Creative endeavours can provide a powerful means of reflecting, and reflecting on, human experience and can therefore extend our understanding of the human other. My feature-length screenplay *When Granny Went on the Internet* is a creative product which takes as its centre an ‘-ism’ that sits low on the radar of public comment or concern: ageism. The story revolves around Granny who, at 75 years of age and after the unexpected death of her husband, suddenly finds herself alone and unable to operate any twenty-first-century technology. I use the creative product of the screenplay to explore the link between technology, patriarchy and sexism, and the traditional alignment between technology and men, as well as the alignment between technology and youth. Granny, as an old woman, is an outsider to digital technology and her sons, believing they are acting in her best interests and are ‘protecting her from herself’, attempt to gatekeep her access to such technology.

The relationship between gender and technology is not static, but evolves over time. Eugenia Siapera (2012, 181–82) describes both technology and gender as ‘moving targets, involved in a fluid relationship in which they co-constitute each other’, along with other influencing elements. I sense that new media such as the Internet provide an opportunity for the traditional alignment between technology, gender and age to be disrupted. Through my screenplay I explore the notion that new media may provide a portal through which definitions of self can be reconstructed: Granny’s story disrupts the
traditional alignment between technology, patriarchy, sexism and ageism described by Siapera, and re-imagines it.

INT. GRANNY’S BEDROOM – DAY

The harsh sound of an alarm clock heralds the start of the big day. Granny’s eyes snap open. She switches on the light and puts on her hearing aid. She tries to jump out of bed but ends up rocking back and forth on the edge before she can finally stand. She is chatting ten to the dozen.

GRANNY

Ho-kay! Let’s get the show on the road. Today is the day! Can you believe it! I want you to tell me which outfit is better for the ship. She opens the cupboard and starts taking out one vividly bright outfit after another, tossing them behind her onto the bed.

GRANNY (CONT’D)

What do you think? This one OR . . . this one? Grandad lies silently. Granny pauses and turns, holding another colourful outfit in her hands. She faces the bed and Grandad.

GRANNY (CONT’D)

Sweetheart?

Granny’s expression changes as she realises that something is not quite right. She goes over and shakes Grandad. No response. She shakes him harder. He lies motionless. Granny drops to her knees next to the bed. She places her hand on Grandad’s chest, but there is no breathing. She grabs for the phone next to the bed and dials furiously. It rings for a long time before someone answers.

* 

This is an early scene from When Granny Went on the Internet, a feature-length screenplay I wrote about a 75-year-old grandmother who suddenly finds herself alone after the death of her husband. Through this screenplay, I explore what it means to be old, female, alone and out of step with the technological world around you. The protagonist, Granny, has to find her feet again without the partner who ‘did it all’ for her. In the aftermath of her husband’s passing she learns how to use a computer and then the Internet, which leads
to a changed perception of herself and to renegotiated relationships with her two sons.

I chose the title of my screenplay before I had encountered the work of pioneering feminist writer Barbara McDonald. The title *When Granny Went on the Internet* speaks on various levels: first, hailing old women and families as an important target audience through the use of the word ‘Granny’ (although they are not the only audience); second, positioning the screenplay as a comedy and therefore as non-threatening; and third, as an *agent provocateur* asserting that old women have the right to engage with new media.

The dialogue in the screenplay includes use of the word ‘old’. The decision to refer to the protagonist as old, rather than with a euphemism such as ‘senior citizen’, or the more innocuous-sounding term ‘older woman’, was influenced by McDonald’s writings about identity and difference in old women (McDonald and Rich 1984). McDonald has been described as the first person to really draw attention to the fact that old women are ignored, excluded and rendered invisible in society (see Adams 2008). She identified society’s view that ‘old is ugly, old is powerless, old is the end and therefore … old is what no one could possibly want to be’ (McDonald and Rich 1984, 91). Her powerful and clear writing encouraged me to use the word ‘old’ deliberately, and to choose that the protagonist of my screenplay challenge the stereotype of the old woman as benign, non-productive and inconsequential. I hope that the screenplay will provide a form of advocacy for the right of old women to experiment with new media and to enjoy its affordances, such as easy access to information and connection with people who live far away.

Another view is that it is life stages, rather than age, that better predict engagement with and use of new media (Helsper 2010). I have deliberately tried to highlight the protagonist’s life stage of widowhood. The norms and conventions associated with Granny’s life stage of advanced age and widowhood are clearly displayed by one of her sons, Aaron, when he tries to persuade her to move to a retirement centre. He believes she is old, unskilled, should not be trying anything new, and needs looking after. Josh, her other son, on the other hand, believes that Granny’s new life stage of widowhood is as good a time as any for her to try out new things. As such, Josh focuses more on Granny’s life stage than on her age.
Through McDonald I came to understand that the identity of grandmother is a safe one for women to occupy, given that the role stereotypically emphasises the nurturing of the young and is seen as supportive, useful and non-threatening. The choice of name for the protagonist – ‘Granny’ – conjures up the stereotype of the benign, inconsequential individual whose uses do not extend much beyond child-minding. However, Granny does have a real name: Sylvia Human. I chose the name Sylvia for her as it provides a connection to the phrase ‘Silver Surfers’ being used in the online press to describe old people using the Internet. Her surname – ‘Human’ – suggests that she is an ‘everywoman’ and her experiences and feelings reflect those of many other old people. As such, she is a mirror of the human condition.

However, McDonald also says that ‘age in our society also gives us a second opportunity … to move out of that safe harbour of acceptability’ (McDonald and Rich 1984, 2). The two sons, Aaron and Josh, represent these two positions – the safe harbour and the move away from it. I trade on the stereotype of the granny, and pull the audience in through the use of comedy, but ultimately I invert expectations since my protagonist does indeed move out of that ‘safe harbour of acceptability’ as she engages with new media and starts to create a new self.

Aaron and Josh represent two polarised views of old women that can be found in the broader society: on the one hand, the view that an old woman is at the end of her life and should not be disturbing the status quo – this is Aaron’s position – and, on the other, that an old woman still has much living to do – this is Josh’s eventual position (although it takes him a little while to reach it).

It is interesting to me that the basis of ageism might be the family. Lise Weil (2007) maintains that McDonald’s recognition of family as the source of ageism is one of her most significant contributions to feminist thought. Granny’s elder son, Aaron, is the one who displays ageism most clearly, having fixed and preconceived ideas about what is and is not appropriate for a woman of Granny’s age. Aaron personifies the conservative, restrictive voice of traditional roles and expectations. As such, he serves to hamper her activities, and Granny is always concerned about what he will say. McDonald points out that ‘the need in an ageist society to rely on children for acceptance … results in a profoundly unbalanced power relationship, in which the old woman must often bend to her children’s definition of herself’ (McDonald and Rich 1984, 60).
Aaron believes that as Granny is approaching the end of her life, she should not be starting anything new or engaging with anything of consequence. Expressing a desire to revive an old skill, in this case driving, is interpreted by Aaron as proof of his mother’s lack of judgement. Despite her grief and insecurities Granny is an independent woman at heart. She strives to maintain her independence and declares that she wants to start driving again, a notion that is met with resistance from her two sons, as in the following extract.

EXT. GARAGE – DAY

Granny enters the garage clutching car keys and a remote control. She surveys the old car uncertainly. She tries the car door. It is locked. She points the remote at the car and presses a button. The garage door starts to close behind her.

GRANNY

Woopsie.
She quickly presses the remote again and the garage door rises. She presses the remote and tries to open the car door again, but this time she triggers the car alarm, which begins to wail and screech. Josh and Aaron appear in the background. Josh rushes in looking worried while Aaron stays in the driveway, covering his ears.

JOSH

Shouting.
Ma, what’s happening?
Granny looks somewhat bewildered as he takes the keys and remote from her and stops the alarm. She composes herself, and after a moment she puts out her hand for the keys. Josh hands them over hesitantly.

JOSH (CONT’D)

Do you need to go somewhere, Ma? I’ll take you.

GRANNY

I’m just wondering what to do. I’m going to need to start driving again.

Josh processes this information and tries to choose his words carefully.

JOSH

Ma, do you really think that’s the best thing?

GRANNY

Why not? I’ve had my licence for 40 years.
JOSH
Ya, but you haven't driven for 25 of those.

GRANNY
And so?

JOSH
Aaron won't like it.

GRANNY
Oh, Aaron. He worries too much. One or two little accidents and he thinks I can't cope.

* 

For Granny, the car and being able to drive represent autonomy of movement and choice. Much has been written about women and technology, and Julie Wosk’s work, *Women and the Machine: Representations from the Spinning Wheel to the Electronic Age* (2001), elucidates the link between technology, patriarchy and sexism. Following Wosk, I try to show in the scene above and throughout the screenplay how technology is aligned with gender and, following Siapera (2012), that technology is gendered as masculine. When issues of gender intersect with issues of age, as in Granny’s story, the exclusionary aspects of technology are amplified, resulting in the scene above where Granny’s sons try to stop her from driving.

Later in the screenplay I suggest that, although technology has historically been perceived as gendered and masculine, new media such as the Internet provide the opportunity for such an alignment to be re-imagined. In order to convince her sons that she should continue living alone, and to prove that she can cope on her own, Granny learns how to go on the Internet.

The storyline suggests that acquiring digital technological expertise can lead to an expanded definition of self, and can empower the individual to break free of expectations related to their role in the family and in society. Thus, it offers a challenge to stereotypes about age and gender, and suggests that new media may provide a portal through which definitions of self can be re-imagined.

The person that Granny becomes can be understood as an example of a ‘resistance identity’. The idea of resistance identities was formulated by Manuel Castells (1997), who describes them as ‘stigmatised identities that
seek recognition – identities that do not enjoy a high material and symbolic status’ (Castells cited in Siapera 2012, 173–74). This is precisely what Granny’s experiences elucidate. An old woman online is not taken seriously. An old woman as a teacher of new technologies is oxymoronic, and yet this is indeed what Granny becomes in the end.

The script functions as a form of consciousness-raising and advocacy for old people to be included in new media, and for the younger generation to be the conduit that allows this to happen. However, a film must still work as a film, and so I have created a multilayered script that is, on the one hand, a comedy aimed at a family audience, and on the other, a serious social commentary which uses flips in tone to create provocative content for those who care to look beyond the surface humour. My reasons for choosing the subject matter for my screenplay stem mainly from considerations about my late mother who, at 88, with a hearing impairment and with Parkinson’s disease, found herself increasingly isolated from life around her – the plight of many an old person. At the same time, her independent spirit led her to search for ways to become mobile and autonomous, including expressing a desire to learn to drive, which led to alarm among her adult children, and a desire to learn how to use the Internet.

My interest in notions of digital insiders and outsiders is reflected in the character of Granny, and was partly inspired by my mother’s situation. The Internet, along with Skype, email and social networking sites, holds positive potential for old people to expand their virtual horizons at a time when their real world is shrinking. I therefore constructed the events of the plot by researching and considering the multiple opportunities provided by new media, especially the Internet. The comic storyline rests on a bed of both realities and possibilities related to new media and their affordances, particularly in regard to how these apply to old women.

I was inspired by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Clickworkers’ project, in which members of the public were invited to volunteer a few minutes or more to map and identify areas on the surface of Mars, meaning that people without scientific knowledge could do this (Benkler 2006). Another intriguing NASA project is ‘Target Asteroids’, through which amateur astronomers are invited to discover and study near-earth objects (Benkler 2006). It struck me that such Internet-based initiatives provide the ideal opportunity for old, retired or immobile
persons to contribute to important projects and, in so doing, gain a sense of self-worth. This presupposes, however, that the old person has access to a connected device, is reasonably new media-literate, has a support system to help them navigate online problems, and possesses a degree of self-confidence, all of which would enable them to take advantage of such opportunities. Without access, skills, assistance and confidence, the old person is an outsider to new media and the prospects they afford. Although I did not specifically include the Clickworkers’ project and Target Asteroids in the storyline of the screenplay, these initiatives and the issues they raise sparked my ideas.

At the outset of the story Granny is neither digital native nor digital immigrant, and is not located anywhere in the digital dimension. Initially she is not particularly interested in the Internet and is not bothered by her lack of techno know-how. If it were not for her younger son Josh’s insistence, she would happily continue with a life lived ‘unconnected’. I have extended Marc Prensky’s (2001) digital native hypothesis and invented the category of the ‘digital stateless’ to refer to those who are indifferent to or unaware of new media, and do not belong to either the category of digital native or that of digital immigrant. Granny embodies the digital stateless person. Aaron, her elder son, tries to ensure that she remain stateless in this sense. Josh, by contrast, believes that Granny has the potential to become an ‘immigrant’, as demonstrated in the following scenes which follow on from Granny’s money being stolen at an ATM.

* 

INT. KITCHEN – DAY

*Josh and Granny sit at the kitchen table having a cup of tea, the rain visible through the window behind them.*

GRANNY

I feel bad about the money. Don’t tell Aaron.

JOSH

Ma, you have to be careful at ATMs. You can’t trust anyone to help you. Don’t give your card to anyone.

GRANNY

I didn’t.
JOSH
Don’t tell anyone your pin number.

GRANNY
I didn’t!

GRANNY (CONT’D)
He just looked so helpful. And I wasn’t really sure how to use the stupid machine. That woman showed me so quickly. Boom, boom, boom, just like that. It’s easier to go into the bank. Your father always used to go into the bank. 

Granny starts to cry. Josh moves to comfort her. He puts his arm around her tenderly.

JOSH
It’s okay, Ma. I’ll show you. We’ll go over it step by step. 

Josh sits in silence for a moment, thinking.

JOSH (CONT’D)
Actually, Ma, there is a way of avoiding the ATM altogether. Online banking. With the computer.

GRANNY
That’ll be even worse. You know I can’t use that thing.

JOSH
But I can show you. It’s much safer and it’s easy. You can do your banking and everything. You can even order stuff online. Do shopping.

GRANNY
Shopping?

JOSH
Ja, and crosswords.

INT. GRANNY’S STUDY – DAY

The camera follows a cable up to a laptop which rests on a desk in front of Granny and Josh.

JOSH
Okay. Now I’ve connected the mouse. I think it’ll be easier than using the trackpad.
GRANNY

Maybe this is a mistake.

JOSH

Just trust me. You'll like it once you know how. It's easy, I promise.

_Granny looks sceptical._

JOSH (CONT’D)

Okay. You switch it on at the side here.

_The familiar sound of a computer booting up is heard._

JOSH (CONT’D)

I'll use 3G because you haven't got the Internet yet.

_He puts a dongle into the side of the laptop. He points to an Internet icon on the desktop._

JOSH (CONT’D)

That is for the Internet. You just double left-click on it and …

GRANNY

(Interrupting)

I don’t want to try this thing right now, Josh. It’s too much. And I’m tired. And I don’t understand it.

JOSH

That’s the beauty of it, Ma. You don't have to understand it. You just do it. You just click.

_They face off for a long moment._

JOSH

Just click.

JOSH (CONT’D)

Just click, man. Please.

_Granny clicks her fingers and laughs at her own joke._

JOSH (CONT’D)

Come on, Ma, please man. Just click.

GRANNY

Oh, for heaven’s sake! Okay, here.

_She takes the mouse and clicks._
JOSH

No, on the left button.

Granny tries again.

JOSH (CONT’D)

No, actually double click.

Granny gives him a withering look. She clicks twice, slowly.

JOSH (CONT’D)

No, fast like this (he takes the mouse). Click, click, fast.

Granny folds her arms, looking stubborn.

GRANNY

At my age I don’t do anything fast.

JOSH

Ma, I know you can do this.

GRANNY

Make me.

JOSH

Now you’re just being silly.

Granny sits with folded arms and raised eyebrows.

JOSH (CONT’D)

Okay. Well, you know what, I’ll just demonstrate and you watch. Then if you feel like it later you can try on your own. Okay, so you double click, fast, on this ‘I’ which stands for Internet. Then you type the word ‘crossword’ here and then you double click here, and there you go!

A crossword puzzle fills the screen. Granny perks up a bit and leans forward, trying to disguise her interest. Josh looks pleased with himself.

* 

After noticing the possibility of online shopping, Granny ultimately embarks on a journey of acquiring expertise and surprises everyone, including herself, with her ability to learn how to use the Internet. She gains confidence and discovers an aptitude she never knew she possessed, and starts to refer to herself as ‘a natural’. All of this is possible through her grandson Max’s help. He personifies Paul DiMaggio and Eszter Hargittai’s (2001) concept of a social
support network or system, and without his encouragement it is unlikely that Granny would have continued with her online journey and been able to traverse the ‘digital divide’. Without support and help, old people are unlikely to enjoy the maximum affordances of new media.

Granny personifies the South African who is venturing online for the first time. She is an unthreatening figure with whom South African audiences can identify. The idea of outsiders and insiders to the Internet and new media has been conceptualised as a digital divide and much has been written about it (see Dan Schiller 2007). The divide is most often seen as a case of ‘information haves and have-nots’ (Siapera 2012, 69). In unequal societies such as South Africa, it is easy to mistakenly conceive of the digital divide as a fault line between those who are rich and those who are poor. However, it is somewhat simplistic to envision the digital divide as merely a question of financial affordability. Furthermore, one cannot assume that once a person owns a connected device they are on the right side of the digital divide, or that if they are young they possess techno know-how. In the screenplay I present factors other than the overly deterministic conditions of age and class that have clouded early considerations about new media access and affordances, and show that stereotypes about where, how and by whom new media are used are not necessarily accurate.

Granny’s plight as a widow, her conflicts with family members, and her predicament as an outsider to digital technology are the primary features of her life that are likely to resonate with the audience. In addition, her initial reluctance to learn how to use the Internet, perhaps because she fears making a fool of herself, could be an experience with which many digital outsiders identify, irrespective of age, race or class. It is not uncommon to approach new technology with a degree of resistance and a lack of confidence, and it is not uncommon to make mistakes when using new technology. Yet, as the storyline charts Granny’s adventures online, it demonstrates that not even the formidable intersection of age, gender, race, middle-class financial status and lack of confidence can prevent her growing technological proficiency, and that it is possible to cross the so-called digital divide, or traverse the digital hierarchy, and become an insider to new media.

Current events, issues and theories concerning new media and the Internet provided me with multiple story opportunities, and they form the foundation of the action and the events of the plot of my screenplay. The screenplay rests
on a bed of both realities and possibilities related to new media and the affordances of the Internet, particularly in how these apply to old women. News media often report on acts of hacking, and it was one such case that became a foundational idea for the screenplay. Some years ago I read a newspaper article about a teenager who hacked into NASA and accidently moved a satellite. The humour as well as the potential for disaster inherent in this act struck me as very powerful, and I used it as the trigger incident in my screenplay, the event that sets the plot in motion. There are many similar stories of hacking, including several cases of hacking the NASA website. There are also reports of numerous NASA mobile computing devices being lost or stolen, including one containing details of the algorithms used to control the International Space Station (BBC 2012). Based on this, the events of the plot are entirely plausible, and having ‘even’ a digital newcomer such as Granny capable of carrying out such a hack, albeit by accident, serves to highlight the fragile nature of NASA’s security. Furthermore, hacking, as opposed to cybercrime, might actually have positive spin-offs such as improving the security of the system being hacked. Thus, in the screenplay, the audience may actually be sympathetic towards Granny when she becomes involved, albeit unintentionally, in hacking.

For some hackers, their online exploits can be construed as a job interview, if you will; an example is George Hotz, a teenage US hacker going by the hacker name GeoHot, who hacked the Apple iPhone and the Sony Playstation 3. Although he was sued by Sony, he subsequently worked for Facebook and Google. This is not unlike what happens to Granny in the screenplay, when the attention she gains through her accidental hacking leads to her landing a job teaching old people how to use the Internet.

There can be no doubt that Granny is asserting herself as mistress of her own life and, as such, is carving out a new identity for herself and a new relationship with her adult children. In Granny’s case the Internet provides her with the opportunity to act differently to how she performs in real life. Judith Butler’s (1993) writings introduce the concept of performativity, and the idea that we acquire our gender identities through repeating expected practices. Such gender performances are not limited to the real world and may take place via new media devices and activities, such as going online and entering the cyberworld. Granny’s experiments with the Internet result in her developing abilities hitherto unrelated to her concept of herself. She begins to
see herself in a new way. For example, she starts buying things online. In her life up until this point she was only able to go shopping if someone, usually Granddad, gave her a lift to the shops; and once there, he would moderate her choices. Her shopping excursions were thus mediated by his needs and presence. Shopping online, however, frees her from all of this. She ends up shopping whenever she wants, spending as much as she wants, and choosing anything she wants.

However, her emerging new identity is threatened in the following scene, which is the midpoint of the screenplay, when Aaron is helping her to install all the new computer equipment she has bought and suddenly realises that she has accidentally moved a satellite.

* INT. GRANNY’S LOUNGE – DAY

Aaron busies himself installing the new computer. While he sorts through cables and connections Granny takes a break.

GRANNY
My feet are killing me. I’ve got to sit for a bit.

AARON
This guy saw you coming, Ma. You don’t need half this crap. Why don’t you just keep using the laptop Josh lent you?

GRANNY
Because it isn’t Josh’s laptop. He has to give it back soon. And I want my own.

AARON
What are you actually going to do with a computer anyway, Ma, I mean, at your age and everything?

GRANNY
I’ll have you know that I’m quite good at the computer. I’ve been using it for shopping and I need it now.

AARON
What shopping? Haven’t you just been to the centre?
GRANNY

Not groceries. Other things. I'll show you. It was delivered yesterday. 
*Granny goes off and quickly returns with a small package, a shoe box and a certificate. Aaron looks on, bracing himself.*

GRANNY (CONT’D)
Okay. Now, you’re not going to believe it but THIS (*she holds a mouldy piece of toasted cheese aloft*) actually does look like the Virgin Mary. 
*Gob-smacked, Aaron stares at the piece of mouldy toast that Granny holds out towards him.*

AARON
Oh my God. How much did you pay for this?

GRANNY
It doesn’t matter. Because THESE were a bargain. 
*She pulls out a pair of platform shoes with plastic goldfish swimming in glitter in the soles. Chuckling to herself, she starts to put them on. Aaron splutters incoherently. He notices the certificate, which Granny has placed on the floor while she changes her shoes. He picks it up and begins to read.*

AARON
You now have the ‘title’ Lady Gloucestershire?

GRANNY
It wasn’t expensive.

AARON
You bought a title? This can’t be real. For God’s sake Mom please, you can’t do this!
*A tense silence descends instantly. Aaron does his utmost to remain calm. Granny feels assertive.*

GRANNY
Why not? It makes me feel better.

AARON
For one thing, you’ve got to watch your money.

GRANNY
It wasn’t expensive. And I can handle my money just fine.
AARON
It’s all just too much for me, Mom. I can’t keep up with you. Driving and accidents and computers and buying crap online.

Granny remains silent as they face off.

AARON (CONT’D)
Why can’t you just relax and take it easy?

GRANNY
You want me to just sit at home and do nothing? Just stop everything?

AARON
No. Just the online shopping and the bladdy driving. Just stop. Please. We can still find a nice retirement place for you. There’s got to be one out there.

GRANNY
I doubt it.

AARON
There must be. That’s where you should go. They help you if you want to do anything, drive, shop (A LONG BEAT), go on the Internet (he shudders).

GRANNY
No.

AARON
Mom.

GRANNY
No.

Granny clicks her tongue and ignores Aaron. She picks up the newspaper. The front page article is something about a ‘Satellite Sleuth’. She sits for a moment contemplating the picture and headline. Aaron reluctantly returns to installing the computer, aggressively and noisily moving things around. Granny looks up.

GRANNY
This picture in the paper is just like the one I saw when I went inline. You know when I was helping Max with his project? I copied and pasted this exact picture for him. That’s a coincidence, hey?

Aaron abandons the cables and connectors and goes over to Granny. He takes the newspaper from her.
Decolonising the Human

AARON
Let’s have a look. (He reads from the newspaper.) ‘NASA system engineers believe they are up against a hacking genius. NASA confirmed today that the orbital path of the DAS 5 weather satellite was altered from a source. Authorities are baffled as to how their system, which features state-of-the-art security protocols, could have been breached. The hacker …’

(A BEAT)
Granny and Aaron drift in a long moment of silence as Aaron puts two and two together.

AARON (CONT’D)
Hackers?

INT. HOSPITAL – NIGHT (FLASHBACK) CONTINUOUS
A speeded-up flashback of the hospital scene shows Granny and Max working on the laptop, the NASA logo visible among the satellites on the screen.

INT. GRANNY’S LOUNGE – DAY (CONTINUOUS)
We screech back to real time while Aaron’s face registers the full spectrum of emotions and expressions as the penny drops. He finally bursts out with:

AARON
Oh my God! You’re the one who moved this thing!

GRANNY
No, I didn’t.

AARON
No, I think you bluddy did!

GRANNY
Surely not. How is it possible?

AARON
If you go on the Internet, no, if YOU go on the Internet, anything’s bluddy possible! Besides, people are always hacking into NASA. Their security’s bluddy appalling.

Granny looks scared. She eventually answers.
GRANNY
It says here they managed to put it back.
*Aaron collapses into a chair and puts his head in his hands.*

AARON
Fuck.

GRANNY
I didn’t do it.

AARON
I strongly suspect you did.
*Aaron gets up and crosses to the boxes. He starts packing the computer away aggressively.*

AARON
All this crap is going back. You moved a bladdy satellite. What the hell’s next??? You can’t have this. You mustn’t go online any more. And it’s ONline, not bladdy INline. You don’t know what you’re doing. You’re dangerous. It’s got to stop now before we get into big trouble.

GRANNY
No. I want the computer. I like it. I’m a natural.
*Aaron kicks the boxes out of the way. Granny flinches. He grabs his car keys.*

AARON
A natural? A natural? I’m going. I can’t take this any more. I have to process all of this. My mother moved a fucking satellite.
*He storms out.*

GRANNY (to herself)
It’s not like they couldn’t put it back.
*Aaron is out of earshot, already at the front door. He screams back at her.*

AARON (offstage)
And Max has to stay here tonight, I’m working late and there’s no one to look after him.
*He slams the door with an almighty bang. Granny flinches.*

*
The scene above illustrates that the Internet has provided Granny with a portal to a new self, manifested through her shopping online, on her own terms. Back in the real world Aaron tries to regain control over Granny, but it is too late. Her new independence has provided her with a surplus of self-confidence.

As the plot unfolds, the question is posed: once Granny has access to a connected computer and the ability to operate it, what difference will this make in her life? Will her access to the Internet only get her into trouble, as when she inadvertently hacks into NASA and accidentally moves a satellite, or can it provide her with something positive? Throughout the screenplay we see the affordances of new media in Granny’s life, some of which are quite unexpected, particularly the construction of a different self as she moves from the stereotypical ‘old person’ position of resisting new technology towards embracing it. Another affordance of her engagement with the computer is that it ultimately helps bring the family together, as they try to solve the predicament that Granny has got herself into. In this way I link the concept of the digital outsider, or the digital stateless person, to questions of new media affordances, and connect all of this to questions of identity and family relationships.

Granny’s journey is one that takes her across the digital spectrum and up the digital hierarchy as she traverses DiMaggio and Hargittai’s (2001) five dimensions of digital inequality. Factors other than the overly deterministic conditions of age and class are presented, and stereotypes about where, how and by whom new media are used are interrogated through the fabric of the story and the lives of the characters. Granny’s story disrupts the traditional alignment between technology, patriarchy and sexism, and re-imagines it.

The screenplay suggests that the modification of self can continue even into old age and, furthermore, that new media provide a means for this modification to occur, the latter point also made by Donna Haraway (Haraway cited in Siapera 2012). Granny questions and changes not only who she is, but who she is in relation to new media, as she moves from epitomising the digital stateless to being a self-described new media ‘natural’.

The Internet allows us to move far beyond our neighbourhood and thus, as Manuel Castells points out, personal identity is ‘no longer limited or determined by the immediate socio-political context of values, requirements and expectations’ (Castells cited in Siapera 2012, 174–75). This manifests in the screenplay when Granny experiences immense online support for her
Doing the Old Human

predicament, made possible when her grandson Max and his teacher set up a Facebook support group for her. This online support translates into validation of her new self: she comes to see that it is permissible to be an old woman who enjoys experimenting with new media, even if she makes a few mistakes along the way. The online support mediates and modifies the pressures from members of her immediate family who want her to conform to gender and age expectations. Thus, her reconstructed self is fostered and impacted upon by her online supporters, who are diverse and geographically dispersed.

A final significant affordance is revealed at the end of the screenplay, when we realise that Granny's access to new media and her proficiency have landed her a fabulous job opportunity – teaching old people how to use the Internet. This in turn suggests that she can continue to live independently, and the major axis of conflict in the screenplay is thus resolved, albeit in an open-ended manner.

When Granny goes online she enters another reality and is free to be who she wants to be, unfettered by Aaron's expectations. The nuances of this other side, or cyber side, of Granny are revealed to Aaron when he realises not only the havoc she has caused on the NASA website, but also that she has been looking at support group websites for the newly widowed. He begins to realise that his mother may be more than he thinks she is, or wishes she were, and that her children, himself included, may no longer be the centre of her universe or able to influence and control her. Granny's changing identity has consequences for Aaron, and for his perception of himself as being in charge of her life. This is manifested in the dialogue between Granny and Josh in the scene where she wakes up from her nightmare about trying to put the satellite back in its correct position, after the concert where her Grandson Josh played the part of a satellite, and tries to correct her misadventures on the NASA website.

*

JOSH
Ma, Aaron says you shouldn't …

GRANNY (interrupting)
Fuck Aaron.

Aaron reels and Josh practically takes a step back at his mother's use of the 'f-' word, something he has never heard from her before.
A symbol I use in the screenplay is Granny’s hair colour. Later in the plot Granny meets Jack, a charming man who lives in the retirement home she visits, and decides to throw a party, before which she elects to colour her hair. The subtext of this episode is that she is attracted to Jack and wants to look ‘nice’, in other words ‘young’. I played this part of the storyline for humour, having the hair colour turn out to be a bright pink, to add a subtext to the main plot critiquing age-modifying attempts by old women. McDonald (McDonald and Rich 1984) is critical of women who try to ‘pass’ as younger than they are, believing that this is a denial of self, and Ann E. Gerike states that hair dyeing ‘represents the attempt of aging people to “pass” as members of a group with greater power, privilege and prestige than that to which they belong’ (Gerike cited in Rosenthal 1990, 37). That Granny chooses to dye her hair illustrates that she has internalised some of the ageism that permeates our culture.

However, by the end of story, when Granny is released from prison (her NASA misadventure did not go unpunished), her hair has returned to its natural grey, symbolising that she is at peace with who she is and is becoming her authentic self. Women should be free to choose whether they want to colour their hair or not, but because of the association of coloured hair with sexual attractiveness and reproductive potential and, conversely, of grey hair with being past one’s physical prime, it is not difficult to understand why women would choose to conceal their grey hair. That Granny finally lets her hair return to its natural grey is physical proof of her internal growth. She is owning who she is, and is proud to be herself.

Through advertising and social interaction we are constantly surrounded by messages of what is age-appropriate and gender-appropriate, and the fact that the audience might laugh at Granny experimenting with products aimed at the youth market shows how ingrained these notions are. Other notions of this ilk are that ‘old people, especially women, should not drive’, ‘old people should not live alone’, and ‘old people cannot handle new technology’. Throughout the screenplay I try to contest these popular notions, and at the end of the story Granny drives her own car to the location where she will be teaching other old people how to use the Internet. On arrival there she successfully performs a complicated parking manoeuvre. The fact that she is able to drive independently and teach others how to use the Internet shows
how much she has changed, and that she is mistress of her own life. Her ‘age-inappropriate’ choices remain, in terms of her dress sense – she loves very bright dresses and high heels, and has no problem wearing a swimsuit – and are proof that she is resisting the suffocating, societally imposed prescriptions of image. She is doing it her way, regardless of what ‘people’ may think.

NOTES

REFERENCES


