

Home Movies: Historical Space and the Mother's Memory

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I. Up in the Attic: Memorial Images

Roland Barthes, writing in *Camera Lucida* of photographs of his recently deceased mother, concludes, "that is what the time when my mother was alive *before me* is--History" (Barthes, 1981: 65). Barthes, the childless "being *pour rien*" who sees his own body as marking the "very contrary of History," finds in the photographic memory of his mother a way to reconcile his strange sense of her as a discrete historical object with his paternal care for her during her dying illness: "I who had not procreated, I had, in her very illness, engendered my mother" (Barthes, 1981: 72). In saying this, Barthes brings together a number of compelling trends seen recently in international cinema: the artistic interrelationship between a mother's death and cultural memory, the maternal body as a visual marker for the site of autobiography, and the gendered representation of physical locations of memory. In this essay, I take Barthes's act of maternal memorialization as a proto-example of a trend amplified by home video, and seen most clearly in Wolfgang Becker's film *Good Bye Lenin!* (Germany, 2003), which I discuss in detail. *Good Bye Lenin!*, a film commonly read as a political fable of East German nostalgia, is rather for me a successful example of autobiographical narrative that balances maternal loss and a boy's coming to manhood, framing this transition in and through home movies. As such, it provides a much-needed positive model for cinema's use of mothers and memory.

While Barthes in 1981 had only still images of his mother to contemplate, today, home movies mediate such connections to history, and we find mothers and memory embedded ever more thoroughly throughout popular cinema and culture. With home movies, the cinematic iconography built around the three basic categories under discussion here--maternal biography, cultural memory, gendered space--could provide an increasingly important area where filmmakers shape, and audiences rethink, their attitudes towards women and culture. Unfortunately, however, many recent films deal with memory simply as a problem of heterosexual relationships. In such diverse films as *50 First Dates* (Peter Segal, 2004), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004), *Code 46* (Michael Winterbottom, 2003), *Why Me, Sweetie?* (Jingle Ma, 2003), *Novo* (Jean-Pierre Limosin, 2002), and even the neo-noir *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), memory and amnesia serve primarily as a stumbling block to a traditional love plot. There are fewer films that attempt

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to investigate thematically the vital relationship between gendered space, mothers, and memory. One film that successfully does so, *Good Bye Lenin!*, situates the public and private meanings of cultural memory by figuring them as a problem of maternal relationships. In *Good Bye Lenin!*, set in 1989, the protagonist Alex's (Daniel Brühl) East German socialist mother (Katrin Sass) enters a coma after seeing him arrested at a protest; while she is unconscious, the Berlin Wall falls. Fragile and bedridden, she returns from the hospital to their apartment, but Alex, believing the shock of Germany's reunification would cause her grave harm, invents increasingly elaborate ruses in order to keep history from his mother and to keep his mother from the present. In one telling scene, Alex shows his mother false, homemade news broadcasts, and here he and the film perform an odd ritual of memorialization around the technologized, historical space of the mother's memory.

In centering its narrative on the mother's health, fragily linked to her knowledge of history, the film must visually represent the limited space of memory. Throughout *Good Bye Lenin!*, Alex must find or create numerous historical objects to satisfy his mother's memory, which craves, for instance, a particular brand of pickle no longer available. The visualization of memory is emphasized by the necessary confinement of Alex's mother, which allows Alex to turn her bedroom into a sort of museum of living history. In doing so, the film abounds with the threat of what Freud labeled the "uncanny." For Freud, the uncanny was the forgotten familiar--that which is both comfortable and homely as well as repressed and hidden. The confined space that Alex "historicizes" for his mother represents this uncanny effect. During the film, he goes to humorously extreme lengths to manage every detail of his mother's memory, recreating an entire national past in order to keep the uncanny at bay. That homely space can represent the contradictory possibilities of comfort as well as fear is well known, but the gendering of such spaces in cinema has not been as fully worked out. In the past, feminist literary critics such as Barbara Johnson have complained that associating the uncanny with the home only serves to link domestic space and women's memory to women's detriment. In response, since cinema must faithfully visualize domestic and extra-domestic spaces, "homely" films could provide a material text that draws more nuanced connections between the meaning of spaces and their functioning in memory.

Freud's notion of the uncanny is thus especially relevant to the spatial representation of memory in cinema. This is evident in disparate genres such as horror and melodrama. In horror films, characters are continually moved towards or away from liminal or extra-domestic spaces such as attics or basements, which stand in for the dark fear of the unknown. In scary movies, the shape lurking behind the closed door is often as likely to be the family cat as a corpse or a killer. Yet, in more sentimental films, characters who go into attic or basement areas uncover family memories and homely reminders of the past that provoke painful, but positive, narrative development. When these reminders

are not previously defined symbols in a film (such as the layered shirts in *Brokeback Mountain* [Ang Lee, 2005]), they are quite often reels of home movies; cinema loves to replicate itself in diegesis. In the simplest reading, these two contradictory but conventional uses of attic or basement space work so well since extra-domestic spaces seem naturally uncanny--they both house a family's treasured history and at the same time represent a place where memories can be safely shuttered off. For the cinema, where homely space is a necessary element of set design, Freud's paradigm remains a persuasive way of understanding and expressing the ambivalent mental feelings of comfort and horror.

A clear example of this model is found in another genre, in the comedy *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* (Jeremiah S. Chechik, 1989). In one scene, after sneaking up the attic stairs to hide Christmas presents, the beleaguered suburban patriarch Clark W. Griswold (Chevy Chase) finds himself locked in the attic. As he makes his way across the treacherous space to call for help from a window, Clark steps on and hits himself in the face with a board, three times in a row. Unable to call on his family, Clark, a character thoroughly devoted to the fulsome pursuit of a mythic experience of family bonding, misses out on the family's last-minute shopping trip to the mall.

Significantly, mothers frame this attic scene. First, Clark's mother-in-law, feeling a draft, is the one who closes the attic trapdoor on him. Next, we see Clark, who is hiding a present in a cobwebbed space between some boards, pull out another dusty forgotten one wrapped in pink and labeled "Happy Mother's Day 1983, Love Clark." Then, after seeing his unwitting family drive off, Clark rummages through a chest to make himself comfortable, donning what could only be his mother's old clothes for warmth--a fur stole, pink arm-length gloves, and an old-fashioned, aqua velour turban. Underneath this costume, he discovers a cache of assorted reels of home movies. As he settles down to the movies, the scene switches from slapstick to nostalgia. A Ray Charles song, "That Spirit of Christmas," comes on the soundtrack and the camera focuses on a teary Clark, who clutches the box of film to his chest, before panning finally towards his impromptu sheet screen. The title card for the home movie he watches identifies the time as Christmas 1955. A boy with a sled comes out of a house with his mother; they smile and wave at the camera and she kisses his cheek. A father, cigar in mouth, appears and pulls presents from a car's trunk, slapping the reaching boy's hand away. This cuts to an exterior shot of the present day where we see the Griswolds returning from the mall laden with packages. The last shot we see from 1955 is of a family party; the adult Clark looks on with wide eyes at his childhood self enjoying the spirit of Christmas. The camera pulls closer and closer to his joyous face until his wife pulls the trapdoor he is sitting on and he, the projector, and his smile clatter back to reality.

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What is so compelling about this scene is the explicit coordination of themes not often undertaken in lighthearted comedy: home movies and history, the attic as a gendered site of memory, the destabilizing uncanny, and the mother's role in sustaining memory. Is it the case that Clark's cross-dressing as his mother is what allows the film of memory to run? Is it that, in some of these films, the mother simply must be in peril for memory to function? As in others, we can just as easily turn the mother into a basement or attic or grave marker? The outmoded couture fashion looks ridiculous on a forty-year-old man stuck in his own attic, but it also helps bridge two moments of time; Clark momentarily becomes his mother in order to re-view these memories, and thus watches his boyhood self from a maternal perspective. To face the impending challenges in the film's narrative, Clark must be reminded of the family's idyllic Christmas traditions and at the same time gain control over the careening holiday experience that threatens to blow up in his face. The stakes of this are so great that he must confront the perilous attic, must become his mother, and must realize that he may not be able to replicate his childhood for his children, but only watch fragmented memories from home movies.

II. Home Movies: Final Memories

Annette Kuhn, in *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, speaks to the egalitarian nature of photography and memory, which is part of the ordinariness of family life that makes Clark Griswold sympathetic. While her book is organized around case histories drawn from photographs of herself as a child, she claims that "since my family secrets are no doubt shaped by the same kinds of amnesias and repressions as other people's, their substance will very likely seem familiar" (Kuhn, 2002: 3). This familiarity, though, does not mean Kuhn's stories are banal; in fact, she makes a virtue of the collective, shared nature of memory work. The possible recognition of our own childhood selves in Kuhn's family secrets shows her work to be less focused on narrative autobiography than on working to understand the "links and discontinuities between personal and collective memory" (Kuhn, 2002: 159). The structure of her book foregrounds this, moving from "home"--readings of her own photographs and difficult childhood relationship with her mother--to "nation"--readings of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation and images from World War II. This continuity between the personal and the collective prepares me for *Good Bye Lenin!*, which likewise doubles as both an individual and a national narrative. As a counterpoint to the national pageantry embodied by images of the Royal Family, Kuhn consistently invokes and reads "class" in the childhood photographs she examines. The technological history of photography that she touches on--the increased prevalence of box cameras in the 1950s, Kodak's marketing campaign aimed at amateurs--means that for those of Kuhn's generation and later the raw materials of memory are "almost universally available"; "making do with what is to hand . . . is the hallmark of memory work's pragmatism and democracy" (Kuhn, 2002: 7). As with Clark's makeshift trip down memory lane in *National Lampoon's*

Christmas Vacation, "making do with what is to hand" is a theme we will see throughout *Good Bye Lenin!*. The lesson of each of these texts is that memory is accessible to anyone with a mother; memory's pragmatism begins with one's mother. In this, memory work is thoroughly democratic and similarly, the threat to a mother becomes a threat to memory itself.

In *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch also discusses Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, stressing the "multiple looks [that] circulate in [a] photograph's production, reading, and description" (Hirsch, 1997: 1). In one telling image, these multiple looks include Barthes's mother looking at the camera as she is photographed and Barthes later looking at the photograph and seeing himself in her. Hirsch's reading of Barthes explicitly emphasizes the maternal connection. She writes that

through the image of the umbilical cord . . . Barthes makes photography--taking the picture, developing it, printing and looking at it, reading it and writing about it--inherently familial and material, akin to the very processes of life and death. And he defines loss--the cutting of that cord, and its reparation through the photographic imagetext--as central to the experience of both family and photography. (Hirsch, 1997: 5)

Anyone who has tried to construct family narratives from a chaotic collection of found photographs and home movies knows the difficulty of reading the past. How to interpret these outdated clothes, places, and postures that this overly well-known person adopts in these images? These images confirmed at one point a coherent life story, but now the scattered evidence leaves us with a failing hope in the essential truth of images. In this, the promise that history can help reunite us with our past turns sour; instead, the visual materials of history cut off direct access to our past. This is a theme Barthes realizes in noting that history is divisive; it "is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it--and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it" (Barthes, 1981: 65). Or, as Hirsch put it, in family photographs, those multiple looks "reveal even as they conceal" (Hirsch, 1997: 2).

As an example, the theme throughout the first part of Barthes's autobiography *Roland Barthes* is family lineage, and Barthes explicitly invokes Freud when he titles one page with a family portrait of his father's father "The family novel." Freud's short article "Der Familienroman der Neurotiker," translatable as "the family romance," or, with the Gallic sense of the word *roman*, "the family novel," tells how children first realize that paternity is a suspicious attribute, and that it is only the mother who offers the certainty of birthright and family history. Freud uses the Latinate legal phrase *pater semper incertus est, mater sed certissima*: paternity is always uncertain, but maternity is most certain. Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, glosses this: "now Freud says of the maternal body that 'there is no other place of which one can say with so much certainty that one has already been there'" (Barthes, 1981: 40). Freud's title

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gives a double meaning to Barthes's longer caption where he traces back in this photograph a clear race and class to which he belongs, only to find it stopped in his own being. Childless, Barthes sees only the "final stasis of this lineage: my body. The line ends in a being *pour rien*," a being for nothing (Barthes, 1977: 19). There is something especially sad about Barthes's self-description once we consider the focus he places on his own mother (whose being was so tangibly not *pour rien*) in the following pages. Tracing a link to his family novel, Barthes was able to see, through his mother's living mediation, his place at the end of the family line. But after she dies, history--dramatized in images of the time before his own birth--comes to stand in the way. Now, history blocks access to his mother; the threat of the dying mother (a threat Barthes does not write about imagining) is a threat to unmoor the subject and brutally reinscribe him or her into the present. At the end, it is the silent bounty of the visual image--the failed promise that Barthes may be able to rediscover his mother in photographs of her--which so troubles him.

An issue of recent critical interest is the question of whether home movies occupy the same space of memorialization as photographs did earlier. The increased prevalence of video in the 1980s as well as the widespread practice of digital video today suggests an even more readily available store of the raw materials of memory. Patricia Zimmerman's *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film*, the first historical study of amateur and home films, begins in the American capital, explicitly drawing out the "confluence of the unstable intersection of family history, state iconography, and consumer technology" as parents film their children in the National Museum of Natural History (Zimmerman, 1995: ix). Zimmerman argues that while home movies may appear visually unsophisticated, they in fact reveal a keen and directed attention at constructing narratives of family life. Zimmerman's suggestion that family life overlaps with national life rhymes with Kuhn's interest in personal and collective memory. As Zimmerman suggests by imagining the universal family on their tourist vacation, state iconography is quite often the setting for the filming of a family drama. So, rather than see home movies as solely private affairs, which might be true about their distribution and consumption, thinking of how the production of home movies often takes place in a social space would force us to think about the public setting of memory work. In the home video sequence from *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, this takes the form of a Christmastime consumerist bounty; purchasing presents, decorating the home, all of these filmed activities are evidence in support of the primacy of the nuclear family. In *Good Bye Lenin!* the backdrop of a shared national iconography is even more clearly connected to private family life; indeed, as I shall argue next, the one hinges on the other.

III. *Good Bye Lenin!*: Preserved Memories

Good Bye Lenin! is a suggestive film about memory since it mixes cultural and historical memory with maternal and filial memory. *Good Bye Lenin!* is most commonly analyzed as an *ostalgiefilm*, a portmanteau German word combining *ost* (east) and *nostalgie* (nostalgia) that characterizes a kitschy fondness for life in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). The *ostalgiefilms*, music, shops, and restaurants that sprang up in the mid-1990s were seen as humorous by some and offensive by others, and this cultural ambivalence towards *ostalgie* has as much to do with specific political feelings as it does with the general workings of nostalgia. For instance, Daphne Berdahl argues in an ethnographic account that *ostalgie* fits somewhere between "mere" nostalgia and more "socially sanctioned commemorative practices"; *ostalgie* is an "industry . . . that has entailed the revival, reproduction, and commercialization of GDR products as well as the 'museumification' of GDR everyday life" (Berdahl, 1999: 193). Jennifer M. Kapczynski discusses as an example of this interplay the kinds of films that attempt "to conjure up the patina of the past, constructing a decidedly retro aesthetic that is, by design, just as dated as the republic's discontinued consumer items" (Kapczynski, 2007: 80). While these two critics get at the public, cultural effects of *ostalgie*, Martin Blum's analysis also begins to consider the private, individual effects, arguing in part that

the sense of loss and dislocation that is at the heart of many feelings of nostalgia can easily be explained in the case of *Ostalgie*, since an entire state, together with its institutions, cultural values, and individual hierarchies, has been swept away, leaving its former citizens with the formidable task to locate themselves in an unfamiliar society, complete with its own rules, values, and hierarchies. (Blum, 2000: 230)

In this context, *Good Bye Lenin!*, which was released in 2003, strikes me as particularly innovative since it is the mother who stands in for that formidable task, helping to locate the divide between public, collective memory and private, family history. By centering the narrative on the mother's potential death, the filmmakers explore the stakes of historical memory, which is marked as radically equivalent to the mother's health. The choice for Alex is between recreating the past to keep his mother alive, and risking her life by bringing her into the present; this is a film Barthes would have enjoyed very much.

Alex's home life is a bit unruly, filled with busy mothers who lapse towards general, homely presences. Alex, not often successful in his reflective moments, seems intuitively to understand the importance of the arrangement of domestic space to his mother's health. As Alex sees it, the walls of her bedroom, with its one door and solitary window, are keeping his mother alive. This film is also obviously about another Wall coming down. The history of a nation becomes a symbol of fate for the mother, and in response Alex tells us that he "valiantly did

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everything in [his] power to resurrect a full-scale East Germany in Mother's room." Alex's more practical sister Ariane (Maria Simon) finds this ridiculous, telling Alex he "better start redecorating the whole city." Ironically nodding towards the new spirit of consumerism, Alex's first plan to revive the former GDR is to find food items from the past. Unable to do this, he resorts to the next best thing, filling old containers that reference the *ostalgie* aesthetic with new Western products (is there an expression here about old wine in new skins?). I am surprised, though, that the mother is so easily fooled--will she not taste a difference? Are these jars and labels, like little walls around contemporary food, really all that convincing? Or perhaps these products *are* the same, and memory really is all about packaging? The impracticality of Alex's scheme dooms it to failure, but the choice for Alex is clear: he can live in the past or his mother can die. As his deception spins larger and larger, Alex realizes that his "scheme had taken on a life of its own." But as he becomes increasingly invested in this alternate history, he discovers that "the GDR I created for her increasingly became the one I might have wished for." Also wanting to live in the past, albeit a highly constructed one, Alex intuits the truth but not the meaning of the idea that our worlds are what we make of them, are how we experience them.

The first indication of the film's preoccupation with the theme of motherhood and Alex's engendering, maternal leanings is both early and unlikely. We first meet the adult Alex lazing on a bench drinking a beer at midday; it is October 7, 1989. Joking about this louche image, Alex's voiceover narration tells us that at this point he "felt that I was at the height of my masculine allure." When he returns home in the next scene, Alex is quickly press-ganged into babysitting duty by his older sister Ariane, who lives at home and has a child from a previous boyfriend. Ariane tricks Alex by telling him "there's a girl here for you." Alex, expecting his "masculine allure" to be finally paying off, is duped by his sister when she hands him baby Paula: "she's your date." At first, Alex sees this as sibling punishment and grumbles in his room. But this short scene effectively characterizes Alex for us. Alex, who will soon have to grow up quickly, is from the outset an unlikely candidate to be a maternal caretaker. Living at home he is a boy in a woman's world--with his father gone, with baby Paula's father gone, he will turn into a man under the watchful eyes of three generations of women.

Of course, another woman soon enters the picture. Marching in the demonstration that led to his mother's coma, Alex spies beautiful Lara (Chulpan Khamatova) while he is choking on an apple; she saves him by pounding his back. His mother's health is coincident with Alex's burgeoning relationship with Lara, but this love may put his mother in even more peril. The first clue is when Alex accidentally pulls out his mother's intravenous tube while checking out a nurse's legs (Lara, also a nurse, appears on the scene to fix the problem). After this, Alex times his visits to his mother so that they overlap with Lara's shifts. Then, at the moment that Alex first kisses Lara, his mother awakens. A vase breaks, the hospital lights flicker on: this is magical stuff. Later, a matching edit

from a shot of Alex standing over a post-coital Lara to one of Alex standing over his mother reinforces the stakes; in a more conventional moment, the film suggests the limits to which one boy can pay attention to two women. As with Barthes, the film's narrative asks Alex to assume new roles for himself in order to replace his mother and history. As he takes control over his mother's life when she returns to the apartment, we notice that everyone around Alex begins calling him "boss," recalling his mother's formerly prominent role in the apartment building and her service to the old socialist government. Ariane's new boyfriend Rainer makes it explicit, telling Alex "you're just like your mother, with her stupid petitions."

Part of what makes Rainer's claim true is the healthy irony Alex has developed to protect him in his shift to adulthood. We find him absorbing this in equal parts from the propaganda of the former GDR and from his mother's attempt to write polite, but pointed, letters on behalf of her neighbors, such as one in "the matter of garishly colored maternity wear" for the sake of a woman in an atrocious and ill-fitting floral muumuu. Throughout the film, Alex also narrates events by such euphemistic understatement. Describing his participation in the demonstration that turned into a violent riot, he says simply that he went "for some evening exercise . . . for the right to go for walks without the Wall getting in the way." When the Wall comes down, it is called "the start of a huge and unique recycling campaign." When he says that Ariane gave up studying economic theory and "gained her first practical experience with monetary circulation," Alex really means that she got a job at a Burger King drive-through. An evening with Lara at a loud and crazy rock concert is a "romantic rendezvous." When the German soccer team wins the World Cup, it is said that it "exceeded its production target." And all throughout, while his mother is comatose and near death, Alex notes simply that "mother kept sleeping."

This coma points out what is unconventional about Alex and his mother's entwined roles: the mother in *Good Bye Lenin!* is both a tenacious source of loving support and a potent source of uncomfortable memories. We feel that she is a storehouse of secrets, and Alex's preservation of the past also unwittingly preserves these hidden and repressed memories. Alex's mother is marked in early flashbacks as psychologically damaged; depressed at the abandonment of her husband to the West, she is hospitalized for eight weeks and stops speaking. It is hard to know what truly happened to her, since Alex was only a child during this period and is unable to narrate it properly. However, the family secret at play here is shown to affect Alex deeply, who cried and begged his mother to return to him. The childish desire to return things to normality (opposed to the adult need to work through and cope with pain) continues to influence Alex's behavior throughout the film. He wants to preserve, to freeze, his mother. The setup of the film changes--if his mother dies, then so does his mother's memory of the past; the mother *is* her memories. As seen in her first hospitalization,

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Alex's mother cannot live in a new time; she is confined to her memories, and thus it falls to the son to protect his mother's memory in the face of the future.

An earlier example of this theme is seen in Barthes's autobiography, *Roland Barthes*, which he begins with forty-two unnumbered pages of captioned photographs. Directly in the middle of the forty-two pages of photographs is one that stands out since it is "framed" in a gray, mask-like oval (it is the only photograph treated in such a manner). This is a photograph of an infant Barthes being held by his seated mother, who is leaning and looking at the camera. The framing, and the centrality of the photograph in the series, marks this image as special; it at first looks more "photographic," as the oval framing brings it back to the drawing room and away from the effect of the photo album or slide show set up by the preceding photographs. But the caption to this particular image changes this reading slightly, rendering it not as a framed photograph, but as a reflection of the author's own gaze back onto the past: "The mirror stage: 'That's you'" (Barthes, 1977: 21). Interestingly, Barthes's joking allusion to Lacan's version of childhood development emphasizes, as did Freud's "family romance," the importance of the mother's stabilizing role. Looking again at this image, the oval mask transforms this page not into a frame, but rather into a sort of textual-historical mirror--it is no longer a matter of a viewer examining a historical photograph from a distance, but rather the mother who is now mirroring our look as we gaze at the page. The camera, when it focuses on the memory of childhood, turns by way of psychoanalysis into a mirror. But it is only by the oval, mirrored reframing of this early image that Barthes is able to turn this photograph into memory, to recontextualize it into lived evidence of an early childhood that one, according to psychoanalysis, can never properly recall. In doing so, what Barthes shows us is the way that our play with photographed images alternates between a grasp of historical memory and a more profound reordering of the relationships we have already lived through and already forgotten. To look at such photographs is not merely to partake in historical research (like viewing raw news footage), but rather to see evidence of history reframed and put into play with culture and with what we mean when we talk about memory.

This theme is established clearly in *Good Bye Lenin!* in two particular ways. First are the fake news videos that Alex makes with the help of a friend. These news videos are his attempt to reframe the raw material of memory into a different historical narrative. Alex tries to rewrite history as it occurs, showing his implicit belief that it is not the images that matter, but their framing and contextualization. Second is the fact that there are children in this film, but none of them are Alex's. In becoming a mother to his mother, Alex must sacrifice his own sexual relationship with his new girlfriend. The developing love relationship with Lara is portrayed as a mutually exclusive option; in seeing himself enframed by his mother's gaze, Alex is unable to imagine himself outside of this

particular family romance so that he could take part in a new one of his own making.

Soon, though, Alex fails his dual filial/maternal role. Babysitting again for Ariane, Alex watches baby Paula in his mother's room. Exhausted from running throughout the city, Alex falls asleep, and at this moment Paula takes her first steps. At this, Alex's mother too gets up and walks, making her way out of the apartment, downstairs and out into the street where she sees the film's iconic image of a helicopter towing Lenin's giant head and chest through the air, his arms reaching out towards her. Rushing out the door to find her, Alex trips, appropriately enough, over a baby carriage.

Incredibly, Alex and Ariane are still able to convince their mother that nothing has changed. They do so by employing the most truthful of media--television. We have seen from the opening that Alex has a fascination with television, marked in an early scene where he watches his hero, cosmonaut Sigmund Jähn, become the first German to fly into space. Even as an adult, Alex puts on the television to watch a military parade that is happening right outside the window he is front of. How much of this early ability to shut off the outside world and absorb a mediated version of history will influence his later decision to repeat the same trick on his mother? Certainly this is the case when Alex first leaves audiotapes of his voice to play to his comatose mother. These tapes bring him closer to Lara, but the son's technological self-replacement also explains his, and the film's, faith in the possibility for video media to "hold" memory and history. For instance, the film narrates the fall of the Berlin Wall not through Alex's first-hand experience, but instead first through inserts of newspaper headlines, multiplied by a montage of overlap dissolves, that lead to televised broadcast images of citizens tearing at the Wall. The film's performance of this mediated version of history initially suggests to Alex a new technique for tricking his mother, making fake news videos with his new friend from the West, Denis. But by using news footage of the Berlin Wall that is recognizable to viewers, the film also reminds us of how moving images powerfully structure both memory and our faith in the image. The film suggests that witnessing this particular shock of history allows for a new plausibility; it is as if after seeing such an incredible and momentous news story broadcast live that any fake news would be, in comparison, thoroughly believable.

Barthes "mirror stage" photograph is even more profound when the viewer understands it as a literal enactment of Freud's *pater semper incertus est*; Barthes was not yet a year old when his father died. Of him, Barthes writes, "the father, dead very early (in the war), was lodged in no memorial or sacrificial discourse. By maternal intermediary his memory--never an oppressive one--merely touched the surface of childhood with an almost silent bounty" (Barthes, 1977: 15). For Barthes, the mother is thus the conduit for two lines of history, and the expected oppressive, mournful, or sacrificial tint to memories of his

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father are instead opened up by the mother's gentle mediation into a "silent bounty." Likewise in *Good Bye Lenin!*, the story of Alex's father is extremely uncertain. Having apparently abandoned the family, the story of the father's early disappearance and betrayal is one kept sustained by the mother's account of history. This is one reason Alex is led to seek a father surrogate in his childhood hero Sigmund Jähn, who may or may not now be a humble cabdriver. But after Alex reunites with his father, who has a new life with new children, the truth is revealed--he in fact wanted the family to join him in the West, but the mother refused. The paternal uncertainty was in fact one constructed by the mother; she had been creating a sheltered version of history for her children just as Alex has tried to do so for his mother. Wandering through a party at his father's home, Alex hears music from a children's television program he used to watch. Entering the room, he meets his step-siblings and sits down to watch with them. On the television are images of a rocket launch, and Alex realizes that he is facing versions of his childhood self. The scene feels right, as if despite an individual's best intentions, the truth of history will out itself.

Interestingly, *Good Bye Lenin!* begins with such a preoccupation over the relationship between television and memory. While the images from the fall of the Berlin Wall have a shared, public value, the credit sequence of *Good Bye Lenin!* offers a private version of memory, starting with home movies labeled as "Weekend Cabin" in Summer 1978. This first image, centered and small in the screen, enlarges to fill the frame. We see two children playing and the voice of the father, who is holding the camera. A young Alex, reaching for something on the table, has his hand slapped, and the father and Ariane next shake him as he lies in a hammock. These quick shots are followed by older, halftone photographed images of Berlin washed out in very 1970s colors. The third type of image in the credit sequence is of a rocket, and then the camera dollies out to reveal that the rocket is being filmed from a blue-tinted television screen, which Alex and Ariane are watching. *Good Bye Lenin!*, moving from home video to newspaper images to television, emphasizes from the outset how media intervenes between memory and experience, and ultimately locates the viewer as a participant in this *ostalgie*.

This point is further reinforced at the film's conclusion, when we see that the final images of *Good Bye Lenin!* are also from home videos like the ones we began with. These framing home movies become privileged memories, setting up and now figuratively standing in for the story Alex tells us of his mother's death and his new life in reunified Germany. Curiously, though, while the film works to establish cinema and video's place in constructions of memory, the final image is photographic in nature; it is a freeze frame on Alex as a child, gazing up at his mother who instead looks directly at the camera. Rather than serve as commentary on the film, this final image acts as yet another replacement for the mother-son relationship Alex tried so hard to maintain. Yet Alex does not know what the viewer does, that just before her death his mother learned the truth of

Alex's deception from Lara. Alex thinks that "the country my mother left behind was a country she believed in, . . . a country that, in my memory, I will always associate with my mother." With this we see that Alex's effort to preserve his mother's memory was in truth an effort to preserve his own. The power of the film lies in this simple idea: that the images we use to document our present will become the stuff of fabulation for those who follow. This is a useful nostalgia that allows us to contain our selves in memories, and in Alex and in Barthes's case, in memories of our mothers. What is radical about *Good Bye Lenin!* is its *ostalgic* relation to contemporary history, but it is a film so clearly about politics that it hides its other powerful undercurrent--the relation to mothers and memory that we see also in Barthes. In both, piecing together what it means to be an orphan adult demands coming to terms with what it means to remember a mother.

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