

JENNIFER WALDEN

University of Portsmouth, UK

## “MOMENTS OF GRACE?” THE “DRAMATIC” REPRESENTATION AND THE AESTHETIC OF AGEING



his paper will limit its focus to consideration of two ‘dramatic’ treatments of ageing, both of which involve an aged woman and both of which touch upon ageing and *dementia*. My focus is here as part of my proposition is that ‘dementia’ is on a spectrum of ‘cultural’ apperceptions of the ageing process associated as that process is with weakening and failing ‘powers’ both physical and mental.

Dementia is also that which conjures up strong and complex emotions with apprehension and fear which I suggest additionally serves the ‘dramatic’ effects of representations of ageing.

I want for the sake of economy to present some alternative commentaries upon the aged woman and dementia which refer to perhaps two ends of the spectrum for dramatization; the highly orchestrated ‘mainstream’ narrative film and the ‘close to home’ documentary, in this case made by the daughter of the aged person with diagnosed Alzheimer’s. I rely upon two papers which whilst referring to cultural productions were each placed in scientific journals. One is a paper by Megan. E. Graham presented in a journal *Dementia* in 2014 entitled “The voices of Iris: Cinematic representations of the aged woman and Alzheimer’s disease in *Iris* (2001)”<sup>1</sup> The other is a paper by Aagje Swinnen in ‘*The Gerontologist*’ journal in 2012, entitled Dementia in Documentary Film: *Mum* by Adelheid Roosen (2009).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> M. E. Graham, “The voices of Iris: Cinematic representations of the aged woman and Alzheimer’s disease in *Iris* (2001),” *Dementia* Vol. 15, 2014, 05 2016, 1171–1183. Sage Publications originally published online November 2014.

<sup>2</sup> A. Swinnen, “Dementia in Documentary Film: *Mum* by Adelheid Roosen (2009),” *The Gerontologist* Vol. 53, Issue 1, 1–10.

I am interested in not only the identifiable difference and similarities along this spectrum but also in what the commentators take from the effects of these dramas in terms of an “aesthetics of ageing”.

One’s overriding response to even the word dementia, even before any representation, is that of a concern for ‘loss’ and something of a “living death” whereby the body is still in operation to some extent, whilst the mental faculties are highly disordered and on route to an irreversible ‘complete’ malfunction.

The narrative film genre arguably ‘orchestrates’ such loss with a typical rendering of the story whereby “the disease in progress reaches its nadir in the time span of the narrative and use(s) metaphors such as darkness to add to the story of decline” (Graham 2014).

The overall ‘feel’ will be elegiac evoking previous and now lost ‘powers’ and holding on to ever diminishing “moments of grace” as the disease ‘takes hold’.

As has also been pointed out the ‘caretaker’s perspective , if not dominant in terms of ‘speaking for’ the ‘afflicted’ person, takes on a poignancy as that person’s or persons’ stress, bemusement and frustration is stitched into the drama (see Swinnen 2012).

The orchestration of the drama is designed to elicit compassion in the viewer, but is it always clear as to the direction of this compassion; compassion for whom?

My proposition also here is that responses and the ‘*premise*’ of dramatic effect depend upon a privileging of a certain view or presentation of cognitive and intellectual ‘powers’ tied exclusively to a notion of ‘mind’ as substitutable for *being* as such, so that ‘loss’ of such powers presents a *disappearance* of the person.

There is also a dependence upon a certain ‘aesthetics’ of *being* and physical presence so that aspects of ‘perceived’ physical disarray or physical ‘incoherence’ or non-normative physical expression are deemed solicitous of our compassion and regret (see Swinnen 2012).

The feature film *Iris* (2001) is a case in point. Hailed as a film that “...helps people understand what it [Alzheimer’s] means for family and friends as well as for the person with the condition...” (Quoted in Graham 2014) arguably reinforces stereotypes and culturally negative presentations of women and ageing with Alzheimer’s being at the extreme end of a spectrum of diminishing quality of life and sickness as that which befalls womanhood (see Graham 2014).

*Iris* is about the British philosopher and author Iris Murdoch who had a flourishing career as a writer and social commentator who crossed the ac-

ademic/ popular divide. The film is not about this career however, but seen through the ‘memoirs’ of her husband John Bayley, is a narrative of her decline in her ‘older age’. Her younger self and her prowess are seen through the lens of emotional frailty and instability accompanying ageing and her ‘disease’, here strongly orchestrated as a ‘harrowing’ loss of identity.

Richard Eyre who directed the film presents a clear view of the need for and effect of the dramatization. “One of the things I’ve tried to show in the film is that even though the person is disappearing in front of you, in some way there is a sense in which they remain. You can still love the person because their soul is still there until the end.” (Eyre, R (2001) Miramax Films, Quoted in Graham 2014)

We thus encounter the ‘classic’ themes of loss and disappearance of self, dramatized through broadly familiar devices such comparison between younger Iris (self) and aged Iris (self). Here played by two different actors with younger self ‘augmented’ via timbre of voice, energised delivery and charismatic presence compared to a flat-toned, confused and distressed aged present day Iris, where any highly expressive pitch is couched as that of terror and torment rather than ‘joy of life’.

This is particularly dramatized in two scenes where the aged Iris actual confronts her younger self, one by way of earlier film footage in a television studio and once as a ‘quasi-mirage’ whilst swimming in the sea. In both instances the aged self is left ‘speechless’ or ‘nonplussed’ (see Graham 2014).

Speechless is one thing. Silence is another. Megan Graham is interested in the particular aesthetic of ageing that marks this film, which is that of the *sound of woman’s voice*. It is physically the case that the female voice will usually change timbre with age but what does, should or could that mean culturally?

The association of the young higher pitched female (soprano voice) with the ‘angel’s cry’<sup>3</sup> even as that becomes secularized and dramatized as ‘tragic’ in the move from religious song to opera, still retains a sense of ‘evocation’, quasi-spirituality and ‘siren-like’ affect in the western canon.

This is emphasised in *Iris* by the ongoing theme of her unaccompanied singing of an Irish folk song, “The Lark in the Clear Air” (the thematic of the singing voice of Iris is explored by Graham 2014).

As Graham points out, what the ‘aesthetics’ of sound emphasises is the strength and sonority of the younger voice compared to the thin ‘wilting’ sound of the aged voice as if ‘*married to her failing body*’ (Graham 2014).

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<sup>3</sup> See M. Poizat, *The Angel’s Cry*, trans. A. Denner, Ithaca: USA Cornell University Press, 1992.

To take the voice and its sound as an aesthetic vehicle for signifying the aged woman is a powerful and potentially empowering move for criticism.

The voice and sound are in many of their respects 'extra' linguistic or in excess of semantic meaning of any utterance or 'expression'. Additionally even as the gendered voice in 'conventional' narrative film anticipates a commanding authority and exteriority for the male voice and a disempowering 'subordinated' interiority to the female voice, that very opposition, precisely because it cannot be an 'exact' science and bears even the tiniest element that escapes characterisation, *can* set up a destabilising effect which disturbs the conventional attribution of meaning.

A critical attuning to the aesthetics of voice and *sound* as opposed to the always seeking after *meaning* supports a 'listening against the grain of the voice'. Such listening against the grain may enable those moments of grace in the elegiac 'air' of the folk tune (for example here) to be released from *poignancy* and take on a *potency for the* identity of the bearer of the voice.

Working against the grain of expectation is much more powerfully evoked in the other dramatic representation considered here, the documentary film *Mum*. This is a film made by the artist Adelheid Roosen in 2009 about her own mother and includes Roosen herself in one of the 'staged' scenarios and another family member with her mother in each of the other 'scenes'.

As Swinnen (2012) let us know in her paper the thematic and style of this documentary is strongly counter to 'conventional' documentations of the aged and /or Alzheimer's subject.

For a start it does not so much present a story with a narrative arch, as a series or set of episodes with the effect of 'performed' interactions between Mum and one of her family members. Whilst there is 'framing' there is no *narrative* framing of a 'before' and now 'after' dementia or surrounding frames of 'familiarizing' objects or accoutrements.

Here instead, the 'frames' are deliberately 'theatrical' framings including one where Roosen's own body clearly and deliberately 'mirrors' that of her mother and wears similar minimal clothing and one where the mother's son-in-law 'cradles' the mother in a quasi- reversal of a *Pieta* image.

The 'stark' physicality of the framed encounters confronts the viewer in the way that the narratively positioned images of withering and increasing frailty in a film such as *Iris* do not.

Arguably it is not 'compassion' that is elicited of the audience/viewer here but a provocation to respect and understand the presence and personhood of *Mum*.

That this may be discomfiting and disturbing for the viewer and not ‘sad’, speaks to this entire problem of aesthetic representation of ageing. Roosen deliberately eschews a conventional portrayal of the aged person with Alzheimer’s as “confused and helpless but not visually threatening” (Swinnen 2012).

Instead the viewer experiences highly stylised and aestheticized presentations of *Mum* in minimal whilst *potentially* ‘pathos inducing’ garments in deliberately dramatic contexts. These contexts are both slightly ‘surreal’ whilst displacing an ‘easy’ differentiation between the aged ill person and the person who is not and eschewing any familiar ‘spectacle’.

The film did provoke controversy with some commentators suggesting ‘exploitation’ of the subject and questioning the fact that the subject (Mum) was not in a position to consent to these portrayals. As Swinnen suggest however “because [they] believe the mother has *disappeared*, some viewers feel compelled to speak for her...they want to safeguard an aesthetics of personhood which assumes dignity to be linked with a subject that can sit straight does not [need protection for incontinence] and can speak [what is conventionally considered to be ] coherently” (Swinnen 2012). Swinnen asks “Would it have made a difference if the mother...had been well enough to give informed consent?” (Swinnen 2012).

I would add that these objections are less about the personhood of the mother, which is actually stronger in its presentation here than in most other documentaries about aged persons or feature films but are more to do with the spectators’ discomfort.

This discomfort is because the spectator is *denied* the more easy ‘moment of grace’ that can solicit ‘compassion’ rather than some other less defined emotional response to these images.

Arguably the documentary offers, because it is so formally ‘staged’ in theatrical scenes, an example of a cinematic experience both visually sensory and auditory that “demands active involvement of the spectator in understanding the ‘character’. This latter is a proposition explored by Lucy Bolton in her analysis of cinematic experience articulated through the ideas of Luce Irigaray.<sup>4</sup>

Following the lines of Irigaray’s thought, via Bolton, the images from *Mum* have their effect precisely because ... ‘*what it [means] to see is not already defined...*’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> L. Bolton, *Film and Female Consciousness: Irigaray, Cinema and thinking women*, UK Palgrave: Macmillan, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> L. Irigaray (2002) quoted in Bolton (2015), *op. cit.*, 36.

They evoke something akin to (and this is why the film disturbs) a relation of the spectator's *body* to *filmed body* which is much more *reciprocal* and much less a relation of a pre-given 'mastery' (sic) by the spectator.

In sum the film embodies much of those principles of the female character 'becoming' on screen and revealing an embodied 'interiority'.

I acknowledge that the word 'interiority' does not do justice to a complex of forces and spatial relations that subtly displace cinematic 'norms', as articulated through the use of the thought of Luce Irigaray, in Lucy Bolton's critique of cinematic representation.<sup>6</sup>

Here, disturbing as this unconventional lived body may be, nevertheless Mum is a live presence, not disappearing or disappeared.

I propose such living presence rendered even more powerful by this artifice of staging compels an 'awkward empathy' rather than sympathy, far closer to an embodied experience rather than an abstracted visual one for the spectator.

The focus upon the here and now of lived moments 'framed' in scenarios also enables a closer concentration upon and 'abiding with' the spoken words of Mum. Close attention and patience reveals certain patterns, repetitions and rhythms and searching for associative words or sounds to bring about 'communication of meaning' which start to show their own unfamiliar but detectable 'sense'.

As Swinnen points out we know 'precious little of the life of this particular woman' (Swinnen 2012). But we know her presence far more than that of the 'narrated' subject of the story of loss and 'fading' powers that is 'Iris'.

I would argue that this is not solely due to different 'time' contexts and genres, (*Iris* is a retrospective narrated reflection upon a life and *Mum* is a direct 'in the present of her life' documentary), but is due to certain aesthetic choices and decisions about the determinants of representational affect.

As Swinnen concludes concerning *Mum* "by means of the performative mode, *Mum* invites viewers to look beyond the cultural stereotype that no personhood is to be found in people with dementia. As such the documentary is a quintessential act of recognition of an aged mother with Alzheimer's by an artist's daughter" (Swinnen 2012).

"Does she recognise you?"

To whom is this question to be addressed? (See Swinnen 2012 conclusion)

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<sup>6</sup> See L. Bolton, *op. cit.*, 41–42.

## References

- Bolton, L., *Film and Female Consciousness: Irigaray, Cinema and thinking women*, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Graham, M. E., “The voices of Iris: Cinematic representations of the aged woman and Alzheimer’s disease in *Iris* (2001),” in: *Dementia* Vol 15, issue 5, 2016, (originally published online 4 November 2014). <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1471301214556133>
- Poizat, M., *The Angel’s Cry*, trans. Denner, Arthur Ithaca, USA: Cornell University Press, 1992.
- Swinnen, A., “Dementia in Documentary Film: *Mum* by Adelheid Roosen (2009),” in: *The Gerontologist* Vol 53, Issue 1, 1 February 2013, 113–122 (first published April 2012). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/geront/gns061>

## Filmography

- Mum* by Adelheid Roosen (2009) Netherlands documentary short; running time 20 minutes.
- Iris* directed by Richard Eyre (2001) BBC Films/Fox Iris Productions et al; Distributed by Buena Vista International UK. UK Release date 14/12/2001.