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## **‘Call the Celebrity’: Voicing the Experience of Women and Ageing through the Distinctive Vocal Presence of Vanessa Redgrave**

*Ros Jennings and Eva Krainitzki*

This chapter suggests that the BBC television drama, *Call the Midwife* (2012–), is a unique televisual timespace (May and Thrift, 2001) that provides opportunities for audiences to engage with a more complex understanding of ageing femininities than are usually available in popular television. Focusing on a specific period of production (Seasons 1–3), the chapter argues that central to the series’ unique and fluid construction of age is Vanessa Redgrave’s role as series narrator. In particular, the singularity of Redgrave’s disembodied voice (incorporating intertextual elements of her controversial celebrity persona as well as the singularity of the sonic cadences of her theatrically trained and now postmenopausal voice) contributes to the series’ distinctive, polysemically multi-layered representation of women and ageing. As the voice-over narrator in *Call the Midwife*, Redgrave’s voice facilitates a rare example of female subjectivity that is built on a continuum of ages rather than firm or oppositional divisions between young and old.

This essay argues that, in the period under scrutiny, *Call the Midwife* disrupts many of the limited and negative representations of women and age by interventions that work to ‘unfix’ age and challenge many of the dominant ageist assumptions about older women that circulate in society. It does this in two important ways. First, it uses the technique of voice-over narration to explicitly link the immediate perspectives and experiences of the onscreen character Jenny Lee (who is a young nurse/midwife just starting her career in the 1950s and played by Jessica Raine) with the very same events as introduced and summarised by her older self as offscreen narrator<sup>1</sup> – events that are mediated by memory, the filter of life experience and an extraordinary older female voice. Second, *Call the Midwife* uses an intergenerational female ensemble cast to interrogate a wider age range of female subjectivities than is usually encountered in popular television. An innovative dimension of this is the skilful construction of its oldest core character, Sister Monica Joan (Judy Parfitt). In her 90s and suffering from dementia, Sister Monica Joan is represented through her age-(in)appropriate behaviour as existing on a fluid spectrum of age. As will be explored, her characterisation also parallels elements of Redgrave’s own celebrity persona, embedding an additional echo of Redgrave’s disembodied presence within the televisual text. At the same time, Sister Monica Joan’s demented behaviour also mirrors the dynamics of the series’ voice-over narration (as her behaviour moves from childish to wise crone within each episode), connecting young and old, just as young and old Jenny are connected. The final part of the discussion returns to the central role of Vanessa Redgrave’s vocal presence in the series and

analyses how her status as what we will show to be a rather unusual kind of celebrity informs understandings of older age and female identity in *Call the Midwife* as being powerful and authoritative. In moving towards the conclusion, the final section emphasises the distinctiveness of the complex and positive timespace for women and ageing and concentrates briefly on the third season's 'Christmas Special' (broadcast 25 December 2014), which we argue is suggestive of a transition to a new and less 'positive' phase for *Call the Midwife*. With young Jenny Lee's departure at the end of the third season, the pivotal connection between young Jenny and Mature Jenny is lost. As the fourth season begins (January 2015), older Jenny's voice-over narrations become less 'authentic' and less authoritative. This becomes clear when we analyse the framing flashback sequences of the third season's 'Christmas Special', where Redgrave's embodied presence typifies stereotypical ageist representations of older women, in contrast to the series' portrayal of female ageing.

## **Ageing studies, old women and television**

There is a level of agreement in humanities, social sciences and media studies that ageism is part of contemporary society and that ageist representations are a consequence (Cuddy et al., 2005). Although feminist analysis of television has a long tradition (Brunsdon et al., 1997), and television is also often defined as a 'feminised' medium (Gray and Lotz, 2012), the fact that it nevertheless 'substantially under-represents women – and older women especially – seems a strangely contradictory state of affairs' (Jermyn, 2013: 75).

As Marshall and Swinnen note, in the development of ageing studies scholarship, 'analyses of age, gender, and sexuality have evolved intersectionally from their conception' (2014: 157). Understandings of older age and ageing have not, however, been similarly integrated within women's studies and feminist scholarship (Browne, 1998; Calasanti, 2008; Calasanti and Slevin, 2006; Rosenthal, 1990; Woodward, 1995). For the most part, issues related to ageing and older women have not featured strongly within feminism, but recently this has begun to change as an ageing studies lens is slowly being incorporated (Jennings and Gardner, 2012), extending feminism's engagement with women and women's issues across the life course. The following exploration adopts a feminist ageing studies lens to explore the interconnections between older celebrity voice, women and ageing in *Call the Midwife*.

Whilst contemporary screen media now present more diverse images of older women than was previously the case (Tally, 2006; Vares, 2009), there is still a tendency to represent older women in relation to narratives of 'ageing as decline' or 'successful ageing'. Older women are consequently represented as either the object of a pathological gaze or, alternatively, as absent; they are erased and made invisible (Woodward, 2006) when their bodies do not conform to dominant notions of 'graceful agers' (Dolan and Tincknell, 2012: x–xi) or, the relatively new figure of the 'sexy oldie' (Vares, 2009). Within the field of ageing studies, binary constructions of ageing as 'progress-versus-decline' (Gullette, 2004) or of young versus old have been challenged, in recognition of the fact that 'one of

the intractable problems of the discourse of age itself [is that] it pivots on the blunt binary of young and old, as if there were only two states of age' (Woodward, 1999: xvii). A more productive approach to emerge from ageing studies is the understanding that ageing as a continuum (Woodward, 1999) where conceptually we can be young and old –old and young – at the same time (Moglen, 2008; Segal, 2013). *Call the Midwife* succeeds in offering a more nuanced representation and conception of ageing than commonly encountered on contemporary television by approaching age as being diverse and fluid.

## **Older women in the timespace of *Call the Midwife***

The television series *Call the Midwife* is loosely based on former nurse and midwife Jennifer Worth's memoirs<sup>ii</sup> and was first broadcast on UK television in 2012. Despite being scheduled in the peak family viewing slot at 8pm on a Sunday evening, the drama has been described by *Radio Times* reviewer Alison Graham as 'the most subversively feminist mainstream drama on television' (Graham, n.d.). Following the lives of two groups of women – a group of young nurses/midwives, at the early stages of their careers in community nursing, and a group of highly experienced Anglican nuns/nurses/midwives – the series is set in a fictional representation of the London's East End Borough of Poplar in the late 1950s.

*Call the Midwife* seems to offer a welcome alternative to the progress-versus-decline binary of ageing (Gullette, 2004), generating what Tincknell (2013) suggests is 'a broader canvas' of female ageing (2013: 770), sidestepping 'the contemporary media fixation with "cosmeceutical" ageing, offering instead a series of diverse and textured depictions of female maturity that contrast sharply with the conventional Hollywood template' (ibid.).

*Call the Midwife*'s intergenerational female ensemble cast of nuns, nurses and midwives places a range of different ages at the narrative centre of the series. The diversity of age categories is extended further by the wider community of Poplar (grandmothers, mothers, children and babies) that are involved in the storylines. Three of the Nonnatus House nuns are older women and are aged between their late 50s and 90s: Sister Julianne (played by Jenny Agutter, born 1952), Sister Evangelina (Pam Ferris, born 1948) and Sister Monica Joan (Judy Parfitt, born 1935). Although Sister Monica Joan no longer practices as a midwife/nurse herself, the other two do, and all three are actively engaged within their community.

A review in *The F word* emphasises *Call the Midwife*'s exploitation of women-only spaces and experiences – women giving birth, assisted by midwives, nuns, nurses and also midwives living together as a community in the convent – as establishing: 'a sense of sisterhood: This was a commune of independent women, living together and sharing their daily lives without the domination of any man' (Kenway, 2012). Similarly, Iona Sharma explains that *Call the Midwife* 'defly and lightly engages with feminist ideas through the reality of women's lives, rather than through the abstract' (Sharma, 2013). The focus on service, community and women's friendships provides an

alternative to more pervasive postfeminist media texts which proclaim feminism as superfluous or antiquated in an era when women's equality has supposedly been achieved (Hall and Rodriguez, 2003; Tasker and Negra, 2007).

Sharma (2013) suggests, as much feminist research has also suggested (Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Stanley and Wise, 1983), that *Call the Midwife* can be read as a feminist text by the act of telling women's stories. This chapter argues that the series also facilitates an important televisual engagement between feminism and understandings of ageing.

Ageing studies research has been interested in the concept of time and its relationship to understandings of age. In the twenty-first century, the fact that chronological time structures the everyday and imposes order and meaning is rarely questioned. In relation to the concept of age, however, chronological age or age from birth (calendar age) 'should be taken very cautiously if we want to take aging processes seriously, especially because chronological age is widely used in contemporary societies to regulate all kinds of processes with many consequences for the people concerned' (Baars and Visser, 2007: 2). Other models of time that were in existence before chronological time became (de facto) the only version of time – such as kairotic time where time is conceived of as cyclical; experiential or 'felt time' (Crowther et al., 2014: 2);<sup>iii</sup> and Augustinian time, where time involves experiential integration of 'an interrelation of the past, present and future' (Baars, 2012: 151) – have proved instructive when approaching concepts of age. *Call the Midwife* constructs a palimpsest of time that incorporates kairotic time,<sup>iv</sup> Augustinian time and the more usual everyday chronological time. As Jan Baars indicates: 'The understanding of time begins with the experience of change: we begin to notice (what becomes subsequently articulated as) "time" ... when we experience change' (2012: 145). Notions of change are crucial to *Call the Midwife*. As each episode commences, Redgrave's voice-over narration as the older Jenny articulates recollections that frame each storyline for the younger Jenny. The dominant discourse is one of change and coming to terms with new experiences. As Simon Biggs explains, 'the past is used as source material from which to build a serviceable identity in the present' (2004: 50). Consequently, if we think of time as change, then the presumed exactness of chronometric time is not as stable as it is usually considered to be and, as a result, common sense compartmentalised categories such as young and old are not as crisp and contained as popularly conceptualised. Baars suggests that narratives 'creep in and remain hidden behind chronometric exactness' (2012: 143), and therefore overlap with time understood in the older Augustinian sense (which conceptualises time as 'lived time'). To understand the notion of 'lived time' it is necessary to think of it as a formation which simultaneously embraces 'the past, the present and the future' (ibid.). The utilisation of kairotic and Augustinian notions of time generates narrative timespaces (May and Thrift, 2001) that 'interrogate the multiple complexities of time and context, assist with ways to think about unthinking stereotypes of older age that focus on decline' (Jennings, forthcoming 2015). Such timespaces also contest notions of generations as chronologically distinct

or discrete entities. For instance, although *Call the Midwife* is set at an important historical and cultural juncture where notions of youth culture and a generation gap were taking hold of the public imagination in the UK (Marwick, 1998) and despite the fact that fashion and popular music are explored as sites of difference by the young nurses, the overwhelming message of the series is to find points of connectivity between people. This is achieved through respecting diversities of identity within a framework of common human decency.

Sister Monica Joan's dementia also works to upset rigid notion of chronological temporal linearity. Her representation weaves an element of kairotic time into the narrative 'gifting a moment of grace, meaningful insights and knowing' (Crowther et al., 2014: 2) that works neither to deny the illness of dementia nor her vitality. Her dementia means that her presence and, more especially, her words merge to form an overlapping past and present suffused with elements of the mundane, the poetic, the mystical and the spiritual.<sup>v</sup> Equally, the visual style of the opening credits of each episode, where handwritten pages of what we come to believe is Jenny Worth's memoirs are superimposed over each other and intercut with scenes of life in the East End of London in the 1950s, introduces a fluid concept of time from the outset.<sup>vi</sup> The accompanying voice-over narration for each opening sequence and the visual techniques in the sequences outlined above construct time in a sophisticated way in *Call the Midwife* as being multi-layered.

As well as constituting a challenge to linear concepts of ageing in time, Sister Monica Joan, within the Christian framework of her vocation as a nun, emphasises the series' rather idealistic approach to feminism as a supportive sisterhood that can transcend the materialities of class, race, ethnicity and age.<sup>vii</sup> Her characterisation and biography also provides an interesting diegetic parallel to that of the celebrity-infused vocal presence of Vanessa Redgrave as narrator of the series. As will be discussed, Redgrave is associated with acts of politicised rebellion and an unwillingness to conform to the expected behaviours that her privileged status as a member of the Redgrave acting 'aristocracy' affords her. Similarly, Sister Monica Joan is also portrayed as a rebel.<sup>viii</sup> As a young woman, she gave up the comforts and entitlements of aristocratic life to serve the poor as a nun and nurse – becoming, at the turn of the twentieth century, one of the first women to qualify as a midwife.

## **Vanessa Redgrave's star persona and the cultural politics of celebrity**

Redgrave certainly conforms to the notion of a star in Richard Dyer's sense, in that she embodies 'what it is to be a human being in contemporary society' (2004: 7) and more specifically a flawed one at that. Dyer states that the star phenomenon 'consists of everything that is publicly available about stars', including 'interviews, biographies and coverage in the press of the star's doings and "private" life' (2004: 2). Most importantly, a star's image is also 'what people say or write about him or her' (Dyer, 2004: 3), and an analysis of what is written about Vanessa Redgrave suggests that there are two dominant influences that combine to form her media presence.

First, there is a widespread reverence and admiration for her as an accomplished actress. Redgrave was born in 1937 and her family is often described as a dynasty of actors (Adler, 2012; Spoto, 2012): both her parents – Michael Redgrave and Rachel Kempson – were actors, a profession shared, too, by her grandfather Roy Redgrave, brother Corin Redgrave, sister Lynn Redgrave, her two daughters Joely and Natasha, and son-in-law Liam Neeson. Redgrave studied at London's Central School of Music and Drama and, after her film debut in *Behind the Mask* (Hurst, 1958), she became, in Morrison's words, 'one of Britain's, if not Hollywood's, most accomplished and daring stars' (2002: 23). At almost six feet tall, Redgrave has always been an imposing physical presence. In interviews she has been inclined to describe herself or be described as having little care for her appearance, but her consummate understanding of performance has enabled her 'to switch on her beauty almost at will' (Adler, 2011). She is described as a woman possessed of confidence, authority and, most importantly in the context of this chapter, someone who has aged successfully (Viner, 2002) and exudes life experience (Morrison, 2002). Lynn Barber likens her to a reigning matriarch; explaining that she 'almost feel[s] inclined to curtsy' (2006) when in her presence. James Morrison highlights her 'air of almost presidential confidence – a form of eminence that can only be grown into with age and experience' (2002: 23).

Second, there is her political activism which has been the source of much of Redgrave's celebrity. Concepts of stardom and celebrity are often used interchangeably in scholarship and the media (Drake and Miah, 2010), and certainly in Vanessa Redgrave's case, the boundaries of where her star persona ends and her celebrity persona begins are not clear. Redgrave, however, is a star 'with a voice' – both in terms of the easily recognisable and charismatic sound of her voice and also, figuratively, as a star with strong political opinions who is not afraid to express them. Her celebrity persona is encapsulated in Taylor's (2011) description of her as the 'grande dame who won't conform'.

The concept of celebrity can be understood 'as a discursive category' (Holmes and Redmond, 2006: 12). Redgrave's own celebrity status is especially contradictory and multifaceted. For many years, Redgrave was predominantly 'an individual who is first and foremost known for their public profile and media circulation rather than their skilled performances in a particular field' (Drake and Miah, 2010: 51). Renowned as a versatile and commanding performer on stage, on film and on television, Redgrave's celebrity status is complex, sometimes incongruous, and able to evoke extreme feelings. As Marina Hyde wrote in her blog: 'Your opinions about Vanessa will have calcified one way or another sometime during the early 70s – even if you weren't born until the 80s. Indeed, scientists recently discovered that being able to stomach Vanessa is now simply genetic, like tongue rolling or tasting PTC. Either you can do it, or you can't' (Hyde, 2011). Redgrave's multi-layered star persona thus combines the talents of an actress and the extra-cinematic presence of a politically active celebrity (Drake and Miah, 2010: 56). King argues that 'an actor is always a signifier with at least three intertwined referents: the private person, the fictive



person or character, and the type under which these two dimensions of identity are categorically subsumed. ... By contrast, the celebrity is semantically extracinematic and transmedial, even if appearing in a specific film' (King, 2010: 8).

Her championing of humanitarian causes has been a source of tension in her public life, seemingly damaging her popularity as an outstanding actress. Unlike other British actresses who emerged in the 1960s and built impressive reputations for their craft (for instance Dame Judi Dench<sup>ix</sup> or Dame Maggie Smith), Redgrave is not recognised by the public and media as a 'national treasure'. Her image is arguably too controversial and too spikey. Her aura of grandeur contradicts both her humility and her championing of the downtrodden. In her analysis of the phenomenon of celebrity charity, Jo Littler argues that the endorsement of humanitarian causes can be used positively to create or maintain a certain celebrity's brand, to promote themselves or their product, maintaining their 'profile and topical currency' across the media (2008: 241). Redgrave's politics and her 'celebrity of caring' (Littler, 2008) stems from her profound political beliefs. Though her political beliefs undeniably stimulate her celebrity, they seem to harm her 'brand' rather than generate sympathetic interest. Hyde describes Redgrave as a 'celebrity angel of death' (Hyde, 2011), and even though Redgrave's political convictions conform to the same notions that Littler uses in relation to Angelina Jolie, i.e., they can be seen to align with "'real" and "intimate" life' (2008: 238), Redgrave is seemingly the 'wrong type' of humanitarian activist to gain public and media respect. She has never conformed to the type of celebrity brand that can be considered either popular or sexy. More recently her political activism has also been subjected to ageist slurs. Hyde's review of Redgrave's attendance at a protest event fixated on what she referred to as Redgrave's 'grey cardigan of care' (Hyde, 2011), rather than her solidarity in the particular cause she was supporting. In the media, her earnestness and her obsessive desire to promote certain causes above all else<sup>x</sup> is seen as both excessive (Brown, 1995; Hyde, 2011) and negative.

Dyer has argued, however, that a star can embody contradictory elements: audiences 'cannot make media images mean anything they want to, but they can select from the complexity of the image the meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and contradictions, that work for them' (2004: 4). Redgrave's complex celebrity and star persona is the culmination of a rich and contradictory tapestry of discourses, influences and behaviours. If, as Hilde Van den Bulck argues, ageing 'does not sit well with celebrity culture' (2014: 65) by virtue of its intrinsic worship of youth and beauty, Redgrave has nonetheless enjoyed life-long stardom. The public discourse surrounding Redgrave is as ambiguous as her own star persona, combining praise for her stage and screen performances with derisory comments on Redgrave's choice of political causes. Her life and career can be read through the lens of paradox; negotiating, as she does, the freedoms of privilege, talent and artistry, the sorrow of personal loss<sup>xi</sup> and a steely commitment to humanitarian causes, radical politics and the determination to battle on behalf of the disenfranchised.

Redgrave embodies these tensions and contradictions in her celebrity and star persona and expressively and symbolically in her voice. As stated above, she is a 'star with a voice', both dramatically and politically.

## **Vanessa Redgrave's distinctive aged voice**

In Clarice Butkus' (2012) discussion of female voice-over narration, she suggests that in recent successful female-centred series such as *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998–2004) and *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004–2012), the narration and interior monologues used are 'stereotypically "feminine" – higher pitched and lilting' (Butkus, 2012: 186). Despite being an older woman's voice, Redgrave's voice in *Call the Midwife* resonates more closely with the deeper registers that Butkus ascribes to the female 'warrior' register (2012: 186); signifying a more active/activist and possibly feminist presence. Voices have meanings related to age, gender and place in society (Divita, 2012) and female vocal registers are inflected by cultural understandings of the power relations between women and men within a patriarchal society. The tonal quality of voices also change over the course of an individual's life from childhood to deep old age, and diminishing vocal frequency and lack of vocal intensity in later life is frequently associated with dominant cultural and medical narratives of decline (Divita, 2012; Prakup, 2012). In contemporary Western youth-centred culture, an ageing voice is generally deemed *less*; less vigorous, less attractive and therefore implying a lack of authority (Divita, 2012).

Vanessa Redgrave's voice, however, strongly resists this definition through the weight of her star persona and the quality of her voice as an instrument of communication. The distinctive quality of her vocal instrument is the consequence of genetic timbre, her training as an actress and a lifetime of practicing her vocal skills as a performer. Physiologically, vocal folds or vocal chords require training and exercise to prevent deterioration of vocal quality (Prakup, 2012) and Redgrave's 60-year engagement with the practice of acting has ensured her continued skilled delivery of vocal frequency, intensity, range, power and quality.

Redgrave's voice is also made husky by her status as a life-long smoker, a factor that has contributed to deepening her vocal register and making her voice one of her key distinguishing features. In her late 70s, Redgrave's voice is still powerful and seemingly filled with emotion, as described by one interviewer: 'You cannot see her but her voice fills her small Chiswick flat. It is a loud voice, deep and sonorous, with a tremolo effect that suggests barely controlled fury' (Walsh, 1998: 22). It is this unique voice that narrates each opening and closing sequence of a *Call the Midwife* episode.

## **Voicing Jenny Lee in *Call the Midwife***

The narrator is a well-researched concept within literary studies and screen studies. The idea of the unreliability of narration has been particularly influential in relation to theorising the (unreliable) male narrator in American

independent film (Ferenz, 2005). For the female narrator, the main focus has been the exploration of the tensions between the expression of female subjectivity and the positioning of women within patriarchal culture (Hollinger, 1992). The dynamics between female voice-over narration and the viewer or the wider cultural meanings of the aged voice in voice-over narration remain under-explored.<sup>xii</sup> Michael Chion's (1999) concept of *acousmêtre*, or the vocal presence of 'a special being, a kind of talking and acting shadow' (1999: 21), is a useful tool to approach Redgrave's vocal identity in the series. The expectation of seeing a not-yet-seen voice, that is, the moment of revelation, or as Chion describes the moment of 'de-acousmatization' (1999: 23), is evident in *Call the Midwife* from the start. The viewer almost expects a sudden close-up of the 'mature' Jenny writing her memoirs.<sup>xiii</sup> For those cognisant of Redgrave's celebrity, the knowledge that this brings is likely to add to their reading of her disembodied vocal presence.<sup>xiv</sup> For those aware of her star actress persona, the quality of her inimitable voice conveys superlative authoritative communication. As Brian Viner explains, '[a]s elegant as Redgrave is, it is her voice – soft, slow, precise – that transfixes' (2002: 8). For those completely unaware of Redgrave, her vocal ability to 'transfix' acts as a persuasive conduit to the intrinsic values of *Call the Midwife* that are set out in her voice-over narration that introduces and closes each episode.

The voice-over narration in *Call the Midwife* performs several textual and meta-textual functions. This device anchors the narrative on the protagonist, establishing the bridge to a timespace where the first-person narrative of the memoir, its handwritten pages depicted in the title sequence, and its screen adaptation all converge. The address is to a female audience, as signalled by the female ensemble cast and the emphasis on women-focused plots. Most importantly in this context, the voice-over narration is crucial to suggesting the idea of ageing as a continuum in the series, more specifically, of being able to conceptualise the notion of being old and young at the same time.

## **Being old and young at the same time**

Moglen introduced the idea of ageing as 'a multiple, ambiguous, and contradictory process, which provides us – continuously and simultaneously – with images of the past, present, lost, embodied, and imagined selves' (2008: 303–304). Against a binary concept of age identity as a past (of youth) and a present (of old age), and against the idea that 'the authentic, younger self that is trapped inside an unreal, decaying body' (Moglen, 2008: 302), *Call the Midwife* explores age in a holistic way that moves beyond the limitations of chronological compartmentalisation. As suggested earlier, the style of the opening credits is deliberately multi-layered to embrace the concept that '[a]s we age, changing year on year, we also retain, in one manifestation or another, traces of all the selves we have been' (Segal, 2013: 4). In each episode from season 1–3, when the contemporary audience watches, they are pulled into the 1950s' timespace signalled by the *mise-en-scène* (fashions, cars, street furniture, etc.) and through the older Jenny's words, as narrated by Redgrave, they are implicated in the co-presence of kairotic, Augustinian and chronological times (young Jenny,

older Jenny, the 1950s and the twenty-first century when they themselves are watching). In the first episode of the series, the black-and-white pages of Worth's handwritten memoirs and the photographs depicting 1950s London change from black and white into colour as we are drawn into the diegetic world of the episode.<sup>xv</sup> Close-up shots from several different camera angles establish Jenny Lee as the protagonist and affirm the connection between the 'voiced' Jenny and the diegetic character. The camera alternates between a point-of-view shot where the camera is behind her head, and close-ups revealing her first reactions to East End London street life. As the first episode of *Call the Midwife* opens with a scene of two women fighting in the street, the viewer hears Jenny's opening voice-over (Redgrave):

I must have been mad.  
I must have been mad. I could have been an air hostess.  
I could have been a model.  
I could have moved to Paris or been a concert pianist.  
I could have seen the world, been brave, followed my heart.  
But I didn't.  
I sidestepped love and set off for the East End of London,  
because I thought it would be easier.  
Madness was the only explanation.

At that point, the viewer understands that the 'I' in the handwritten pages is 'I' who vocalises these recollections. Different recollections bookend each of the episodes, with Redgrave's ageing voice bringing this character-narrator's experiences to life. At this stage, young Jenny's inexperience and naivety are in stark contrast to the voice of experience that is narrating. Feeling unable to intervene in the fight, she turns away, helpless in this strange environment. As she turns away, one of the other midwives, an older nun who we later learn will be her colleague, Sister Evangelina, arrives at the scene and, with one powerful interjection, brings the violence to a halt. This type of confidence and authority comes from experience, which young Jenny Lee is still to gain. Tincknell accurately associates *Call the Midwife's* presentation of older women as wise and authoritative with Redgrave's vocal presence:

It is also the somewhat hoary device of a voice-over spoken by Vanessa Redgrave at the opening and close of each episode which foregrounds the ageing woman as cultural sage. Redgrave's calmly authoritative and decidedly 'cultured' tones, with their offering of little pockets of homespun wisdom pertaining to the events about to unfurl on screen, not only seem to secure the programme's truth claims, but also to affirm the 'feminine' values being articulated by it. (Tincknell, 2013: 781–782)

Vanessa Redgrave's voice is the reassuring core in a fluid timespace, and its connotations signal that young Jenny will, of course, become brave. In the process of this televisual narration, the naivety of the young Jenny, and the life

experience of Redgrave and the older Jenny, are in confluence creating a situation where the audience can access the notion of Jenny as old and young at the same time.

The confidence of Redgrave's serene, measured voice suggests that identity integration is achieved along the life course. The younger Jenny is thus mediated by an older woman's experiences and, at the same time, the late life narrative of the older Jenny is invigorated. Each moment of voice-over narration presents an intergenerational coming together of the younger and the older self and in this process it is a memoir that is used as the device for Redgrave's vocal presence to create the memory bridge between young and old, past and present. This creates, as Segal indicates, a practice where 'old age no longer appears as simply a type of foreign country separated off from the rest of a life' (2013: 62).

### **2014 Christmas Special: 'Mature Jenny' revealed**

In *Call the Midwife*'s 2014 'Christmas Special' Redgrave appears onscreen as the elderly Jennifer Worth ('Mature Jenny'). This moment of 'de-acousmatization' consists of a close-up of her hands, as she writes, not her memoirs, but a Christmas card. The moment of revelation is significant in terms of the representation of both Redgrave and the older woman. Here in a flashback ('Christmas, 2006'), the voice-over narration links the years 2006 and 1959 (when the episode is set). The choice of depicting Jenny writing Christmas cards rather than her memoirs is only the first element that destabilises the previously strong connection between the voice-over narration, young Jenny and the other characters in *Call the Midwife*. Following a close-up of Mature Jenny's ageing hands,<sup>xvi</sup> the moment of 'de-acousmatization' is one of disjuncture for the audience rather than the fulfilment of expectations. Accustomed to Mature Jenny's voice-over, intoning wisdom and personal experience through Redgrave's powerful ageing voice, the viewer encounters an image that stands in stark contrast with the disembodied voice. Jenny's first enunciation is of helplessness and disorganisation in line with one of the stereotypes of old age – she has misplaced a Christmas ornament and her husband comes to the rescue and helps looking for it. In contrast to the unusual, female-centred space the viewer has become accustomed to in *Call the Midwife*, the decision to represent Mature Jenny within the context of domesticity undermines previously age-positive ethos of *Call the Midwife*. Mature Jenny, complete in 'age-appropriate' attire, hair style and spectacles,<sup>xvii</sup> appears *against type* in terms of Redgrave's celebrity persona and *against type* in terms of young Jenny's characterisation throughout the series.

In contrast to the notion that ageing is a continuum, which Jenny's voice-over narration facilitates, as has been argued here, the portrayal of Mature Jenny and her husband Philip (Ronald Pickup) suggests a more static notion of ageing, where old is the binary opposite of young. As they both gaze nostalgically upon the many black-and-white photographs of the midwives of Nonnatus House that feature on the sideboard in their living room, including some that show Jenny as a young woman in the 1950s, they say almost longingly, 'We were so young'. Discussing Sister

Monica Joan, they mention that she must have been over 80 at that point in time. The focus in this brief flashback on chronological age, and the binary construction of ‘now’ and ‘then’, as well as of young and old, signals a return to dominant ageist constructions of ageing and age which rely on fixed categories of old and young.

## Conclusion

Seasons 1–3 of *Call the Midwife* are a rare example of a series that transcends what Woodward calls the ‘blunt binary of young and old’ (1999: xvii). In so doing, it provides multiple points of identity through the use of an intergenerational female ensemble cast and the creative manipulation of a fluid timespace that allows experiences to be co-present through kairotic notions of ‘special moments’ and Augustinian points of change over a continuum of the past and present. Redgrave’s voice remains strong and authoritative despite approaching her eighth decade, her narration suggests both reliability and also a comfortable sense of identity integration along the life course. Her vocal characteristics mirror some of the series’ welcome portrayals of a wide range of ageing female subjectivities. Most importantly, her voice-over serves to link the past and present of one of the series’ central characters (Jenny) in a rare convergence of older and younger selves. Younger Jenny is thus mediated by an older woman’s experiences and, at the same time, the late life narrative of the older Jenny is re-energised by younger Jenny’s curiosity and passions. As the series moves from the December 2014 ‘Christmas Special’ into Season 4, this earlier period of *Call the Midwife*’s production should be recognised and prized for its radical engagement with holistic understandings of ageing and female ageing in particular.

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## **Filmed**

*Behind the Mask*. Directed by Desmond Hurst. UK, 1958.

*Call the Midwife*. Created by Heidi Thomas. UK: BBC, 2012–.

Desperate Housewives. Created by Marc Cherry. USA: ABC, 2004–2012.

Julia. Directed by Fred Zinnemann. USA, 1977.

Notes on a Scandal. Directed by Richard Eyre. US/UK, 2006.

Sex and the City. Created by Darren Star. US: HBO, 1998–2004.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Vanessa Redgrave is cited in the cast list as ‘Voice of Mature Jenny’.

<sup>ii</sup> The midwife who wrote the original books, about her experiences in the 1950s East End, the first of which gives the name to the BBC series, see *Call the Midwife: A True Story of the East End in the 1950s* (Worth, 2009).

<sup>iii</sup> Crowther et al. (2014) suggest that ‘Kairos time emerges between past and future’ (3).

<sup>iv</sup> It is interesting that birth which is one of the main threads of *Call the Midwife* is regarded as particularly significant for notions of kairotic time – see Crowther et al. (2014).

<sup>v</sup> Her character profile on the BBC web page for *Call the Midwife* lists her interests as cake, astrology and knitting, in no particular order (see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/profiles/5hM1j3fSQyShMly53k70jQx/sister-monica-joan>).

<sup>vi</sup> The musical soundtrack encapsulates and underscores this by highlighting repetitive string sounds reminiscent of Buddy Holly’s *It’s Raining in My Heart* (Coral, 1959) fused with a traditional orchestral score.

<sup>vii</sup> These are all intersectional elements of female identities that are explored in the series.

<sup>viii</sup> Small acts of rebellion still continue in her old age by taking more than her fair share of cake.

<sup>ix</sup> See, for instance, the article in *The Telegraph* (Anon, 2008).

<sup>x</sup> Higginbotham (2012) refers to her Academy Award acceptance speech in 1978 for her role in the film *Julia* (Zinneman, 1977) when she used it as an opportunity to make anti-Zionist comments that marked her as an anti-Semite for many years.

<sup>xi</sup> Within two years, 2009–2010, Vanessa Redgrave endured the loss of her daughter Natasha, her brother Corin and her sister Lynn (Teeman, 2013).

<sup>xii</sup> In terms of unreliable narration, *Notes on a Scandal* (Eyre, 2006) comes to mind as an example where the older female character voices a remarkably unreliable voice-over narration, challenging the stereotypes of the maternal, grandmotherly older woman. See, for instance, Krainitzki’s (2012) analysis of *Notes on a Scandal*.

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- <sup>xiii</sup> Which is exactly how the physical presence of Redgrave is introduced in the Season Three ‘Christmas Special’.
- <sup>xiv</sup> The strength of her bodiless presence is explored humorously in the 2013 Comic Relief sketch, where the other members of the cast hear her voice and, looking up to where the voice is presumably coming from, address her as ‘Vanessa Redgrave’, rather than ‘Jenny’ (available at: <http://youtu.be/3ePfiwLuNGg>).
- <sup>xv</sup> This mechanism is repeated in the opening of each episode.
- <sup>xvi</sup> A similar shot can be found in the opening scenes of *Notes on a Scandal*, where the protagonist Barbara (Dench) writes her diary. See Krainitzki (2012). See also Rona Murray’s discussion of Agnès Varda’s use of this motif in Chapter 5 of this collection.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Her agency further undermined by the gendered ageism underlying her portrayal as the stereotypical ‘granny’ (Coupland, 2013).