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review essay

Memory and nostalgia

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The future of nostalgia. By Svetlana Boym. New York: Basic Books. 2001. 404 pp. £12.99 (US\$16.00) paper. ISBN 0 465 00708 2.

Contested pasts: the politics of memory. Edited by Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone. London; and New York: Routledge. 2003. 264 pp. £60 cloth. ISBN 0 415 28647 6.

Regimes of memory. Edited by Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone. London and New York: Routledge. 2003. 224 pp. £55 cloth. ISBN 0 415 28648 4.

In its first two weeks of domestic release, the German film *Goodbye Lenin* attracted over 1.8 million cinemagoers.¹ The popularity of the film is part of a broader trend of reminiscence about the German Democratic Republic (GDR), or East Germany. This trend takes in retro clothing, property booms in East Berlin, and the 'GDR Show' TV phenomenon.² This process is termed *ostalgie* – literally 'nostalgia', but a simultaneous pun on the stubborn presence of the east (*der osten*).³ In *Goodbye Lenin*, Alex Kerner re-creates a domestic interior of the east for his fragile and ailing mother following the fall of the Berlin Wall, and provides rich pickings for those who are already nostalgic for the pre-1989 communist state. However, Alex admits: 'The GDR I created for her increasingly became the one I might have wished for.' Yet, if this was a utopian creation, it also had dystopian consequences. To maintain the illusion, Alex had to adopt the coercive tactics of the communist state, using media distortion, emotional blackmail and constant manipulation. The director, Wolfgang Becker, insists, 'I don't have any *Ostalgie*',⁴ as the film dwells as much on the selective forgetting of the past, and the traumatic events which preceded 1989, as on the stability and kitsch now attributed to the GDR.

These interlocking themes of nostalgia, trauma, memory and forgetting are the subject of the three works here under review. Svetlana Boym's book *The future of nostalgia* traces the emergence of the phenomenon of nostalgia, analyses a series of post-communist cities in which nostalgic practices have flourished and, finally, studies the

nostalgic yearnings of the Soviet diaspora.⁵ Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone have collected together 24 papers in two engaging, if expensive, publications. *Contested pasts* explores how memory has been used to challenge the meaning of historical events, whether these are evolving memories of former incidents, the struggle to remember traumatic occurrences or the service of memory for national causes.⁶ The accompanying volume, *Regimes of memory*, examines different theoretical approaches to the study of memory whether through the body, through models of the mind or of time, through material props or through memory 'beyond the modern'.⁷

Spaces of nostalgia

nostalgia *n.* **1** sentimental yearning for a period of the past. **2** regretful or wistful memory of an earlier time. **3** severe homesickness. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

Boym begins her introduction by stressing the centrality of space to the concept of nostalgia. As the longing (Gr. *algia*) for home (*nostos*), nostalgia is defined as the longing for a home that no longer exists – or never existed. This feeling of loss and fantastical romance was identified in the seventeenth century as a curable disease, yet by the late twentieth century had become the incurable modern condition. This introduction, and much that follows it, is prefigured by Davis's work of 1979.⁸ The emergence of nostalgia is associated with various acts of time–space distancing, from the regulation of nation-states to globalization. The emotive capacity of nostalgia gives it the future (rather than just the past) relevance that explains its recurrent manipulation as a political tool. Nationalist ideologues have attempted to utilize nostalgia, and to institutionalize it in museums and urban memorials.⁹ This is an interesting alternative to Pierre Nora's suggestion that state-backed historical narratives *produce* social memory through *lieux de mémoire*.¹⁰ Boym suggests instead that nostalgic memories exist independently of a state that attempts to harness them.

This opposition between striating, stabilizing state nostalgia and nomadic, evasive nostalgia frames Boym's remaining arguments, in which a discussion of the parallel work of Deleuze and Guattari would be useful.¹¹ 'Restorative' nostalgia focuses on *nostos* and aims to reconstruct the lost home, often in association with religious or nationalist revivals. However, 'reflective' nostalgia dwells on *algia*, and has no place of habitation. It is embodied in the essence of movement, not destination.¹²

If restorative nostalgia ends up reconstructing emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialize time, reflective nostalgia cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space.¹³

Nostalgia is also shown to be spatial in its expressions as well as causes, and must be investigated using a 'dual archeology of memory and place, and a dual history of illusions and actual places'.¹⁴ Boym's dual archaeologies and histories concern postcommunist memories. She examines the perturbations of the memory explosion during *glasnost* (the Soviet policy of allowing discussion of social problems) through to a longing for past stability. These outbreaks of nostalgia were both restorative and reflective, and thus aimed to both conquer and shatter space.

Restorative spaces

In referring to the 'patterning of the national past' Hodgkin and Radstone sketch out many of the features of restorative nostalgia.¹⁵ These memories are mobilized through place: 'Nationalist memory describes a geography of belonging, an identity forged in a specified landscape, inseparable from it.'¹⁶ The nature and scale of these spaces varies enormously. Boym considers Hollywood's 'technonostalgia' that produces American national myths for a world market, although this chapter sits a little uncomfortably amongst its companions, which expertly examine the physical and mental geographies of post-communism.

Boym excavates various sites in Moscow for evidence of forms of restorative nostalgia that attempt to draw upon past identities, whether from Tsarist, rural, Soviet or Western models of identity. One spatial tactic is that of erasure and forgetting in which Manezh Square, where military parades and demonstrations once took place, has been replaced by a shopping mall larger than any European equivalent. While this was an anti-nostalgic move away from Soviet history, it was simultaneously a nostalgic yearning for the scale and grandeur of Soviet projects.

In addition to erasure, reconstruction can also be a form of forgetting. Stalin destroyed the commemorative cathedral built by Alexander I in 1812, yet the replacement 'Palace of the Soviets' was never built. The 1957 swimming pool that substituted for it has now been destroyed and the cathedral rebuilt, nostalgically resurrecting pre-revolutionary Russia in the heart of Moscow and forgetting the Soviet archaeology of forgetting itself.

However, there is more concern over potential nostalgia for Soviet artefacts, especially their monuments. Gorky Park, in which Soviet statues were dethroned following the fall of the USSR, is now the 'Park of the Arts', in which the statues have been restored. Descriptive plaques erase the attempted coup of 1991 and the former graffiti and desecration of these statues. Radical plans to destabilize the communist monumental ethic by, for instance, renaming 'Lenin's Mausoleum' as 'Leninism's Mausoleum' were defeated. Instead, the park marks a tired de-ideologization, faintly nostalgic for an age of greater grandeur. Maya Nadkarni charts a similar process in Budapest's Statue Park Museum.¹⁷ Here, a collection of statues has been taken from the city and neutrally marginalized in a park in the urban hinterland. Despite nostalgic marketing, the placing of the statues within a sanitizing context has prevented the park becoming a focal site for Soviet nostalgias.

Reflective spaces

The majority of Boym's case studies concern reflective nostalgia, whether of actual places (St Petersburg, Berlin, Prague) or of particular uses of space (the imaginary and material tactics of the exiled). Of the former, St Petersburg is examined as a place that, despite being founded 300 years ago, has still not shaken off its image as a place without roots. This is reflected in, and may be because of, the city's shifting nomenclature, from Sankt Petersburg (a Dutch name) to the less German-sounding Petrograd in 1914, to Leningrad in 1924, and back to Sankt Peterburg in 1991. Yet this is a return not to a national myth

but to a local tradition of subversion and autonomy. This is reflected in the popular and parodic carnivals and in the nostalgic recollections of the 'Saigon' bar of the 1970s, a bohemian centre for youth counterculture.¹⁸ The autonomy of the city is stressed, from its banking to trade links and culture, aiming to provide a prospective vision based on unrealized potential rather than a harking back to the past.

Berlin is a battleground of nostalgias – a paradoxical place of becoming and reflection. Like Moscow, Berlin has faced calls for the reconstruction of the old Royal *Schloss* (castle), but remains wary of such restorative urges. The Palace itself was an expansion of a fifteenth-century fort, was used by the king of Prussia until 1918 and was finally destroyed by the GDR, which built the 'Palace of the Republic' on the site. After 1989 calls to restore the Schloss were made, both by conservative restorationists and by curators of memorial spaces, who called for an 'enabling topos' that would encourage contemplation, not erasure, of historical change. However, Boym stresses that it would be a mistake to portray the Palace of the Republic as a sterile and unclaimed site: this too has become 'lived' in popular memory through use, nicknames and the weight of the historical events it has witnessed.

Other places of reflective nostalgia mentioned include a small plaque at Grunewald station marking the now disused platform from which trains departed for concentration camps during the war. The plaque aims not to fill the space with memory but to mark the irredeemable emptiness of this haunted site. The partially reconstructed *Centrum Judaicum* synagogue, which was desecrated during Kristallnacht, bombed during the war and partially destroyed by the GDR, is a similarly contemplative space. The facade has been restored, while the interior remains an irreplaceable and unrepaired site of reflection. A less official site on the same street is the bohemian artistic squat at Tacheles which, in attempting to suspend the atmosphere of 1989/90, has resisted both police evictions and the commercialization of the underground, holding its own alternative to the Love Parade (the Fuck Parade).

Boym argues that 'central Europe' arose as a regional identity that transcended the East/West division, although linking itself to the West through shared traditions of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. While yearning for Europe in the past was a defiant stance against authoritarianism, following the fall of the Iron Curtain the European Union's Golden Curtain has arisen in its place. Cities such as Prague are shown to be nostalgic for an image of an inclusive Europe that they once desired but with which they are now disillusioned: nostalgia for nostalgia itself. Contesting nostalgias have emerged, whether for Europe, for the Prague of 1968, for the post-Velvet Revolution enthusiasm for the city or for Kafka's cosmopolitan presence.

Boym's further discussion of exiles in the final part of the book dwells less on places of habitation than on the use of space to reflect on exile: to deal with memories and places before nostalgia. Three exiled artists are presented who have captured this intimacy and longing that can spring from a dislocated placement in the world. The poetry of Joseph Brodsky is shown to have resisted the nostalgic call of homecoming by projecting the condition of exile onto his childhood memories of the canalled streets of St Petersburg. Here Oedipus and Odysseus are combined to ritualize home fleeing. His concession was to skirt the impossible through the mediated memory-space of Venice.

Visiting his home through its Italian rival, Brodsky allowed himself to remember the memory of Petersburg, not the place itself, wallowing in an uncanny sense of homecoming though remaining an exile.

Ilya Kabakov used art installations in his voluntary American exile to revisit images of Russia. These total environments provided complete yet precariously fragile replications of everyday spaces (a Soviet toilet) and utopias (the never-built Palace of the Soviets). This 'ironic nostalgia' helped to dislocate childhood memories and dream-spaces, and stress the selectivity of nostalgic memory.¹⁹ In his poems and prose, Vladimir Nabokov explored the notion of the non-return, despite somehow returning to Russia in most of his texts. These trips are not patriotic or converting. Instead they roam, in disguise, surviving and adapting, yet ultimately acknowledge that exile is the only home of the present.

Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer consider the nostalgia of second-generation exiles, as well as the experience of actual return.²⁰ Children of exile are brought up with 'postmemories', an intimacy with places never visited (and which may never have existed) which can only be diasporic and deterritorialized. However, Hirsch recalls the return with her parents to the (now) Ukrainian town from which they, as Jews, were expelled during the war. The return fuelled the nostalgia (for the town was no longer as 'beautiful'), but also triggered painful memories of expulsion. This psychic splitting made the town both a primordial site of origin for children but also a nightmare site for adults. As such, for the parents 'as for other refugees and exiles, negative and traumatic memories such as these were nostalgia's complicating other side'.²¹

Dealing with trauma

trauma *n.* **1** any physical wound or injury. **2** physical shock following this, characterized by a drop in body temperature, mental confusion, etc. **3** *Psychol.* Emotional shock following a stressful event, sometimes leading to long-term neurosis. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

Trauma and nostalgia are theoretically and practically linked. While nostalgia denotes a positive attachment to a past real or imaginary home, trauma denotes the negative inability to deal effectively with a past event. While both conditions represent problematic engagements with the past, nostalgia often focuses on a time and place before or beyond a traumatic incident. *Contested pasts* dwells at length on issues of trauma and interpretations of a violent past.²² Such studies have ranged from the individual level of child abuse to the collective trauma of the Holocaust, but have often involved discussion of particular sites and the interpretations of particular places.

Alessandro Portelli's chapter in the collection details the remembrance of a massacre of 335 Italians by the Nazi force occupying Rome.²³ This followed the death of 32 Germans in a 'bomb outrage' shortly before. The popular contemporary version blames the Italian Resistance for provoking the occupying force, which was known for its mechanical and brutal nature. Portelli shows that the smothering of this traumatic memory took place in the context of the postwar rapprochement between Italy and Germany, and Cold War revisionism against the Communist wartime resistance.

Anne Heimo and Ulla-Maija Peltonen argue that, following the victory of the Whites in Finland's Civil War of 1918, the Reds were denied official recognition or spaces of commemoration.²⁴ Before later conciliatory measures in the 1960s, a series of folk stories and unofficial commemorations emerged to deal with the denial of mourning the 28 000 dead Reds. Stephan Feuchtwang similarly examines the importance of recognition as a victim in order to deal with the catastrophic loss of 'props to memory', such as a house, friends or family.²⁵

Boym also considers responses to the trauma of loss through briefly analysing the domestic interiors of post-communist exiles in the United States. These tended to be places in which 'the clocks stop at the hour of exile', despite being assimilated publicly to American culture.²⁶ Cosy spaces crammed with memory items create a place of survival that is beyond dreams of return. Exile became a trauma that could not be dwelt on, and non-return became a psychological need. However, these private museums allowed intimacy and reflection, re-creating the space of escape that the domestic had often provided in the place of origin.

However, Hodgkin and Radstone argue that trauma is a contested concept, involving particular assumptions about the psyche, cause and effect, and the role of fantasy in traumatic recall.²⁷ In *Contested pasts* Janet Walker explains the 'traumatic paradox' by which distorted memories of a traumatic event attest to the strength of the wound itself and thus also to the truth of memory.²⁸ However, Carrie Hamilton argues against categorizing these distortions as specific to trauma, when they are in any case such common features of memory recall.²⁹

Paula Hamilton argues that memory theory tends to be Eurocentric and to centre on the Holocaust, which is an inappropriate template for indigenous memories tied to specific places within local group memory formations.³⁰ With regard to the treatment of Aboriginal groups in Australia, Hamilton stresses that the trauma-therapy ethic has encouraged many groups to adopt a potentially damaging position of 'strategic victimhood'. This is a theme followed through in Christopher Colvin's excellent chapter on truth and reconciliation in South Africa, a movement which has encouraged the use of 'psychoanalytical archaeologists' to deal with the past.³¹ The proposed solution is often counselling and storytelling, which may be of little use for people whose material reality is little changed since the days of apartheid and who live within a past that refuses 'closure'. Variations within the model of self and the different survival mechanisms of memory are more explicitly addressed in the third of the volumes under review.

Counter-memory

While Freud's writings on trauma and therapy retain their popularity within cultural studies, Oedipus is being selectively forgotten. Constantina Papoulias comes deliciously close to suggesting that contemporary researchers have an Oedipus complex about Oedipal theory.³² The latter represents a universalizing, domineering and systemically determining presence against the historically contingent and inter-subjective focus of cultural studies. In *Regimes of memory* Hodgkin and Radstone approach this tension through identifying epistemological frameworks of memory specific to time and place

that configure subjectivity, forgetting, history, place and the mind.³³ These frameworks provide contesting interpretations of memory, as well as suggestions of how memory itself exists as a resistant agency.

Regimes of memory can aid social stability and subdue resistance. Robert Burgoyne shows this in the case of the subsumption of the racist and anti-authoritarian elements of 'rock and roll' within the imagery of the American dream.³⁴ Within the broader history of the 'West', regimes of memory have bolstered the concept of the 'bounded self' which is the basis of the liberal democratic notion of 'possessive individualism'. This process traces the division of the collective social realm into the binary of the public and private. However, Michael Lambek stresses that this model cannot be applied outside of the West, where, even if the society is not rooted in 'oral' memory, simplistic divisions between individuals and history cannot be sustained.³⁵ Even within the West, Papoulias stresses that memory only appears stabilizing when the radical unconscious is excluded in favour of the turn to practice. Here, the unconscious is reconfigured as the sedimentation of habits and gestures, when it was intended as an alien and destabilizing concept.

Similarly, memory itself has also been considered a destabilizing force against historical 'grand narratives'.³⁶ Memory can challenge dominant interpretations of the past and stress the local and particular, although it must always remain dependent upon the power-knowledge relations in which it exists. Boym stresses that 'counter-memory' can exist as an embryonic public sphere in oppressive societies, borne in oral histories that can use half-words, jokes, anecdotes, photographs and private intonation.³⁷ While Paula Hamilton shows how Aboriginal memories challenge the memory of the mythic Australian man, Chris Healy argues in the same volume that films can retain and communicate a subversive rereading of historical narratives.³⁸ Esther Leslie shows how Freud and Benjamin used technological analogies to argue for looking beneath surface interpretations to causes and memories lying beneath.³⁹ Whilst Boym drew inspiration from Benjamin to explore the contested memories of place, the body itself has also been construed as a depository of memory.

Luisa Passerini emphasizes the difference between silence and oblivion, stressing that without textually or verbally representing memory, the body can harbour it in gestures and movements.⁴⁰ Jill Bennett suggests that beyond representational memories can lie 'sense memories' which register events but can only be recalled through reliving those emotions.⁴¹ Bennett claims that photographs of abused children can incite affective recall in viewers that can transmit the trauma of abuse. However, the fact that the viewers must draw on their own traumatic memories surely dislocates this affect so much from the original source as to make it highly problematic. Paul Antze complicates considerations of the body through critically exploring neuro-cognitive literature.⁴² In this school, declarative registers of events and people are divided from procedural registers of skills and habits, the latter being considered to be neural rather than symbolic or representational. However, Antze stressed that these bodily memories rely on social and cultural context to explain their effects on behaviour.

Antze advocates the retention of a depth model of the psyche that Tony Bennett explicitly rejects.⁴³ Bennett claims that this model emerged from nineteenth-century geneticist and geological models, extended to anthropology and psychology, which

allowed historical change to be sedimented into contemporary traces. These nineteenth-century models presumed that memories could be biologically inherited, rather than passed on through oral history or writing.⁴⁴ However, Bennett is mistaken to conflate what Hodgkin and Radstone clearly delineate as contemporary definitions between a genetic or biological inheritance and a cultural or environmental transmission.⁴⁵ While memory is archival and technical, these arguments do not discount an interest in Nora's 'ingrained memories'.⁴⁶

These three works provide an excellent introduction to, and exploration of, memory and nostalgia. Boym writes with a fluidity and style that is totally engrossing, while Hodgkin and Radstone introduce and frame the papers in a clear and thorough way, although this can lead to a sense of *déjà vu* when one finally reaches the chapters themselves. What is more, these volumes attest to the growing importance of geographical themes, if not geographers' work, beyond the discipline. Here, space and place are examined not just as weak metaphors but as formative factors in thinking about the presentness of the past.

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Notes

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- ² *The Guardian* (18 July 2003).
- ³ Z. Abbany, 'Notes from Berlin', *The Observer* (1 June 2003).
- ⁴ Quoted in *Deutsche Welle* (3 July 2003).
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- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xviii.
- ¹⁵ K. Hodgkin and S. Radstone, 'Patterning the national past: introduction', *CP*, p. 169.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
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- ²² *Ibid.*
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- ²⁴ A. Heimo and U.M. Peltonen, 'Memories and histories, public and private: after the Finnish civil war', in *CP*, pp. 42–56.
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- ²⁶ Boym, *The future of nostalgia*, p. 327.
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- ²⁸ J. Walker, 'The traumatic paradox: autobiographical documentary and the psychology of memory', *CP*, pp. 104–19.
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- ³⁰ P. Hamilton, 'Sale of the century? Memory and historical consciousness in Australia', in *CP*, pp. 136–52.
- ³¹ C. Colvin, '“Brothers and sisters, do not be afraid of me”: trauma, history and the therapeutic imagination in the new South Africa', in *CP*, pp. 153–67.
- ³² C. Papoulias, 'From the agora to the junkyard: social memory and psychic materialities', in *RM*, p. 118.
- ³³ K. Hodgkin and S. Radstone, 'Regimes of memory: an introduction', in *RM*, p. 2.
- ³⁴ R. Burgoyne, 'From contested to consensual memory: the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum', in *CP*, pp. 208–20.
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- ⁴⁶ Nora, 'Between memory and history.'