

## **Discourses of Care: Media, Medicine and Society**

University of Glasgow, 5<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> September 2016

### Care and Televisual Spectatorship

As the abstract to my paper indicates, I wish to make a contribution to this conference by reflecting on the significance of televisual viewing as a form of care as lived through by myself and my late wife, Antonella, after she became ill with a rare, highly aggressive and ultimately terminal form of endometrial cancer (papillary serous carcinoma). As such this paper will in many ways be highly personal – how could it not be given that today, the 6<sup>th</sup> of September, would have been our 19<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary – but I hope that in exploring our joint experience of her illness there may be more general observations about the relationship between care and various forms of media that might prove valuable.<sup>1</sup>

I'm not a TV specialist, so I am very aware that there will be all sorts of deficiencies in terms of history and theory in this paper; however, I felt that a personal intervention, inflected with my broader background in Film and Critical Theory might prove productive; I hope that this might be the case here today!

So, as I have just suggested this paper is seeking to explore the relationship between care, illness and (televisual) spectatorship from a primarily autobiographical perspective and it is with the autobiographical that I wish to begin, taking my cue from Amy Holdsworth's compelling *Screen* article 'Televisual Memory' (2010), which resonated, as I read it, with many aspects of my own work on *Afterwardsness* in film, and which has proved instructive in my reflections on television viewing, memory, mourning but also, importantly, care.

In her essay Holdsworth examines the relationship between stasis and televisual flow or to borrow Barthes' terms for the analysis of the photographic

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<sup>1</sup> This date also marks the anniversary of the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, who had died a week earlier on the 30<sup>th</sup> August 1997.

image, the *studium* and the *punctum*, setting up an encounter between the unremembered 'flow' of television, as articulated by writers such as Fredric Jameson and Stephen Heath, versus its punctuated moments that provoke memory. Focussing initially on the 'memorial' episode or reflective montage as an exemplar of the relationship between television and memory, stasis and flow, Holdsworth extrapolates beyond these particular instances to argue more broadly for a productive relationship between television and memory; she suggests that moments,

'illuminate the role of memory in understanding how television works but they are also fragments which attempt to capture and magnify an experience of television. [...] These moments of televisual memory reveal a complex relationship between feeling and understanding, where meaning is closely bound up both with the experience of the sequence itself and with the greater flow of television' (2010: 142).

She goes on to say that,

'we [may] think of the television viewing experience as one of accumulation, where viewing experiences and references are built up over time to form a kind of television autobiography' (Holdsworth 2010: 140).

Referring to the medical drama *ER* (NBC, 1994 – 2009), Holdsworth continues, 'what the sequence [...] attempts to capture and reproduce are those "afterimages" and "moments" built up over a life lived across television' (2010: 140). Citing Barbara Klinger, she notes,

'as nostalgia involves an interplay between film narrative and the viewer's past, it ignites a chain of autobiographical associations, deeply affecting the process of comprehension ... comprehension is not, then, simply the act of understanding the flow of narrative events or the stories' main theme. It lies, rather, in the connections set off while a text

is being read or viewed. Repeated encounters with the same films over time amplify associative possibilities' (2010: 141).

Holdsworth goes on to reflect that, 'these associative possibilities seem particularly pertinent when considering serial drama, in which cumulative narratives demand and reward certain levels of audience investment in character and diegesis, often over hundreds of hours of programming' (2010: 141).

I mentioned earlier that Holdsworth's article resonated with my own work on *Afterwardsness* in film and I want to move on to explore briefly that connection, again in both autobiographical and theoretical terms, in the next part of this presentation. This work began in 1994 with my PhD which was entitled, '*Nachträglichkeit* in Psychoanalysis and Film: A Paradigm for Spectatorship'. This project explored mourning and transience in some depth, and I am struck, from my position as a bereaved widower, by how it now takes on a renewed and rather poignant significance. I argued in this work that cinematic spectatorship might be structured by the temporality of deferred action or *Afterwardsness*, as Jean Laplanche has usefully translated the Freudian term *Nachträglichkeit*. Motivated by moments of 'trauma', in the loosest sense of the word, what Laplanche calls 'enigmatic signifiers', I proposed that the spectator unconsciously de- and re-translates these signifiers both during and after their viewing. Memory, recollection, becomes a fundamental component of the spectatorial experience whether conscious or unconscious. Those moments that remain, often unbidden, after we have viewed a film, that return, sometimes for days, are the after effects, the reworked signifiers, 'traumatic', arguably because they require attention.<sup>2</sup> These are the 'cinephiliac moments' that Christian Keathley has written about so elegantly. They are also similar to the 'connections', the 'associative possibilities' that Klinger refers to. The autobiographical, then, is both televisual in the way that Holdsworth suggests but also personal in its access to both conscious and unconscious memories.

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<sup>2</sup> This is Barthes' *punctum*, the element that stands out from the ground of the *studium*, that forces the attention of the spectator.

This idea that viewers form personal televisual autobiographies constructed out of their individual televisual viewing histories, allied to their broader lives is absolutely relevant to the experience that Antonella and I had watching *Frasier* (NBC, 1993 – 2004; Channel 4, 1994 – ) at various points in our lives. I first began to watch the series when it was aired on Channel 4 in 1994, the year in which I moved from London to Bradford to undertake a PhD. Antonella also started to watch it at this point too but as an existing viewer of *Cheers*, familiar with the character of Frasier Crane. My viewing was bound up with the regular and repeated pleasure of Antonella's arrival in Bradford for the weekend from London, where she had remained working and living with her parents, but it was at the same time filled with a sense of loss too, the intense sense of loss that I would experience on her return to London on a Sunday evening. In a no doubt familiar sensation those weekends were often permeated by the present experience of a future anticipated loss. Similarly my viewing of *Frasier* with Antonella during her illness was inhabited by that same feeling of the transience of the experience and its pleasure, and the knowledge of her impending death that I had in effect already begun to mourn. (When someone is terminally ill the mourning often begins while they are still alive, as one mourns a future that will no longer happen, as one prefigures the loss of that person). The importance of every moment becomes intense, freighted with the unacknowledged spectre of death. I became very conscious of the importance of holding onto moments in the present knowing that they would not last or exist in the future, moments that included televisual spectatorship more generally and *Frasier* in particular. As Antonella's mobility was increasingly compromised as the cancer attacked her spine and eventually paralysed her, so her universe contracted and the 'care' offered by individual and shared televisual spectatorship became ever more valuable. Our spectatorship of the series was an accumulative experience of the kind described by Holdsworth, stretched over a lengthy period of time, in our shared past, that became part of both an individual and a conjoined televisual autobiography and which was then resurrected, so to speak, to function as a form of almost palliative care as we faced Antonella's increasing immobility and the development of her illness. It is also the case, of course, that our re-

viewing of *Frasier* together while Antonella was ill has become a further part of my personal televisual autobiography, of which this paper has now also become a part. For over three years since Antonella died our *Frasier* boxed set has set on a shelf in our bedroom, with the last disc that we had viewed together still pulled to one side in its packaging as a reminder of where we had got to with our viewing. That visual marker functioned almost as a kind of memorial as it marks the period of Antonella's death: *Frasier*, Season 3, Disc 4. It is only as I began to write this paper that I was able (forced, in effect) to return to view the episodes that we had re-watched together, something that proved immensely difficult to contemplate but actually intensely pleasurable once I did actually begin to watch the series once more.

While Antonella was ill we would generally watch *Frasier* sitting together in bed with Antonella propped up using a special backrest provided by occupational therapy. During her illness there had been a necessary transformation of the way space in the house was used. As Antonella became bed bound, paralysed – and before we had a hospital bed installed downstairs – she was forced to remain in our bedroom, which became her primary living space and the space in which we viewed all of our TV, having previously not had one at all in the bedroom.<sup>3</sup> Meals were now eaten in this space, which became in effect the main living space in the house with Antonella still at its centre, although her presence downstairs (and in the kitchen specifically) was still felt as a loss, a decentering. One of the most important dimensions of this changed circumstances for our televisual viewing was the fact that we were sharing an intimate space together in which the pressures and realities of care could be put to one side for a brief period to be replaced by the television as a form of virtual care but at the same time we could share physical contact, laugh together, talk etc. As Holdsworth and Lury note in their recent article on 'peripheral viewers and care', 'care is not necessarily verbal: "It may involve putting a hand on an arm at the right moment, or jointly drinking hot chocolate while chatting about nothing in particular"' (2016: 190). Sitting together viewing in this way would also trigger memories – part of our shared

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<sup>3</sup> Historically, Antonella would watch television downstairs and come up to bed at 2.00 or 3.00 in the morning because I found it a distraction and preferred to read before sleeping.

biography – sometimes connected directly to, or prompted by, the viewing of *Frasier* but often entirely unrelated. But these memories become a little like the ‘hand on an arm’, they take on a significance because they function to reassure or to comfort and/or to bring pleasure. I remember at this time that Antonella developed a craving for caramel flavoured rice crackers and so I was always buying them whenever I saw them and our viewing was often punctuated by crunching as she ate them. After she died I was struck by how many packets of these crackers I had ended up storing (knowing that I would never eat them as I don’t like them) and which I kept until eventually they went beyond their sell by date and I binned them. Holdsworth and Lury suggest ultimately that ‘television in certain instances [...] is a caring technology’ (2016: 190) and borrowing the term ‘small pleasures’ from Feder Kittay they argue that it is the ‘routine qualities, repetitions and diversions [of texts] that reflect and articulate the important relations of care’ (2016: 190). There is also, arguably, an element of care for the future self through the making and retaining of resonant memories, so important in a situation such as that which faced Antonella and I. Perhaps the most important product of Antonella’s illness was the simple sharing of time; since the birth of our twins in 2002 that was something we’d had less of for each other but ironically Antonella’s illness afforded us this in unexpected ways. Waiting together to see her oncologist became an occasion to spend valuable time together, despite the frustrations of the frequent and lengthy delays to be seen; simply sitting or lying together in front of the TV therefore became similarly significant. Faced with terminal illness there is an imperative to take the most from any given situation, to properly notice and engage fully with the ‘small pleasures’, to share time, laughter, pleasure and love.

Antonella was someone who had always used television as a kind of care. She would always fall asleep to the TV in the evenings and would use it as a means to relax and unwind. Arguably, it also reflected her Italian cultural heritage where television had a far more central place in the home than I was used to as a boy. My own experience privileged reading over television and while I was growing up TV was a relatively rare ‘treat’ with viewing proscribed and organised. As a boarder at a public school I had limited access to TV in

any case so my televisual autobiography or history was very different to that of many of my peers. This meant that my relationship to television was a relatively distant one, although those programmes that I was able to watch I bonded with perhaps in an especially intense way. After such a repressive early approach to TV, it is perhaps not so surprising that I became a film academic! My relationship with Antonella, who I met when I was 19, just over a year after I had left school, engendered a shift in my approach to television and her influence softened my fairly rigid class bound viewing habits. Antonella's illness and our collective viewing produced a significant further shift in my relationship with TV and my viewing and appreciation of it. I have fond memories of Antonella watching series such as *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981 – 87), *Cagney and Lacey* (CBS, 1981 – 88), *The Equalizer* (CBS, 1985 – 89) and *Cheers* (NBC, 1982 – 93) when I first knew her; she introduced me to *The Equalizer*, for example and to *Cagney and Lacey*, although I could never get excited by *Cheers*, despite its importance for *Frasier* (NBC, 1993 – 2004; Channel 4, 1994 – ), which as I have described became a real favourite for both us.

As I begin to work towards the closing section of this paper I would like to consider what it was about *Frasier* that made it so compelling. It is a sitcom that received plaudits and awards for the quality of its writing and certainly that was a key element of the pleasure that Antonella and I took in viewing it but the characters themselves are so well crafted that they also become familiar and to some degree comfortably predictable in their traits. What *Frasier* also represents is a family, one in which care sits at its centre. Martin Crane, a widower and an ex-policeman has been shot and injured as part of the series backstory. He is cared for by Daphne Moon, originally from Manchester and the person who regularly pricks the pretentiousness and the pomposity of *Frasier* and his brother Niles Crane. *Frasier* himself is also involved in 'care' of course, as a radio psychiatrist, dispensing advice to the listeners who call into his show. In an early episode, 'Death becomes Him' Season 1, Disc 2), which I remember being difficult for Antonella (and me to some extent) to view, *Frasier* comes face to face with his own mortality when a doctor that he has arranged for his father to see, dies suddenly. Angry at

being kept waiting for the appointment Frasier becomes contrite when he discovers the reason for the doctor's absence. Anxious that he too might die like this similarly aged doctor, Frasier resolves to try to find out what has caused the death in the hope that he might be able to differentiate this man from himself and therefore reassure himself that he is not in any imminent danger. In the scene that I hope to show you if I have time, Frasier visits the doctor's funeral wake and in typical Frasier fashion blunders embarrassingly amongst the guests, eventually meeting the doctor's wife. The scene portrays the earnest, pompous, self-obsessed Frasier but we also see the wise, caring Frasier 'from the radio', dispensing advice and quiet, gentle comfort...

Clip: 6 minutes 55 seconds

At the end of the clip Frasier's advice echoes Kittay's 'small pleasures' referred to earlier in relation to care, as he suggests to the bereaved widow that the best we can do is to 'live for the little joys and surprises that life affords us'.

The way that I watch TV now has been hugely influenced, shaped by, the viewing that I did with Antonella while she was ill and in many ways I have been (and continue to be) 'cared' for by those programmes that I have watched and which have had an incredibly powerful effect on me. Perhaps the most important of these has been *Battlestar Galactica* (NBC, 2004 – 2009), which is, of course, a series that is profoundly shot through with loss. The protagonists are searching for some kind of future that can move them beyond the loss of their home planet to a new world on which they can rebuild their lives. It is also a narrative that charts the demise of a key character, President Laura Roslin (Mary McDonnell) as she eventually succumbs to cancer in the very final episode. I discovered this series shortly after Antonella died in April 2013 and it sustained me during that summer. I would watch it every evening after my children, Emily and Toby had gone to bed and I would escape entirely into its fictional universe, channelling my grief in and through each episode and the broader narrative arc of the series. I had never been so profoundly affected by a television programme in my life and it is clear that my



relationship with *Battlestar Galactica* was tied ineluctably to my grief. As I returned to work at the start of the new academic year I found that I had less time to view *Battlestar* and gradually the intensity began to wane; however, it continued to carry a significant affective charge and I became reluctant, almost frightened, to finish viewing the series. It was only this summer – three years on – that I viewed the final episodes, evidence undoubtedly of me wanting to hold on to Antonella – to not let go of the Antonella who still felt strangely close by immediately after her death – but also to hold onto the care that the series offered me, as well as to not have to experience the loss that its conclusion would cause me.

The freighting of memory in relation to the viewing of *Frasier* by Antonella and me and my own memories in relation to her, as well as our experience of collective viewing and the moments – often extended – of TV that I have referred to in this paper would tend to bear out Holdsworth thesis in relation to ‘televsual memory’ but the amplification of grief and mourning offers an intensification of it. This has been a challenging paper to write. It has been difficult to balance the personal with the academic and the return to viewing *Frasier* has not been easy, although it has as I said been gratifyingly pleasurable. However, it has been therapeutic to think about and write about a period during Antonella’s life and my life, where despite facing a terrifying and often painful future we shared innumerable ‘small pleasures’, not least of which was the love that we had for each other...

## **Bibliography**

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