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Stirred Memories 15

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In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes refuses to reproduce a treasured photograph of his mother. “For you,” he tells the reader, “it would be nothing but an indifferent picture” (Barthes 73). The contributors to *Stirred: Memories and Dreams* have sought, against all odds, to reconstruct their memories of places (and faces) through photography, poetry, and critical texts. The collection includes features on growing up in Brighton UK, finding a perfect pair of shoes at 16 in Ontario, playing a violin for a mother for the last time in Quebec, and staging a performance in Madrid and subsequently remembering it in England. Several pieces deal with remembering a childhood home – in Romania, Russia, Switzerland. In “Stirred Memories 15,” offered here as an introduction to the labyrinth of questions surrounding memory and its reconstruction (or translation), I discuss autobiographical films by Andrey Tarkovsky, Woody Allen, and Guy Maddin. I illustrate my paper with a set of images of my current Canadian apartment. Like Warhol’s art, these photographs elevate the everyday and are designed as a tribute to my old apartment across the Atlantic.



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“Broke into the old apartment/ Tore the phone out of the wall/ Only memories,
fading memories/ Blending into dull tableaux/ I want them back” – Barenaked
Ladies, “The Old Apartment”

For his film *Mirror* (1975), Andrey Tarkovsky reconstructed his childhood house near Moscow, where his family vacationed during summer months. The building was “resurrected from photographs just as it had been, and on the foundations which had survived” (Tarkovsky 132). Tarkovsky also rented a field in front of the house and sowed it with buckwheat. The workers from the nearby collective farm warned Tarkovsky that “buckwheat would not grow there, because it was quite the wrong soil” (Tarkovsky 132). When it eventually came up, they “couldn’t conceal their amazement” (Tarkovsky 132). Tarkovsky “took that success as a good omen”:

It seemed to tell us something about the special quality of our memory – about its capacity for penetrating beyond the veils drawn by time, and this was exactly what the film had to be about: it was its seminal idea. (Tarkovsky 133)



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In *Radio Days* (1987), Woody Allen also portrays his childhood home, but unlike Tarkovsky, he chooses to “romanticise” it, rather than construct an exact copy. The voice-over narrator introduces Allen’s old neighbourhood in Queens, New York as follows:

The scene is Rockaway. The time is my childhood. It’s my old neighbourhood, and forgive me if I tend to romanticize the past. I mean, it wasn’t always as stormy and rainswept as this. But I remember it that way because that was it at its most beautiful. (Allen 15)

Radio Days, Allen states, is a “movie of anecdotes and the atmosphere of what the kids did when I was younger – went to the beach and looked for German submarines” (Allen, qtd. in Lax 39). The film draws inspiration from popular radio shows played during Allen’s childhood in the 1940s. He remembered those shows as “incredibly wonderful,” although listening to them in his adulthood, he realised “they are *quite* god-awful,” except for “Jack Benny, who holds up brilliantly” (Allen, qtd. in Lax 36). Allen’s more ironic attitude to his childhood is more akin to Guy Maddin, the third protagonist of this project.



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Both Allen and Tarkovsky construct fragmentary narratives. *Mirror* “obeys the logic of a dream,” forcing the viewer to fill the gaps and construct meaning “on the basis of the clues the director offers” (Johnson and Petrie 134). This strategy is at odds with Tarkovsky’s desire to reconstruct the exact replica of his childhood home. In matters of setting, he leaves very little to chance. He “scrupulously” selects every item, adding “many ‘real’ objects from his childhood and adult life” (Johnson and Petrie 221). In Tarkovsky’s cinema, household objects perform an additional function, serving as a “source of information about the inner nature, social status, or self-image of the characters” (Johnson and Petrie 221). The mirror – “the most obtrusive and emblematic of all objects” – seldom functions as “merely a normal element of décor” (Johnson and Petrie 224). In addition to serving more conventional ends, to express vanity or self-absorption, mirrors become part of Tarkovsky’s “very personal network of images” (Johnson and Petrie 224). In one dream sequence, the mother, still a young woman, looks in a mirror and sees an image of herself as an old woman. Tarkovsky’s *Nostalgia* (1983) includes a similar scene, in which the protagonist Andrey – a man “torn between his ‘Russian’ and ‘Italian’ identities” – “looks in a mirror and sees not his own reflection but that of his alter ego, Domenico” (Johnson and Petrie 225).



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In Allen's *Radio Days*, the young protagonist's aunt dances in front of her bedroom mirror to the sound of Carmen Miranda's energetic 1940 tune "South American Way." In this instance, the mirror remains just a prop, rather than acquiring any potent symbolical significance. According to Allen, *Radio Days* presented an "exaggerated view" of his childhood, and members of his family and his schoolteachers "were supposed to be cartoon exaggerations of what real-life people were like" (Allen, qtd. in Bjorkman 162). Allen's "only tragedies," Vittorio Hosle points out, "are, as in Chekhov, private, never public tragedies" (Hosle 59). Tarkovsky's film goes beyond "private tragedies"; instead, the documentary footage included in *Mirror* "objectivizes" the personal, providing "a foil for the inner reality" (Johnson and Petrie 256). Tarkovsky's newsreels subtly equate "history, both personal and national, with loss and a sense of sadness" (Martin 136). *Mirror* includes, among other things, footage of the liberation of Prague in WWII, shots of "Hitler's double lying in the ruins of Berlin," and a newsreel of fireworks in Moscow celebrating the war's end (Martin 137). In the latter footage, the "euphoria is short-lived, as this almost immediately cuts to a shot of the atomic bomb destroying Hiroshima" (Martin 137).



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Guy Maddin's *My Winnipeg* (2007) also combines personal recollections and documentary material. Like Tarkovsky before him, Maddin shot his film in his childhood residence. Fortunately for Maddin, his old Winnipeg apartment at 800 Ellise Avenue has remained more or less intact, and he simply rented it for the duration of filming. The apartment retained a number of important traces of his childhood, such as his “dyslexically inscribed” name, which he scrawled there in 1961 (Maddin 135). Along with episodes recreating the director's personal memories and dreams, *My Winnipeg* incorporates a wealth of documentary, or rather pseudo-documentary, material. Based on an actual event from 1942, the section on “If Day” recreates a pretend takeover of Winnipeg in order to bring home the gravity of WWII. Maddin borrowed Nazi uniforms from Hollywood, and he also used his own books in the book burning scene. He comments: “I had to make sure they were calculus textbooks from my old left-hemisphere days. I felt there wouldn't be any loss to world knowledge” (149). Maddin points out that “at this point in film history the boundaries of documentaries are spreading like pancake butter,” and that with *My Winnipeg* he felt “like a logical step to start adding elements of fantasia to the objective” (134).



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Mirror helped Tarkovsky to come to terms with his past and brought a feeling of liberation: “Childhood memories which for years had given me no peace suddenly vanished, as if they had melted away, and at long last I stopped dreaming about the house where I had lived so many years before” (Tarkovsky 128). The making of *My Winnipeg* produced a similar affect on Maddin: “Now I receive almost no visits from dead loved ones in my dreams” (Maddin 134). However, Maddin is ultimately less certain about the rewards of making an autobiographical film: “You do cure yourself by filming autobiography; it’s a weird kind of therapy – you literally just wear out the subject matter” (133). In *Radio Days*, Woody Allen has not pursued any lofty objectives: “It was that kind of nostalgia; self-indulgent pleasure that one gets re-creating one’s childhood atmosphere” (Allen 35). Allen’s greatest regret is that memories fade with the passage of time. *Radio Days* concludes with this bittersweet voice-over:

I never forgot that New Year’s Eve when Aunt Bea awakened me to watch 1944 come in. I’ve never forgotten any of those people or any of those voices we would hear on the radio. Though the truth is, with the passing of each New Year’s Eve those voices do seem to grow dimmer and dimmer. (263)



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Tarkovsky too was concerned with the fleeting nature of memory, and searched for ways to keep it alive. In addition to making films, he practiced photography, taking polaroid pictures both in Russia and abroad. As described by Jean Baudrillard, the polaroid “is a sort of ecstatic membrane that has come away from the real object” (37). For this project, I have used a selection of digital images of my apartment in Canada inspired by a quote from Andy Warhol’s *America*: “And you live in your dream America that you’ve custom-made from art and schmaltz and emotions just as much as you live in your real America” (Warhol 8). These more light-hearted pictures are easier to display than those of my old Moscow apartment. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes writes that to the viewer, most photographs communicate “only a general, and, so to speak, *polite* interest” – what Barthes calls a “studium” (27). “The studium,” he explains, “is of the order of *liking*, not *loving*; it mobilizes a half desire” (27). Digital photographs make one’s choice not to reproduce them much simpler. They exist in the virtual realm. It is comforting to know they are there, stored neatly in their electronic files. But you do not have to print them and face the crashing weight of the past. Their immateriality can thus be seen not only as an impediment but also as a blessing in disguise.

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