t panic, I mustn’t panic.” That this is uttered in the presence of the older woman at least suggests a sense of safety, a sense of sociality premised on shared emotional

experience. Without knowing each other's story, the two women understand each other. Earlier in the play, a knowing Harriet speaks to the forever silent Lillian:

You don't fool me, Lillian. You haven't fooled me from the start. Because you know far more than you pretend, don't you. You understand everything, don't you, but you are refusing to show it. You prefer to seem an idiot. ... I don't mind. No one else need ever know.

Continuing to express no gratitude for the efforts to reinstall her into society, Lillian remains largely silent and uncommunicative, her silence is defiance, resistance, the performance of madness irritating the smooth social body. However, the audience becomes sutured into Lillian's history simultaneous to Harriet's own developing understanding of the older woman, so that the two women's narratives of repression merge while the silence provides the plumb-line, a continuity blending past and present, the one informing the other.

The road trip

The scan proves to be the tipping point, the moment in which repressive practices of patriarchy propel Harriet into a sort of "mad" response to her situation. To describe her reaction to her pregnancy as undelighted is an understatement: the baby will either perpetuate the male lineage and all that comes with that or, if a girl, will inhabit the same social and cultural paradigm as Harriet. What is interesting about this moment is that it is the first time we hear Lillian speak spontaneously to the younger woman. Having watched Harriet's frantic search for suitcases and now on the point of leaving the house, she calls out:

Lillian: Harriet!

Harriet: I'm just popping out, just for a minute.

Lillian: I think I could pop out, too. It would be nice to pop out.

Harriet: I'm only going round the block. To the shops.

Lillian: I'll pop out to the shops, too.

Harriet: I'm not going far; you'll see.

The next shot is of Hugh's very expensive, very shiny car being driven recklessly out of the drive, denting and scraping the whole of the driver's side along the wall. So, a now seven months pregnant and frustrated Harriet takes herself and Lillian on a mad car journey to nowhere in particular (a kind of deranged *Thelma and Louise*).

Frantic with worry over the disappearance of his wife, Hugh is mystified. "Maybe Lillian did something to her," he says. And of course, Lillian has done something to his wife, but not in the way that he had imagined. After crashing and abandoning Hugh's (much beloved) car, the dishevelled women hitch a lift and check into an upmarket hotel. Posing as mother and daughter, Harriet tells the surprised looking male receptionist: "We're here for pleasure!" The liminal space of the hotel offers Harriet the liberty to express her hatred of her unborn child, to reflect on her own compliance within a system she despises. Harriet: "It's very unattractive, I know, being full of hate. Is there anything worse, worse feeling in the world than hating the child you are about to have, without knowing why?" Without fully knowing the details of Lillian's adolescent misdemeanours or present thought processes, Harriet nonetheless intuits: "You can't forgive; why should you? ... I'm not as brave as you are ... You did what you had to do. It didn't exactly get you very far, but that is something else." The hotel operates as a liminal space in which rebellion is fostered, strengthening the plumb-line, the bond of a sociality premised on shared experience. It is here that the unsayable can be said: Harriet loathes her husband, and Lillian can, for the first time, speak her story, tell how she gradually made herself get smaller, become more "locked away" over the many "little" years in the hospital.

Still at the hotel and after much alcohol and wild dancing, Harriet collapses resulting in a rush to hospital and a diagnosis of eclampsia. The ensuing emergency caesarean delivery of her baby saves Harriet's life, but it is Lillian who saves Harriet. The scenes of Harriet being rushed into theatre for the caesarean delivery are juxtaposed with scenes of an emotionally fraught Hugh and calm, reasoning Dominic discussing wife/mother. As Hugh gains awareness that his wife ran away rather than being kidnapped, his shame (shame because everyone would know, it has been reported on the television) frames his fury: "God, she's got some explaining to do. These last weeks until the baby is born she will never be out of my sight!" A crushing claustrophobia is conveyed, once again, by the darkness of the room in which Hugh

has this exchange with his son mirroring the moment of the hospital scan where Harriet had no say, was rendered voiceless. What punctures this relentless regulation and control is the moment when Lillian's memory is stirred, once again acting as the catalyst that ultimately offers the possibility of rescue for both women. This is key to the play.

As Harriet is rushed into the hospital theatre, a (male) doctor asks Lillian if she is the patient's mother – "I'm not, not quite her mother" – because she (Harriet) has a life-threatening condition and they must "get the baby out now".

Lillian: "I must see her."

(Male) Doctor: "I'm afraid that is impossible"

Lillian: "I must see her. I have something to give her."

Doctor: "You don't understand . . . that woman could easily die... Now stop wasting our time."

As these final words are spoken, Lillian is manhandled away from the theatre entrance and towards a seating area. The grip of the doctor's hand on her hand, restraining her, the owner of the hand refusing to listen to her words of protest. Memory music fades in as we watch Lillian being led away, a tight close up of the male grip on her wrist. As they walk, the performance of memory is activated as images of her young self merge with the music so that we, as well as Lillian, are transported back to the day when, as a young girl, she was taken away, incarcerated. This is powerful because we not only witness what did actually happen to Lillian at the moment of her removal from society, but also how she responded, how she felt, what she said. The brutal physicality of her incarceration is evoked, then the remembering of her "interview" with the two psychiatrists. Lillian: "You don't know what you are talking about. That's the trouble. And I know you don't; that's what you don't like." What follows is a tight close up of the young Lillian undergoing tests, again in a dark room, while the unseen examiner poses diagnostic questions:

Psychiatrist: "Who is the Prime Minister of this country?"

Young Lillian: "A kind of monkey."

Psychiatrist: "What do we call a man who looks after our teeth?"

Young Lillian: "A blood-thirsty man."

As the camera pulls back, we see the male doctor on one side of a large wooden desk as the resistant Lillian is seated opposite.

Psychiatrist: “What is the name of this country where we live; what do we call it?”

Young Lillian: “I don’t know. Black Islands. Some name like that. A place that you fall through. ... and come out the other side.”

Psychiatrist: “Why do you think you are here?”

Young Lillian: “Because I am cleverer than you. Because I am meaner than you. Because I see through you. It would be much easier if I wasn’t around, wouldn’t it? But most importantly because you do not feel ... Just like my father.”

At this point, memory music fades in as old Lillian recalls her sexual encounter with the much-wanted Edward. Young Lillian [excitedly]: “They will come soon, find out where we are.” Lillian’s refusal to hide, to not worry that they will be found is both a sign of her individuality and the cause of her subsequent powerlessness. More memories: renouncing her father, she says, “I can no longer believe you exist. I have lost my faith. I can’t believe such a boring, small minded, lumpy man can be my father. So I have decided you aren’t my father.” These memories are recalled as taking place in darkened spaces indicating Lillian’s internal processes intensifying her declarations as she refutes the Law of the Father both at home and in hospital. We, too, are drawn into Lillian’s narrative through the process of prosthetic memory, enabling us to understand both the root of her “madness,” able to see it as socially constructed, and to position us with Lillian rather than with the technologies of regulation (Foucault) that work to position her as abject.

The memory sequence triggered by the restrictive hand on Lillian’s arm is the longest and most expository in the drama and leads to the denouement. We still have flashes and poetic images, but the performance of memory here tells us the most complete story suturing us into Lillian’s back-story: images of young Lillian being restrained are fused with images of old Lillian being restrained as we cut between the present day – Lillian in the hospital prevented from being with Harriet – and the past and

young Lillian screaming through the bars of a cell-like hospital room. Old Lillian is silent, while her not-yet-shattered young self is imprisoned but defiant: “Bastards! Bastards!” Ultimately, the two Lillians merge as, in the present, she soliloquises, “What happened to all that time? It was just...taken...away”; her anger and distress are palpable. (Ellipses in original). What is significant here is that the old Lillian could not have the force that she ultimately does, if it were not for the recollections of the injustices meted out to her young self. While her young self is disempowered, her old self claims an agency and defiance *because* of her age. The closing six minutes of the play are enacted in the postoperative room in which Harriet is recovering and the newly self-empowered Lillian takes charge. Shoving a nurse out of the way – Nurse: “You can’t go in there”; Lillian [pushing the nurse aside]: “Oh rubbish” – we understand that a profound shift has occurred.

Harriet: “So what the hell are we going to do now, Lillian? Haha. Listen to me, I’m asking you that.”

Lillian: “Yes. [pause] I don’t know why you’re laughing.”

Barricading the door so that “they” cannot get in, Lillian stands guard, watching as echoes of the memory music play over images of a contented-looking Harriet and a vigilant Lillian. Hints of the music are heard as the camera pulls back to reveal Lillian and Harriet behind a wall of glass, sharing the space separating them from us. As we look, we hear footsteps approaching the room. This is the sound of the as yet unseen Hugh approaching. Now, as the footsteps get louder and more pronounced, a succession of shot/ reverse shots switch our points of view between that of Lillian looking down the corridor and that of the approaching threat. These shots merge with a series of memories of young Lillian looking through the bars of her cell/room, jumping in ecstasy on her bed, having sex with Edward, an unruly presence at her parents’ party... all these are shown overlaid with the sound of the footsteps and mingled with faint snatches of memory music blurring the boundary between past and present. Finally, when Hugh comes into view, he is seen marching down the corridor with a fleet of medical and nursing staff in his wake (Hugh is a very influential man after all), his feet making the same noise pattern as that of the old clock in young Lillian’s memory tick-tocking the years away. Finally, as the play comes to an end, we are left with Hugh and Lillian staring at one another through the glass.

I hope that I have shown how it is possible for a mainstream television drama to offer a discourse of ageing and mental illness that stands counter to those most prevalent in contemporary culture. The narrative is made profound through the processes of prosthetic memory enabling Lillian's subject position to become sutured into the audience experience. Rather than made abject, the confluence of madness, old age, and memory disrupts expectations and punctures the consciousness. As Landsberg states, prosthetic memories enable a sensuous engagement with past lives and past experiences that, she argues, can serve as "the basis for mediated collective identification" offering the ethical, social, and political potential for "unexpected alliances across chasms of difference" (3). Television drama of this kind offers the possibility of (re)creating a social memory that reconfigures madness and old age as wisdom and powerful unruliness – a source of celebration.

References

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¹ On International Women's Day this year (2013), BBC Radio 4's news programme *World at One* promised a discussion on "whether the ageing female workforce is blocking new female talent." It is hard to know where to start with this but it is astonishing that the recognition of a day celebrating women's achievements demonises the very age group that helped call this kind of celebration into being. The older woman here is positioned as a problem, as an impediment to younger women's aspirations. She is, in fact, being excluded from the meaning of Women's Day. In fact, the discussion was actually between two generations of female journalists who reflected on the changing nature of their profession. But the hook for the item is an example of the powerful discourse that constructs older women as a problem.

² Although being launched just as the conservative policies of Thatcherism were beginning to take a hold, Channel 4 with its sometimes edgy and controversial programming was the result of a long process that began in the 1970s when a Labour government was in power.

³ For the sake of consistency, I will refer to *She's Been Away* as a drama or play rather than introduce the term "film", but I should note that the production is indeed feature-length and did have a limited theatrical release.

⁴ There is a large body of research exploring media representations of the mentally ill that focuses on (a) the accuracy (or otherwise) of clinically determined pathological symptoms and (b) the erroneous and highly disproportionate of linkage of mental illness with violence (Philo, Henderson, and McLaughlin; Diefenbach; Rose; Paterson and Stark). The overall conclusion is that there are a range of stereotypes (most frequently violent) deployed across the media along with representations of mental ill-health sufferers as having a poor quality of life (Signorielli; Diefenbach).