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The motherly gaze in Aslaug Holm's *Brothers* (*Brødre*, 2015)

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ABSTRACT

Award-winning Norwegian filmmaker Aslaug Holm's *Brothers* (*Brødre*, 2015) is a documentary that explores the question of how to imbue contingency with significance and extract what is the most real (for both the filmed and filming subject alike) from the recorded footage, an epistemological documentary act complicated by the experience of motherhood. In this article, I discuss this film's complex act of documentary looking and means of shaping contingency into both a narrative and a filmic memento. My contention is that the film delves into the intricacies of subjective maternal experience and its multifaceted perception of time and space by employing diverse documentary modes as well as refracting them through the lens of empathy and care, a perspective I have conceptualized as the 'motherly gaze' – a specific affective modality of care rendered as sight, i.e. an affective perceiving and ordering of the visible reality. This concept is a further theoretical development of Bill Nichols' famous analytical categories for discussing various documentary conventions by combining Nichols' framework with Michael Renov's key notions regarding the fusion of subjectivities within the context of domestic ethnography.

KEYWORDS

Motherhood; motherly gaze; documentary; domestic ethnography; women's cinema; autobiographical film

Ever since its inception, the practice and theory of documentary filmmaking has been focused on capturing, (re)presenting, and (re)redefining reality. The father of documentary, John Grierson, has famously distinguished the actual from the real (1933, 8), where the former is a matter of simply capturing what is happening in front of the camera (how documenting is often understood) and the latter entails interpreting that actuality through editing (usually seen as antithetical to documenting). Such a perspective on the most apt way of capturing the real is contradicted by the famous French film critic André Bazin's philosophical and ethical preference for 'the immanent ambiguity of reality' (see Rosas and Dittus 2021, 205) achieved via the long take, deep focus, and deep space compositions as well as eschewing editing as much as possible even in fiction film (Bazin 2005a, 41–52; 2005b, 16–40) in order to entice the spectator to engage in a more critical hermeneutic activity. In this sense, the distinction between reality and fiction is put into question: the experience of something as real needs to involve an element of (re)structuring through subjecting

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the actual to the rules of, for instance, narrative and fabulation where even the choice not to cut, not to edit a piece of footage involves a certain interpretative, aesthetic, and ethical stance. Such a stance becomes particularly complex when the filmmaker, the editor, and the spectator are united in one subject as in Norwegian filmmaker Aslaug Holm's *Brothers* (*Brødre*, 2015), a documentary that explores the question of how to make contingency meaningful and thus real in relation to the experience of motherhood. As the filmmaker, a mother of two boys, the younger brother Lukas and the older brother Markus, documents her two children growing up, she is faced with the impossible task of sorting and compiling this incessant capturing, contingency, and actuality into a feature-length film. She must edit – interpret – her own experience, select the most meaningful and real moments. In doing so, the film explores the experience of motherhood and its complex temporality by refracting various modes of documentary (see Nichols 2017) through the affective mode of care – what I term the 'motherly gaze' and which is coined by conceptually synthesizing Bill Nichols' insights about different documentary conventions and Michael Renov's ideas about the intermingling of subjectivities in domestic ethnography (2004). In my article, I discuss this complex shaping of contingency into a narrative and filmic memento by closely examining the theoretical implications of its gaze.

Holm is an award-winning documentarian (see Madsen Hestman 2022), known for her exploration of gender-related themes in such earlier works as *Nora* (2005) and the TV series *Career Women* (*Karrierekvinner*, 2002). Her film *Woman, I Hate You* (*Kvinne, jeg hater deg*, 2014) sheds light on the issue of online harassment against high-profile women in Norwegian society. Her endeavors also encompass politically charged subjects, with documentaries focusing on Jens Stoltenberg, former Prime Minister of Norway, such as *Mount of Olives* (*Oljeberget*, 2006) and *Tales of the Prime Minister* (*Fortellinger om statsministeren*, 2007). In recent years, Holm has continued to address societal issues, such as right-wing extremism and youth activism, as evidenced by *Generation Utøya* (*Generasjon Utøya*, 2021). This documentary explores the resilience of young survivors of the Utøya tragedy and their unwavering commitment to political engagement, shedding light on the enduring challenges of hate speech and extremism in contemporary Norway. But her most personal documentary film is *Brothers* where Holm, in her words, 'wanted to make a film that describes childhood, growing up, memories, and the close relationship between brothers. [. . .] Some of the motivation in making this film is to be present in and describe the true moments' (Holm and Martinez 2016). *Brothers* can be linked to several other documentaries that valorize the complexity of the documentarian's gaze. In Marina Lutz's *The Marina Experiment* (2009), the filmmaker goes through the found footage of her long-deceased father's archives and examines the problematic familial relationship by questioning her father's filmic sight. Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* (2003) is an example of a documentarian trying to understand his mother and his own subjectivity via filming. Or, most recently, Faustine Cros's *A Life Like Any Other* (*Une vie comme une autre*, 2022) attempts to fathom the filmmaker's mother's reasons for trying to take her own life by, among other strategies, (re)examining her father's footage of her mother filmed more than a decade ago. Likewise, Milia Turajlić's *The Other Side of Everything* (*Druga strana svega*, 2017) and Dana Budisavljević's *Family Meals* (*Nije ti život pjesma Havaja*, 2012) explore similar parent-child, seer-seen relationality in the documentary medium. While my article attempts to explicate the singularity of *Brothers*

in terms of the documentarian's gaze, my insights touch upon theoretical matters key to such a type of domestic ethnography in general.

Domestic ethnography: the motherly gaze

The idea of filmic contingency is most closely associated with Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960) and, as Janet Harbord notes, even though the concept itself is not often named in the text, 'it rather defines the paradigm within which Kracauer's critical concepts reside, those of indeterminacy, the fortuitous, the endless and the accidental' (2007, 90). Kracauer sees 'a flow of chance events, scattered objects, and nameless shapes' as a necessary condition for the genesis of any filmic reality, bringing with it 'a fringe of indeterminate visible meanings' (1960, 303). And this conceptual framework for understanding the filmic contingency is especially relevant in the context of documentary and domestic ethnography in particular – necessitating a gaze that 'visibilizes' the indeterminate, the fortuitous, the endless, and the accidental in multiple ways. The act of documenting family life is a complex procedure, vacillating between involvement and distanciation. The documentarian must reconcile the role 'of the discreet observer who respects the real, and the narrator who orders and emphasizes some elements of that raw [contingent] reality' since both roles gesture toward a representational goal 'that exceeds the camera's capacity to record' (Rosas and Dittus 2021, 205). But, as Susanna Egan states, 'film may enable autobiographers to represent subjectivity not as singular and solipsistic but as multiple and as revealed in relationship' (1994, 593), enable the filmmaker to tell their story and expose the limits of such an enunciation. I furthermore argue that autobiographical filmmaking by necessity needs to engage in a multiplicity of documentary modes and offer multiple perspectivalism – or follow the documentary ethics of ambiguity – to fully capture its subject matter. Such filmmaking needs to exhibit what David MacDougall calls deep reflexivity, which advocates advancing reflexivity to a more profound and intrinsic level. It necessitates a shift in perspective, wherein the author is no longer considered an external entity vis-à-vis the work; 'Subject and object define one another through the work, and the "author" is in fact in many ways an artifact of the work' (1998, 88–89). Jay Ruby further claims that 'an intelligently used reflexivity is an essential part of all ethically produced documentaries' (2005, 215).

While MacDougall and Ruby address ethnographic filmmaking, these remarks are applicable to what Michael Renov calls 'domestic ethnography' as well, which plays 'at the boundaries of inside and outside in a unique way' (1999, 141) as this work involves the systematic recording of individuals within one's family or, in a broader sense, individuals with whom the observer shares enduring, day-to-day connections, thus attaining a degree of informal closeness. As the existences of the filmmaker and the filmed subject are intertwined through social or familial bonds, the documentation of one invariably entangles the other in intricate relationships. And, in Tony Dowmunt's reading, 'In all instances of domestic ethnography, the familial other helps to flesh out the very contours of the enunciating self, offering itself as a precursor, alter ego, double, instigator, spiritual guide or perpetrator of trauma' (2013, 270). As such, this co-existence of the subjects on multiple layers of the work, adds another nuance to Kracauer's concept of contingency – the indeterminacy, the fortuitous, the endless, and the accidental of the filmed self in

a constant relationship with the familial other. What has not thus far been conceptualized is the paradoxical unifying gaze that may result from such a deep reflexivity as the autobiographical subject is often theorized as fragmented (Anderst 2013, 221). I suggest that in cases of domestic ethnography such as *Brothers* there emerges a higher-level unifying (supra) perspective – the motherly gaze.

Brothers, as a film by a mother of two boys about her two sons, which constantly reflects on its own nature and purpose, inevitably exemplifies what Renov sees as the primary feature of domestic ethnography, namely, its 'co(i)mplication,' 'both complexity and the interpenetration of subject/object identities' (1999, 141). That is, domestic ethnography represents a supplementary form of the autobiographical endeavor; it serves as a tool for introspection – a technology of the self – offering a mechanism by which self-awareness is cultivated by engaging with the familial counterpart. As I argue in this article, all the other modes (observational, participatory, reflexive, and poetic) are subjugated to this primary mode of co(i)mplication, of being a vehicle of self-examination, aimed toward self-knowledge through the transformative encounter with the familial other. As Renov insightfully remarks, domestic ethnography deserves to be distinguished from every other type of autobiographical ethnography due to the complexity of its gaze. For the documentary scholar, it is essential to carefully delineate the specific connections existing between the domestic ethnographer and the subject since 'There is a peculiar sort of reciprocity (which might equally be termed self-interest) built into the construction of Other subjectivities in this para-ethnographic mode' (1999, 142). To speak of purely observational, fly-on-the-wall documentaries in the context of such filmmaking is therefore problematic even though the formal, stylistic elements might be present – Nichols' documentary modes thus need to be refracted through the specific constellation of co(i)mplication, which is the conceptual development in documentary theory this article advocates for in its examination of the documentary gaze via its close viewing of *Brothers*. Even the detached, non-obstructive gaze gains a certain affective 'glow' in this film, an emanation of care, which in *Brothers* takes the shape of specifically motherly care; both the subjects in front and behind the camera are co(i)mpli(cat)ed by this gaze and vulnerable to each other. Even when such documentaries include observational, participatory, and other modes of documentary filmmaking, they all issue forth from within this overarching mode of care.

Caring for the filmed subject(s) on a profound and visceral level is not limited to being a mother, neither does being a mother inevitably lead to an affective modality of care, but in the context of the film under analysis, this affective modality could be defined as the motherly gaze. In contrast, both *Tarnation* and *A Life Like Any Other* respectively exemplify the gazes of the son and the daughter trying to understand their mothers through the documentary act. And while there are profound similarities between the gazes of these films and *Brothers*, they exhibit a more questioning, investigative affection in relation to the filmed subject than *Brothers*. Related to such an affective unity of the filmmaker and their filmed subject(s) is another aspect native to domestic ethnography that Renov describes – erosion and 'sharing of textual authority,' exemplified by, for instance, 'moments at which the maker hands over the camera to his subject, at the subject's request, moments at which filial obligation outpaces directorial control' (1999, 146). Such moments are endemic to domestic ethnography and are signs of inherent intersubjective reciprocity that characterizes this mode of filmmaking. And while the

camera in *Brothers* is never passed on to one of the boys, they do intercept, question Holm, force her to stop filming, and even terminate the film project itself. Even though Renov does not explicitly make this link himself, I suggest that erosion of textual authority correlates to the motherly (or fatherly, daughterly, etc. albeit with some exceptions such as *The Marina Experiment* where the fatherly gaze is voyeuristic and abusive) gaze since the gaze that the subject(s) return(s) is a recognition of and a response to familial familiarity, 'consanguinity' (1999, 141) and the knowledge that the filmed I and the filming I share their domestic sphere. That is to say, such sharing of textual authority is not something that is only conceded by the filmmaker or is a formal element of domestic ethnography but is a right that is actively exercised by the filmed subject(s) – the familial Other gazing back. As a spectator, one therefore finds oneself in a compromised position that invites self-investigation – the viewer infringes on a pact shared by the filmmaker and her subjects, which de-sutures the spectator and puts into question the documentary pact traditionally understood as the promise of objective reality offered to the spectator as the film's vulnerability initiates him/her into the mode of care.

(Im)possibility of detached observation

Nichols describes the observational mode as that which 'stresses the nonintervention of the filmmaker: Such films cede "control" over the events that occur in front of the camera more than any other mode' (Nichols 1991, 38). Such documentaries are different from the genealogically earlier, although still often made, expository documentaries due to their eschewing of the authoritative voice in favor of giving an access to reality through the events that unfold in front of the camera and avoiding the filmmaker's interpretation of those events. For this purpose, 'observational films rely on editing to enhance the impression of lived or real time' (1991, 38). *Brothers* includes many observational strategies and often gives preference for the ethics of observation and non-interference, honoring the filmed subjects and their phenomenological experiences – each documentary mode inevitably entails a specific ethical stance toward the real. The filmmaker is often situated behind the camera and records the events as they unfold such as the boys playing football with their father, sitting at school, or Markus practicing playing music with his band and engaging in friendly banter with his bandmates. Even when the camera's presence is clearly felt in the shaky hand-held shots – when climbing up the school stairs to follow Markus taking Lukas to the latter's new classroom – such filming choices work in the service of preserving the realism of the unedited, unaltered present, of capturing every potentially significant contingent moment. Holm rarely says anything from behind the camera in such observational moments, seemingly exemplifying the observational documentary in its purest form where 'voice-over commentary, music external to the observed scene, intertitles, reenactments, and even interviews are completely eschewed' (1991, 38). In such scenes, the spectator encounters the impression of a lived, unaltered, and thus real time unfolding in front of his/her eyes.

However, the fact that the filmmaker is the mother of her filmed subjects complicates and questions the stance of non-interference in certain scenes. Motherhood may even be said to extend the filmed space to encompass the out of frame as well. When the film shows Lukas coming to his new school for the first time and waiting to meet

the principal, the spectator first sees a couple of other children being called and greeted. A close-up of Lukas's attentive face conveys his anticipation and after the announcement 'Lukas Holm Buvarp,' Lukas goes up to the principal. Unlike in the previous shots, Lukas appears to go alone, not with a parent, until one remembers that Holm is silently following him; she simply remains silent and invisible behind the camera. Even the other observational scenes contain this double perspective, indicative of the ambiguity regarding the filmed/filming I and the on-screen/off-screen space. On the one hand, they emphasize the focus on the filmed material and follow the ethics of non-interference. But, on the other hand, they always imply that the filmmaker is part of the filmed moment, not as an observer but a participant. Whenever the spectator sees the boys practice on the football field, paying no attention to the camera whatsoever, he/she can also treat this objective, recording gaze, this wish to capture the everyday experiences of the boys as the motherly gaze. Therefore, the familial identity of the filmmaker valorizes the ethical issues inherent in 'Observational filmmaking [as] [. . .] the mode hinges on the ability of the filmmaker to be unobtrusive' (Nichols 1991, 39) by revealing that even the moments of the seemingly complete unobtrusiveness include a certain 'double exposure' of the images, i.e. they function both as captures of the reality of the filmed subjects (the ethnographic gaze), from the perspective of these subjects, as well as visual expressions of the motherly gaze, when objective capturing becomes imbued with the filmmaker's affective gaze.

Another scene captures this shift from one type of sight to another even more intensely. In the middle of the film, the two boys sit on a bench and discuss the football cards they have just bought. Then, their competitive sibling spirit leads to a fight which ends up with Markus pushing Lukas – who attacked him first – and the latter falling to the ground, hurting himself. Holm first attempts to stop Lukas by immediately protesting from behind the camera. The film then shows Markus apologizing, which does nothing to console Lukas, who sits sulking in the snow. Afterwards, Lukas addresses the camera/his mother: 'Is it okay if I just move away from Markus?' To which Holm responds by softly asking whether he really wants to do so. Her hand reaches out from behind the camera and gently strokes Lukas's face, consoling him – the only visible presence of her in this scene. In this moment, the camera's gaze becomes embodied, no longer a detached window into reality, exhibiting the ambiguity of double perspective once more; as the subject filmed personally addresses the camera, technology dissolves into the mothering camera's gaze. The three of them have a conversation, some shots of Lukas and Markus standing a meter apart from each other without saying a word follow, and the scene finally cuts to a shot of Lukas and Markus sitting side by side, each eating half of a chocolate bar, which marks the resolution of this conflict. The ethical stance of non-interference is challenged by the filmmaker being a mother; as a parent, she naturally must intervene and help to resolve the conflict. And yet this instance cannot be treated as exemplifying a participatory mode of documentary because the filmed scene, the observed event always already includes the subject behind the camera. In a sense, non-interference in the flow of the event encompasses these gestures of mothering, which allow for the immanent contingency to enter and change the image as the filmmaker needs to be ready to momentarily abandon the objective and detached position and shift from the filming to the filmed I.

Between observation and participation

There are instances when the presence of the filmmaker-mother becomes even more problematic, relating to the ethnographic co(i)mplication of subjectivities and their technological mediation. When Lukas starts acting out at school, becomes angry at the teacher, and marches out into the corridor resolved to go home, Holm stops him. A mother's presence at school is not a regular occurrence – parents usually do not participate in their children's classes. She, therefore, after nothing else seems to work to convince him to go back, resorts to reminding Lukas that, because she is filming, she might be blamed for his behavior. Lukas puts up a front at first, but judging from his facial expressions, his mother is getting through to him. Camera consciousness – the fact that the filmed subject's awareness of being filmed changes the behavior that is supposed to be observed and not interfered with – is a complex issue for observational documentaries. And, even though, in most cases Holm's motherhood makes her presence integral, in this scene, the boy might be acting out because of his knowledge of being filmed by his mother. Conversations, often present in participatory documentaries, tend to have 'an "imperfect" quality, but without further, contextual information, the viewer is left uncertain whether to construe this discrepancy as [. . .] camera consciousness, or self-consciousness that stems from the act of presenting an interview in the guise of conversation' (Nichols 1991, 52). Even though the temper tantrum itself might be caused by camera consciousness, the conversation is an honest and raw dialogue between the child and the mother. The way the camera is held too conveys the oscillation between the need to record (composure) and to be emotionally involved (compassion) as during their discussion some shots keep Lukas steadily in the frame, while others asymmetrically show the doors as if Holm would no longer be paying attention to filming but focusing on the conversation instead. In an interview, Holm herself alludes to this dilemma by stating that 'the most difficult part was when I was filming my sons in their school and there arose situations with conflict. [. . .] As a documentary filmmaker, I seek conflicts and it's good for the film I'm working on, but as a mother I want to protect my sons from difficult situations. I decided to include this dilemma in the film. I'm both a filmmaker and a mother, and it's a mother's point-of-view' (Holm and Martinez 2016).

Nichols notes that 'The sense of exhaustive (and telling) observation frequently comes not only from the ability of the filmmaker to record particularly revealing moments but also from the ability to include moments representative of lived time itself' (1991, 40) as opposed to what can be referred to as 'narrative time' governed by the cause-and-effect principles of traditional storytelling, where a meticulous justification and motivation of actions prevails. Even though there is a narrative logic that governs certain episodes and scenes (equilibrium that moves to conflict and resolution), certain takes are longer than the narrative logic requires, thus conveying a sense of duration. Also, the focus on the boys doing their homework or sitting and looking off into the distance at school does not comprise any specific narrative sequence but express their sense of being there, their lived time, and, possibly, the lived time of a mother who wants to seize such moments, thus doubling this capture of lived time due to ethnographic co(i)mplication. But there are moments indicative of the motherly camera gaze that aims to merge with the perspective of the boys. When Lukas is introduced to a group of unfamiliar children and is about to play football, he starts an argument with another boy. Eventually, the film cuts to him

standing alone with a ball as extradiegetic music starts to play and there is an implication of contraction of time. Since both extradiegetic music and such time-shifts are not usually part of the ethos of observational documentary, the moment of present-tenseness shifts to a more abstract, poetic mode within the same scene. Lukas turns to the camera and states that he is tired of this, hits the ball which lands next to a puddle of dirty water. The boy leans down and places his finger in the water, exclaiming: 'Hey, what is this? It's mud.' The film then cuts to a close-up of muddy water and this shot marks the shift to Lukas's point of view, the spectator is too mesmerized by the water as the sounds of kids playing become distant. Suddenly, a sneaker hits the mud, breaking this subjectivity.

One of several other spatiotemporalities that traverse the observational presentness of the film are the more conventional interviews or confessions, interspersed throughout the film, which mark the moment of self-examination rather than being present in the ever-flowing stream of time. For Nichols, 'When interviews contribute to an Interactive mode of representation, they generally serve as evidence for an argument presented as the product of the interaction of filmmaker and subject' (1991, 48). Yet, in the case of *Brothers*, the interviewer is the mother/the wife of the interviewee and the topics discussed relate to their personal experiences, dreams, plans or reminiscences. Holm's presence in these confessional discursive moments is minimal, limited to a few prodding questions or observational silence. When interviewed in front of the camera, the boys and their father sit in their home – a place they inhabit together – as they reveal thoughts about their family life. Seeing an individual express their hopes and dreams in front of the camera, presented in a straight-angle medium shot (conversational, intimate but not too invasive framing) has a curious effect, relating to what Nichols names the pseudo-monologue in interactive documentaries; it seems to convey the personal thoughts, perceptions, emotions, and recollections of the individual observed directly to the audience. The filmmaker accomplishes a 'suturing effect,' establishing a direct connection between the viewer and the interviewee by deliberately removing their own presence. This pseudo-monologue shifts the cinematic focus onto the viewer, eliminating the various layers of mediation typically emphasized in the interactive mode, such as the roles of the filmmaker, the subject, and the viewer (Nichols 1991, 54). Yet this suturing effect in *Brothers* – and similar domestic documentaries – is not complete; it sutures and de-sutures since even though the formal elements are there, the off-screen space implicitly forms part of the scene – the mother, not the viewer, is implicitly the subject of confessional address.

Escaping temporality: poetic self-reflexivity

Another spatiotemporal dimension that exists in *Brothers* is an abstract, poetic, and timeless space-time of the meditative and contemplative moments, which indicate a shift to the reflexive mode and emphasize 'the encounter between filmmaker and viewer rather than filmmaker and subject [. . .] and [prompt] the viewer to a heightened consciousness of his or her relation to the text and of the text's problematic relationship to that which it represents' (Nichols 1991, 60). Such reflexive documentaries highlight the medium itself as well as investigate the documentary form as such and, in the case of *Brothers*, the film often reflects on its own documentary nature. Already at the start of the film, the viewers are alerted to the acousmatic (see Chion 1994, 129) disjunction between

sight and sound (breaking of the spatiotemporal continuity of what is seen and heard) when a close-up of a running audiotape is paired with Lukas's voice-over asking whether Holm is filming, to which she answers: 'I'm just recording the sound.' This reveals that none of the voice-over meditations and conversations have a corresponding image – they are disembodied and acquire the powers of what Michel Chion famously named the *acousmetre*, 'the voice that speaks over the image but is also forever on the verge of appearing in it,' possessing the powers of seeing all, omniscience, omnipotence, and ubiquity (1994: 129–130). As Lukas inquires why she is doing that, Holm explains: 'So I can hear your thoughts.' This scene establishes an important distinction between observational episodes or the interviews and identifies as thought-images the scenes where one hears voice-over reflections of either Lukas, Markus or Holm, combined with various types of evocative footage. Such a formal choice creates an experiential distance as these episodes function unlike other scenes; they are more akin to Leah Anderst's technologies of thought and memory that prompt the documentarian's 'reflection that allows [them] to follow and represent the recursive, non-narrative direction of [them] thinking around this [archival] image' (2013: 225), exemplifying autobiographical pre-occupation 'with conveying perception itself, with searching for the peculiar character of the perceiving consciousness' (Hampl 1996, 56).

The first instance of such timeless moments comes even before the audio recorder scene and comprises a part of the film's opening prologue when it cuts to Markus as a baby and Holm reaching her hand from behind the camera to play with him, speaking motherese. Holm's voice-over from a later period asks: 'Markus, what do you think about mom making a film about you and Lukas?' The film then shows the two boys at a later stage inside a bath and cuts to a close-up of Markus playing outside, his voice-over stating: 'It's a lot of work. But in like ten years when it's done.' *Brothers* cuts to the two boys in another setting (the island where Holm grew up, an important returning image), standing surrounded by grass and flowers in a pose reminiscent of a family photograph and the voice-over of Markus continues: 'It'll be fun to see ourselves as kids.' Such moments of remediated family photography are significant and ubiquitous and shall be discussed further later. The film's opening cuts to the same location (flowerless, different season), a few years later as the two boys – older and wearing different clothes – stand in the same pose and composition. The film makes another temporal jump to the same shot composition – this time the flowers are in bloom again, drawing a full circle. Irrespective of these time-shifts, the wind is always blowing, which micro-rhythmically unites the images and reinforces the film's focus on the flow of time. The film then cuts to Holm in profile, standing in the grass near the water (same location) on the left side of the screen, holding a camera. She lowers the camera and smiles. A long shot of the two boys wearing bedsheets as capes follows, implicitly Holm's point of view and the reason for her smile; her voice-over asks: 'But what do you think it'll [the film] be about?' As the film cuts to the two boys lying on the grass, Lukas's voice-over responds: 'That we're friends and so on. And brothers.' The film's title appears, establishing this episode as the film's opening.

The prologue self-reflexively continues with diverse shots of trees, a river, Lukas and Markus next to this river as Holm's voice-over ponders on motherhood, her filming project, and this film's beginning: 'I remember thinking when I had children, "Everything starts now." "This is the beginning." I used to travel the world, capturing important events on film. I discovered it was more interesting to film what was right before my

eyes.' This long prologue's extension beyond the title card (usually a marker of a film's entry into its story) relates to the problem of finding a/the beginning and an/the ending, which is extensively addressed throughout the film. At this point, the film cuts to an extreme close-up of Markus's eyes. Holm goes on: 'That the small moments contain everything. And now I can see that the whole world lies within this tiny universe.' The viewer then sees a shot of greenery; soft, selective focus emphasizes the small flies in the air – focusing on the flies, instead of the landscape, challenges the spectator's expectations by highlighting what is usually invisible; contrary to popular saying, one often does not see the trees for the forest – abstraction obscures contingent reality. As Holm starts listing the ingredients of their tiny universe, the film cuts along to visually illustrate these places: 'A river. A school. A kiosk. A football field. A backyard. Small spaces that contain an entire childhood.' When the film reaches their backyard, it cuts to a close-up of bedsheets on the washing line, micro-rhythmically flowing in the wind, rhyming with the river – an evocation of time. Holm hangs the bedsheets; her voice-over continues: 'And though time is endless for a child, for a mother it passes far too quickly. For which days do we really remember when we look back?' With these words, the prologue sequence ends, having established its maternal quest; it refracts contemplation through affect, as a means of mothering.

Loci memoriae and film as a technology of memory

What this prologue does, among other things, is to establish the film's refrains. Such refrains in observational documentaries are recurring 'images or situations [that] tend to strengthen a "reality effect," anchoring the film to the historical facticity of time and place and [. . .] [such] locales take on more and more significance in terms of the emotional geography of space' (Nichols 1991, 41) where specific places such as a bedroom, kitchen, or cash register become linked to an individual's sense of identity. The prologue's locales as well as their kitchen, living room, the boys' bedroom, and the path under the bridge to their school have a similar function in *Brothers* – as *loci memoriae* (see Nora 1989), as spaces affectively invested with personal experiences and seen through the camera's co(i)mplicated motherly gaze. Other refrains are also present in the film, which echo reflexive documentaries where refrains 'no longer underline thematic concerns or authenticate the camera's and filmmaker's presence in the historical world, but refer to the construction of the text itself' (1991, 62). In *Brothers*, these reflexive refrains oftentimes have a carefully constructed character. A case in point is the constant remediation of family photography through staging and shot composition as well as inclusion of actual family photography, the old film footage of Holm's grandfather's fishing boat, the island, and the old house where she grew up, or shots of Holm holding a camera. Such inclusions of archival footage are common in domestic ethnography, but they are rarely treated as refrains, lingering between *poiesis* and *mimesis*. Due to the subjugation of the reflexive mode, including its refrains, to the motherly gaze, the emphasis on the textual construction gains an affective dimension. Namely, the camera being entangled with the acts of mothering entails that attention placed upon its mediation leads to a reflection on this familial relation via textuality; self-reflexivity here concerns technology as the *techne* of memory.

Such an incessant return to specific time-spaces entails a need for a double movement, a drive toward submergence in presentness and an attempt to go outside of that constant flow of time through reflection – to relive the time as well as abstract and eternalize it. *Brothers* is intimate and gigantic in its epistemological proportions and Holm relates this drive to her family genealogy. At one point, the old footage of the sea and her grandfather's boat is shown, and Holm explains in voice-over: 'Lately I've thought about the story of the great white whale, Moby Dick. About the captain, who pursued it, knowing he risked everything, including his own life. But he did it anyway. The pursuit became an obsession. I recognize myself.' At this moment the film intercuts between the past (old footage) and the present (new footage) to show Holm on a small boat, holding her camera. She continues: 'Like a hunter scouting for a whale, I pursued the perfect moment as a photographer. Maybe it's in our blood.' An important parallel is drawn as whale hunting (her family's occupation) and filming (her own pursuit) are both related to the epistemological drive to know. As a rule, the reflexive mode investigates the 'phenomenology of filmic experience, the metaphysics of realism and the photographic image, epistemology, empiricism, the construction of the individual subject, the technologies of knowledge, rhetoric, and the visible – all of that which supports and sustains the documentary tradition' (Nichols 1991, 62), which leads to an unmasking of an essential suspicion about realist representation as such. In *Brothers*, these reflexive strategies have a different function as they all point to a deep reflexivity of the motherly gaze and imbue the technology with consanguinity – the camera is also a technology of familial, generational memory. While the film highlights its photographic textuality and representational nature, it reaffirms itself as maternal memory, trying to understand how the familial consciousness as such is mediated.

One of these reflexive moments gives the answer as to the purpose of the film, revealing that it is not a documentary in a more classical sense of representing reality or making an argument about reality. *Brothers* is both a memory and a memento mori – and Holm's comparing herself to the captain 'who pursued it, knowing he risked everything, including his own life' is key. Capturing time makes sure that it will never be fully relived again – it ensures the preservation of *time as lost*. Significantly, the insight into the film's purpose comes not from the filmmaker but from one of her subjects – Lukas. The film first cuts to a close-up of a hand placed in water (water imagery often works as a transition to the reflexive space-time) and then to an underwater close-up of two sets of feet (presumably of Lukas and Markus) – such emphasis on shots above and underwater illustrate the need to get at the depths of representation. A medium shot of Holm with her camera follows and her voice-over is heard: 'Lukas? Do you know why mom's filming?' The spectator sees a medium shot of Lukas sitting on a tree trunk, visible through the gap between the bedsheets on the washing line from a high angle, implicitly Holm's point of view. This framing and his facial expressions make this shot appear rather mysterious. Lukas's voice-over explains: 'Because you want me to remember you [camera moves closer to Lukas's pensive face] when you die.' This haunting moment defines the film as both a time capsule and a reminder of its inevitable passing. Holm searches for the reason for her incessant filming and it is given by the familial Other, Lukas; the seer is confronted by the seen, exposing the filmmaker's (un)conscious logic guiding the construction of the memory text; this exemplifies how 'autobiographical film-making necessarily confronts the author/narrator, both with him/herself and with her/his "others" (friends, family and any other characters in the films)' (Dowmunt 2013, 269), which leads to deep reflexivity.

Constructing narrative, structuring contingency

Brothers has a certain narrative structure, which goes beyond the everyday micro-narratives that organically emerge out of the filmed experiences of the two brothers: starting school, playing a football match, going to a school party, building a snowman, arguing and making up, discussing their career plans, wanting to dye one's hair against the father's wishes, etc. In the beginning of the film, the two boys attempt to dive into the water on the island where Holm grew up. Markus jumps, but Lukas hesitates and eventually decides against it. This scene works as a framing device because, at the end of the film, this situation is repeated, only the result is different: Lukas jumps into the water and gleefully repeats the jump several times, his fear having evaporated completely. This simple event gains a symbolic meaning as it stands for the moment of growing up, of entering the world, and daring to live one's life, affirmed by Holm's fondness for the scene, expressed in an interview: 'There is one moment in the film I value very much: two pairs of naked feet standing above the dark ocean ready for jumping into the cold water. A few seconds, so present and full of life – and suddenly it's over, and it's just a bright memory from childhood' (Holm and Martinez 2016). Lukas's micro-quest stands for Holm's finishing the film, prompted by Markus. A few scenes ago, the film showed a confrontation between the two. Markus, now almost grown up and about to finish school, objects: 'I'm sick of your filming. It's driving me crazy. You're just as neurotic. You can't finish it. I mean, it's a decade since you started. It's like a nuthouse. Enough.' Holm laughs: 'Oh dear. I'm trying to finish, identify the end.' Markus shakes his head and sternly orders her to finish: 'Sure, but you just have to find an end. You've got enough material.' Since this scene initiates the film's closing, Markus – the other familial Other – might be seen as given equal authority over the film, the ability to shape its narrative process of creating meaning. As Lukas identifies the reason for the film's beginning, Markus orders the film to end.

Narrativity is not antithetical to documentary filmmaking and every documentary mode makes use of it to some degree. A certain amount of narrative fiction is inscribed rather suggestively within other scenes of *Brothers* as well. One notable example thereof is the episode addressing Markus's growing interest in girls and, subsequently, his looks. Markus and his classmate are discussing having a girlfriend (Markus addresses the topic in his conversation with Lukas as well) and then close-ups of a certain girl in their class follow. The editing insinuates a budding young love as this girl is implied to be Markus's crush. The film never reveals whether that is the girl Markus likes or whether it is his mother's projection into the inevitable future – his first love being a sign of beginning to grow up. Film editing in this instance becomes both a means to reveal the truth and to engage in fabulation – to inscribe moments of life narrative into the images of raw footage. *Brothers* thus attempts to document reality but also to make sense of that reality and in this hermeneutic process exposes the co-mingling of subjectivities, of the filmed/viewed I and the filming/viewing I – the mother as contemplating/inscribing her son's contemplation of love into the image. What begins as a childhood saga of the two brothers, becomes a saga about their mother making a film and trying to understand her own motherhood as well as childhood, a doubling of familial subjectivities, evident in the immanent ambiguity of the motherly gaze. Holm too explains in one of her

monologues that this film for her is a means of becoming-child: 'Maybe the memories I have from my own childhood – are being relived through the camera.' Consequently, this inability to say to which extent some events are a mother's projections is indicative of another order of reality, of the intermingling of the experiences of the family members, the inevitable merging of being a mother and becoming a child through her own children.

As mentioned earlier, *Brothers* contains shots that remediate family photography as well as shots that show the viewer the actual photographs from various episodes of the life of the two boys as well as Holm herself, her parents, and her grandparents. Such a becoming-child is only reinforced as Holm goes from showing her boys growing up to revealing herself and then her parents as children. At some point, Holm's voice-over draws further attention to the significance of family portraiture: 'We used to go to the photographer to be immortalized, to hang a portrait on the wall for future generations to remember where they came from.' The film's recourse to photography is an interesting gesture because it implies a certain media hierarchy, the content of the new medium (see McLuhan 1994, 8) of domestic ethnography being the old medium of family photography – as if the search for self-knowledge in relation to the narratives of one's sons would grow out of the visible evidence of the family history contained in the family photographs. An influential scholar of family photography, Annette Kuhn, states that even though family photographs mimic certain conventions they always retain their singularity: 'gesturing towards particular pasts, towards memories experienced as personal, it assumes inflections that are all its own' (2002, 49). A similar vacillation between the singular/contingent and the general/institutional is famously contemplated by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* where Barthes – a son – looks at a family photograph of his mother: 'In the Mother, there was a radiant, irreducible core: my mother' (2000, 75). Even more pertinently to *Brothers*, Kuhn, when thinking the significance of her mother's inscription on the reverse side of her baby photograph, generalizes that 'the mother's recollection speaks a degree of identification with the baby – a desire that [. . .] in giving birth she too will have been reborn, granted the gift not just of innocence but of a fresh start' (2002, 50). For *Brothers* and Kuhn, motherhood is a mode of being located at the intersection between narrative future and past; motherhood co(i)mplicates childhood – anticipation leads to remembrance, a consequence of (familial) narrative's refraction through the motherly gaze, its subservience to affect.

Conclusion: from motherly gaze to motherly spectator

Brothers is a documentary film that, by virtue of its nature as domestic ethnography, problematizes every clear distinction and differentiation among different documentary modes as well as the separation between the filmmaker and the filmed subject. In my examination, I attempted to show the significance of the unifying motherly gaze – the affect of care – permeating the entirety of the shots and necessitating a further conceptual development of Nichols' documentary modalities. I do not suggest abandoning his distinctions since the subtlety of domestic ethnography becomes apparent only when one notices how different modes are made subservient to the co(i)mplicated familial gaze. The film's complex interweaving of documentary modes, spatiotemporalities, and subjectivities is made even more complex through its double address. It is a material

memory clearly intended for the filmed subjects and within the film it is even equated to the family portraiture to be hung on the wall for future generations to see and identify with. Yet, much like a family picture on the wall, it can potentially be seen by any other, unrelated individual spectator. Such a personal, familial address, related to the affective modality of care, calls for a considerate spectator, necessitating further investigations of documentary viewer ethics. Such problematics are particularly relevant in *Brothers* since its public release and distribution both sutures and de-sutures the viewer. When a caring mother's hand softly, from behind the camera, touches a hurt child's face to console him, the spectator cannot but merge with the motherly gaze and feel excluded from this personal experience at the same time, which points to the immanent ambiguity of the spectator of (publicly distributed) domestic ethnography. An overwhelming awareness of *not* being sutured emerges in the spectator who nevertheless continues to spectate and partake in this private affective modality of care, secretly peeking into someone's lived reality. The motherly gaze of domestic ethnography problematizes the detached spectator by questioning the ethics of spectatorship, which is a field of film theory usually conceptualized in relation to alterity or violent and death imagery (see Grehan 2009; Aaron 2014; Chaudhuri 2014; Bolaki 2016, among others), but almost entirely unexplored in terms of specifically domestic ethnography – my invitation for future studies. When the camera's gaze affectively inflects the visible and the real, but simultaneously indicates the consanguinity, the exclusively familial nature of that affective gaze, (not) merging with this gaze becomes a key (theor)et(h)ical issue in spectatorial response.

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