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42ND PARALLEL, RAGTIME AND FILM

“We have had many inventions to overcome us in recent years; the telegraph, the telephone, the wireless, the bicycle, the automobile.” Each of these inventions helped overcome the limits of space and time, “but none (...) was more miraculous in essence or has spread over the world so instantaneously as the moving pictures.” (O’Malley 208) Like the newly invented means of transportation and communication, the movies made the world considerably smaller. In fact, the films became much more effective in eliminating distances than the fastest means of transportation that was to be developed soon — the airplane. Films enabled people to experience countries, cities and cultures they would have never dreamt of seeing before. Earlier it had been impossible for the masses to go to exotic places, but now the exotic places could be brought — all of a sudden — to the masses. It was more convenient and certainly less costly. Thus it was no longer necessary to travel all the way to Africa to see the local culture, the extraordinary animals or Theodore Roosevelt slaughtering them on the safari. Space as an obstacle to human experience — at least on the visual front — disappeared.

The new technique also enabled an image to be preserved indefinitely, either in the form of a picture or in the form of a movement. One isolated image — a galloping horse, a worker’s arm — could be removed from the flow of time and scrutinized; one and the same scene could be seen as many times as one wanted. The same flock of sea-gulls would keep flying over the deck of the Titanic, while in reality neither the Titanic, nor the sea-gulls were there anymore. The surprising speed with which a building — as if by magic — reassembled itself on the screen further disrupted both the “natural” flow of time of the common man in the country and the “objective, standardized” time dominating in the industrial city.

In 1903 American filmmaking saw a remarkable departure from the practice of mere indiscriminate recording of events. The first American attempt at a “story” film — Edwin S. Porter’s *The Life of an American Fireman* — was shown to enthusiastic audiences across the country. Although the present-day

spectator would certainly consider Porter's handling of time and narrative somewhat crude, Porter's film was the first example of successful film editing. Two simultaneously happening events — the plight of a woman entrapped with her child in a burning building and the actions of a fireman who comes to their rescue — were juxtaposed and combined so as to form a coherent story. Beside this, Porter also managed to create for the first time a scene consisting of three different shots: the fireman's arrival at the fire; the imperiled woman and child; and the descent (of the rescued pair) down the ladder. Editing techniques provided the pioneers of filmmaking with means to bring together disparate actions, occurring either simultaneously or at different times, and combine them in complex film narratives. Besides, it was possible to compress the time of the narrative into a much shorter period of "real" time. The feature film, i.e., a film with a structured story, was about to come into existence.

The film's novelty also lies in the fact that it presented a piece of action from two different points of view. This finding may sound like a platitude to us today, yet as any new piece of knowledge, method or tool, it had to be discovered or invented, worked with and explored. Hand in hand with this process, an earlier notion, dating back to times when film was born, i.e., that a camera lens is a neutral, objective observer of the life "outside", had to be abandoned. Although it faithfully records what it is pointed at, the people behind it have an immense variety of options as to what to shoot and how. Having finished shooting, they can start editing. A number of points of view enter the film: those of the filmmakers as well as those of the characters.

As the possibilities of how to use the command of space and time for the purposes of the film narrative further grew, it became increasingly clear that the medium had — beside its enormous capacity for the making of profit — a great political potential. It became apparent that in the hands of an expert a film can turn into a highly beneficent — or devastating — ideological weapon.

As indicated above, many cultural critics of the period which both Dos Passos and Doctorow set out to portray saw film as one of the most important inventions. The rise of the new medium had a number of far-reaching implications. By its fluidity it subverted both the "natural" and "standardized" notions of time and dissolved the boundaries of space.

It was of no less importance as a major influence on the cultural practices of the day, since it immediately became a popular form of entertainment for the masses, most of whom had only recently reached the American shores. The silent movies could easily bridge language gaps. By portraying American scenes they also helped to eliminate the cultural barriers and create some common ground for the disparate immigrant population. With the rise of feature films, which were very often adapted from classical novels, the medium gradually captured the attention of mainstream America. Movie-going became a respectable enough activity to be pursued by the middle-class. What had started as a somewhat obscure, suspicious and cheap working-class entertainment soon

came to be hailed as “the first democratic art” in America.” (O’Malley 206) From that time onwards, American imagination will intensely resonate with its film production.

Since both the novelists I am examining aim at creating a kind of fictionalized time-capsule of the beginning of the century, let us have a look to what extent and in what form the new medium is present in the novels. Given the importance of film and its wide cultural impact, it would be surprising to find that the authors have disregarded or underestimated its weight. Indeed, film plays a major role in both in the 42nd Parallel and in Ragtime. However, the way how film enters both works vastly differs.

In Dos Passos’s novel film is hardly present in what the narrator(s) say. Sometimes a character happens to go the movies to enjoy the rest of a Sunday (as in Janey’s narrative her brother Joe and their friend Alec do) or simply just to kill time, but nobody really thematizes the phenomenon. On the thematic level, film is by and large ignored. Yet just a fleeting glimpse at the structure of the work will show to what extent the author was influenced by the new medium and its artistic possibilities.

The work’s structural affinity to film has not escaped the notice of a number of critics. Delmore Schwartz, for instance, pointed out that Dos Passos seems to have “put the book together as a motion-picture director composed his film, by a procedure of cutting, arranging, and interposing parts.” (Pizer 85–86). The roots of Dos Passos’s constant use of multiple juxtapositions can be found in his interest in the method of montage. He recalls that it was the meeting with the renowned Russian master of the method, the director Sergei Eisenstein, whom he met during his trip to the Soviet Union in 1928, that “confirmed his belief in the importance of montage in expressing theme in all serial art.”(Pizer 85). As he said on a different occasion: “I always had an interest in contrast, in the sort of montage Griffith and Eisenstein used in film. I was trying to put across a complex state of mind, an atmosphere, and I brought in these things (the Newsreels and Biographies) partly for contrast and partly for getting a different dimension.”(Pizer 85).

(It is quite interesting to note how creative approaches in this particular instance traveled from country to country and from medium to medium, regardless of the ideological agenda of the works: the Russian director Eisenstein, who dealt with revolutionary topics in films like *10 Days that Shook the World*, *Battleship Potemkin*, acknowledged his formal indebtedness to “that scoundrel of a capitalist, D.W. Griffith, and his *Birth of a Nation*”(Carr 244). (Ironically speaking, Griffith’s film could be referred to as “revolutionary,” as well. yet solely in relation to the highly original technical innovations Griffith has introduced; the film’s theme on the other hand, conveying a message of white, Anglo-Saxon supremacy, is very much on the conservative side.) Similarly Dos Passos, the American left-winger, was inspired by both filmmakers and transferred their techniques to literature.)

Dos Passos's fascination with the film medium can also be detected from the names he used for two of his modes, *Newsreel* and *Camera Eye*.

The former suggests representation of the social, political, cultural developments in the "outer" world as if presented to a cinema audience (or the newspaper readership). The mixture of fragmented headlines, articles, songs that sometimes relate nicely to the other surrounding modes, while on other occasions resist such a move, should function as a kind of "objective" background to what the writer has set out to highlight. Yet, just as in the case of any news coverage in any medium, Dos Passos's careful selection and presentation of the fragments becomes — no matter how objectively verifiable they might appear to be — a highly subjective enterprise.

The *Camera Eye* sections, on the other hand, highlight problems of perception. The stream-of-consciousness narrative examines the spiritual growth, the inner maturing of its persona. The metaphor of *Camera Eye* foregrounds the objective-subjective tension related to the concept of a camera lens. The lens itself is a disinterested observer, recording the outside world. Such a quality parallels Dos Passos' notion of the artist as a passive and possibly objective observer of the world. He or she must — as he put it on another occasion — "record the fleeting world the way the motion picture recorded it." (Clark 138) However, a camera is controlled by a subjective mind. There is a dialectical relationship between the lens and the mind in that the mind determines what shot should be taken but is influenced in turn by the events it records (perceives). The camera lens could be then understood as a channel of communication between the mind "inside" and the reality "outside." The lens is invisible, to a varying degree distorting. But despite its inevitable distortions we have to keep using it, since it is the only channel we have.

Yet, taking the camera metaphor too literally is misleading. Instead of pointing at the external "fleeting world," Dos Passos aims it inside, at the fleeting world of his persona's mind. By recording the stream of his persona's consciousness he examines his inner growth, his reaching of spiritual maturity. The internal aspects of this mode are also suggested by the very fluid and free-floating narrative, by its spatial and temporal indeterminacy.

Unlike the *42nd Parallel*, Doctorow's *Ragtime* bears hardly any structural relation to film. One even fails to see any formal experiments at all. The narrative is rapid, playful, uproblematized, light. Nevertheless, its readers can avoid problematizations as little as they can avoid its devastating ironies. It is on the thematic level that *Ragtime* starts posing (very illuminating and intellectually enjoyable) problems.

Let us begin with the ending of the novel when Tateh, like the fabulous Phoenix, rises from the ashes of his troubled immigrant life to the heavenly heights of success, prosperity and happiness. He represents the embodiment of the American dream and the reader, who has followed his painful ordeal and frustrated odyssey with compassion, cannot but feel relieved. Being a lover of

life and a charming person, Tateh manages to find a suitable partner, the recently awakened Mother, whose husband — to make matters easy for her — gets killed on board of the downed *Lusitania* in the wake of World War I. The reader may rejoice that Tateh's beautiful, enigmatic daughter will finally be able to lead a decent life in America. The newly established family of Tateh, Mother, his daughter, her boy and the son of Coalhouse Walker Junior, finally moves west (hence another myth) to the promised land of California. The last moment when we encounter Tateh reads like an ending of a fairy-tale (or a Horatio Alger story). An ultimate, film-like idyll:

They lived in a large white stucco house with arched windows and an orange tile roof. There were palm trees along the sidewalk and beds of bright red flowers in the front yard. One morning Tateh looked out the window of his study and saw the three children sitting on the lawn. Behind them on the sidewalk there was a tricycle. They were talking and sunning themselves. His daughter, with dark hair, his tow-headed stepson, and his legal responsibility, the schwartze child. He suddenly had an idea for a film. (Ragtime 344)

Is it just luck and pluck that brought about such a happy ending? Is the American dream possible, after all? Is this what Doctorow seems to suggest? Yes, but in his view, there is a substantial price to pay. The road to security, prosperity, and possibly to happiness is paved with a sell out. Besides, if you want to succeed, you have to become somebody else, somebody who the situation calls for. In other words, one has to construct one's personality as a sellable commodity in a dynamic social market.

The book opens with a telling account of the immigrant experience of Tateh's family. Having gone through the humiliations of economically induced cuckoldry, separation from his wife, a bizarre relation with Evelyn Nesbit, the sex-symbol of the day, Tateh and the girl arrive at Lawrence, Mass. where he gets a job in a textile mill. However, soon a strike breaks out. Tateh is worried about their safety, yet as an ardent socialist he is exhilarated with the struggle. When the famous Wobbly leader Big Bill Haywood arrives in Lawrence to support the strike, the girl realizes that she had never seen Tateh "so inflamed" (*Ragtime* 127) before. But the experience of the brutal crackdown on the strikers' initiative of sending their children to safety provided by sympathizing families in the large Eastern cities, aptly called "the Children's Crusade," is the last in the long series of injustices that make him abandon his socialist creed forever. "This country will not let me breathe," he observes. "The I.W.W. has won," he said. "But what has it won? A few more pennies in wages. Will it own the mills? No." (*Ragtime* 137) It takes only ten pages from the scene when the inflamed Tateh marches with his daughter through the streets of Lawrence and everyone sings the *Internationale* to the bitter morning in Philadelphia when Tateh loses his faith. "From this moment, perhaps, Tateh began to conceive of his life as separate from the fate of the working class." Is it just an accident that the very same moment marks the beginning of Tateh's new and spectacular career?

Next time we see a different Tateh. Mother and Father — two other major characters of the novel — meet him as Baron Ashkenazy in the fashionable seaside resort of Atlantic City. Mother is attracted by his Mediterranean appearance, polished manners, by his vitality and way of experiencing the world. Father is impressed by his spectacular commercial success in the film business. Tateh's "noble origin," his charm and wealth make him an interesting person with whom it is worthwhile to spend one's time. The former socialist seems to be enjoying his new identity and is thriving in the pleasant environment. When he starts speaking about film, he speaks about business and understanding:

It is a big business. People want to know what is happening to them. For a few pennies they sit and see their selves in movement, running, racing in motor-cars, fighting and, forgive me, embracing one another. This is important today, in this country, where everybody is so new. There is such a need to understand. The Baron lifted his wineglass. He looked at the wine and tasted it. (Ragtime 266)

It seems to me that the fact of the film industry's being a big business stands out as a particularly important piece in Tateh's monologue. A participation in a booming business gives a person, among other things, the ticket to fancy places (like Atlantic City) where one can enjoy life by making conversation with interesting people. Words like Tateh's "understanding," J. Ward Moorehouse's "cooperation," then represent the usual verbal material one uses for expressing — over a glass of select wine in a luxury hotel — one's deepest concern about the pitiable condition of the world and about the urgent need for its remedy.

However, Tateh's motives are probably not as important as the fact that by making movies, he does respond to "the central agenda of the Progressive era — the desire to create consensus, a unified public opinion and culture, from the diversity of American society" (O'Malley 224). This seems to be suggested by the names of his first two feature films: "*His First Mistake*" and "*A Daughter's Innocence*".

As already mentioned, the newly developed authorial control over time and space in film gave the filmmakers great powers in handling their narratives. Such control over narrative wielded enormous persuasive powers, something the Progressive reformers were quick to notice. They pressed for films which should not only entertain, but also have an educational value. Since the possibility of constructing the narrative enabled the film makers to create an easily discernible chain of causes and effects, the reformers demanded that "the main argument and effect of the picture shall be for good" (O'Malley 220). In 1914 the National Board of Censorship, for instance, issued a set of guidelines reinforcing the above demand, specifying that "the censor should see to it that the evil characters in the picture come to harm as a direct result of their evildoing" (O'Malley 220).

At that historical moment there was an enormous popular demand for cinema entertainment of any kind. As Tateh put it in his speech, people were fascinated

with any moving images they were offered to watch. Likewise, however, there was a strong pressure from the influential reformers to produce morally uplifting narratives. The way to success therefore resided in the discovery of a narrative that would satisfy both groups at the same time. *Ragtime* gives a clear answer that Tateh was well-equipped for that achievement.

The American experience had taught him that in order to survive he had to abandon his old socialist creed and adopt a new entrepreneurial spirit. When Mother's family meets Tateh in Atlantic City, he already owns his own company, "Buffalo Nickel Photoplay, Incorporated." He also had to discard his class allegiance and form a new one. For the whole jig-saw puzzle of his new identity to fit together, it was even necessary to transform one's body, i.e., dye his beard and hair. Within the new context his Yiddish accent no longer functions as an embarrassing drawback; on the contrary, he can flaunt it.

It is also necessary to become self-reliant, energetic, ingenious. One has to constantly recompose oneself according to the shifting conditions in and demands of the society. It is a must to forget about one's past:

But his new existence thrilled him. His whole personality had turned outward and he had become a voluble and energetic man full of the future. He felt he deserved his happiness. He'd constructed it without help. (Ragtime 269)

Tateh has learned the lesson that resistance hardly ever pays. After all, as he put it, the resistant workers at Lawrence gained — despite their victory — just a couple of cents and nothing more. It is much better to provide people with what they appear to want at any given moment. If there is a demand on the part of some *nouveaux riches* for a title that could be married to their fortunes, let them have one, a barony will do just like any other noble epithet.

The basic prerequisites therefore are knowledge, flexibility and narrative skills. Since Tateh possesses all three, he becomes invaluable for any group that happens to demand his services. The title "*His First Mistake*," for instance, indicates Tateh's compliance with the Reformers' demands and the rules issued by the National Board of Censorship. We do not need much imagination to picture an exemplary series of actions, starting with a petty crime, causing some more serious violations of law, ultimately leading to a whole career of crime which ends in front of the court of law. Similarly, the other title — *A Daughter's Innocence* — tells us tales about Tateh's genius. By its covert appeal to sex (what other kind of innocence might he be talking about?) it is sure to attract the masses, while it will inevitably contain a morally instructive lesson; for instance how to avoid losing one's innocence in the first place.

Tateh's first career moves are hardly objectionable. After all he is employing his great powers for a relatively harmless or perhaps even good cause. However, at second to last page of *Ragtime* we encounter him again. He has married Mother, confiding to her that he is not baron but a "Jewish socialist from Latvia" (*Ragtime* 333). Then we learn that he "made a good deal of money producing preparedness serials — *Slade of the Secret Service* and *Shadows of the U-*

Boat (Ragtime 333–4). In order to illustrate the degree of Tatch's moral flexibility a brief detour, locating these movies in American history, seems to be necessary.

In April 1917 the United States entered World War I on the side of the Allies. No matter whether we believe just one of the possible explanations — America's failure to successfully mediate a peace settlement between the warring parties that led to the necessity of making "the world safe for democracy;" Germany's indiscriminate submarine attacks from January 1917 that constantly violated American "neutrality;" American economic and geopolitical interests, or their combination, practically everybody agrees that American public opinion rapidly shifted from a pacifist stance, favoring neutrality, to a strong pro-war position. In the minds of the mainstream Americans pro-war sentiments soon merged with the idea of "patriotism" itself. According to Nell Irvin Painter, this patriotic fervor became "intolerant and increasingly paranoid. "The Mayor of New York, " she writes for example, "divided the population into "Americans and traitors and designated a Committee on National Defense that administered loyalty oaths to all city workers, including teachers." (Painter: 330) Similarly, the ending of 42nd Parallel gives a strikingly corresponding account of the jingoistic and intolerant atmosphere of the moment. The nationalist fervor was very contagious.

In his revealing book Keeping Watch, Michael O'Malley makes a strong point that the new political opinions, along with its excesses, were produced, among other things, by the cinematic propaganda of the time.

"By 1916" (...) he writes, "*pacifist*" films (...) were rapidly losing ground to "*preparedness*" pictures which promoted war from behind a thin veil of neutrality."... "As products of the industry's maturity, the by now largely standardized narrative techniques of the "classical style," such films encouraged hawkish sentiment, and started anti-German feeling boiling over. (O'Malley 245).

Many German-Americans suffered from the newly-aroused nativist sentiments of their fellow-countrymen. O'Malley mentions in particular the well-known, German-born film theoretician Hugo Münsterberg, who having advocated for American neutrality became "ostracized by his colleagues" and later came under a constant attack from the media, which ultimately led to his fatal heart-attack. It was Münsterberg, who "envisioned movies as a new art form capable of revolutionizing the aesthetic tastes of millions while promoting psychic and social well-being — that is, of changing the way people think."(O'Malley 226). It is a sad irony that the truth of the latter part of his observation brought about his own tragic death.

However, larger ironies are yet to come. What can a reader make out of a "Jewish socialist from Latvia" who makes films that help mold American patriots out of the blurred mass of hyphenated American immigrants? What kind of statement is this, about the shaping of the American nation?

I realize that the connection between Tateh's preparedness to make preparedness movies and the war hysteria in the wake of the "Great War" is loose. Even more so, the connection between Tateh's film production and Hugo Münsterberg's death is a very far-fetched construct. But it is not my point to blame Tateh for his readiness to manipulate the crowds for money. He might have held the usual belief, i.e., that by helping himself he also helps America in her endeavor to make the world safe for democracy and from at least one point of view he was right. And more importantly: he is, after all, just a fictional character. Therefore it will be more interesting to return to his author.

In his treatment of the figure of Tateh we can see Doctorow at his best, exploring the paradoxes of the American reality and subverting its myths with a most devilish, ironical grin. Doctorow's depiction of Tateh's rise to prosperity and happiness conveys serious questions about the nature of the American dream. The price for achieving it is enormous. One has to fundamentally reconstruct one's identity, discard one's past, cultural heritage, beliefs, class allegiance. Bound to staying in constant motion, relying on nobody but himself, Tateh keeps acting out his new role. Very often meeting the constant challenges of his new existence is thrilling and pleasurable, yet on other occasions, "he suffered periods of trembling in which he sat alone in his room smoking his cigarettes without a holder, slumped and bent over in defeat like the old Tateh" (*Ragtime* 271).

What is the ultimate driving force behind Tateh's transformation into a "functioning American?" Is he obsessed with wealth for wealth's sake? Does he want to dominate other people? As a matter of fact, his ambitions are much more modest. All he wanted to do was to provide his daughter with a decent life. "He wanted to drive from her memory every tenement stench and filthy immigrant street. He would buy her light and sun and clean wind of the ocean for the rest of her life." (*Ragtime* 271). Without his becoming a self-constructed fraud, his dream would never have become reality.

It is probably true, however, that Doctorow is not only questioning Tateh's newly acquired personality but is making a more general point: any person's identity can, after all, be regarded as a kind of narrative about oneself, a narrative our cultures inscribe in our minds.

The aim of this article has been to point out the important role played by films in the American society at the beginning of the century. The invention of film, and above all its rapid commercial spread, further subverted the changing traditional notions of space and time as "natural" categories. The growth of editing techniques, enabled the film makers to remove individual incidents from their "natural" spacial and temporal location and combine them into complex film narratives with a distinct point of view. Both the film critics and the film makers came to realize the economic as well as the persuasive potential of the new techniques.

As the popularity of movie-going grew and was gradually accepted also by the middle class, film came to be hailed as the first democratic art in America. It became a strong cultural force permeating the American imagination all the way up to our times.

Since film had such a major impact on the changing notions of time and space at the beginning of the century, i.e., at the time in American history when both 42nd Parallel and Ragtime are set, as well as on further development of American cultural life, I tried to examine to what extent it is present in both works.

While Dos Passos' novel has a marked structural affinity to the medium, Doctorow uses the presence of film to deal with some of his major themes. The author of the 42nd Parallel makes use of four different modes that vary in their degree of subjectivity. He skillfully combines them into multiple juxtapositions, a method that reminds us strongly of his artistic influences in film, the American innovative film maker, Griffith, and the well-known Russian director, Eisentein. Similarly the names and nature of two of the four modes suggest Dos Passos' conscious use of the medium. In E.L. Doctorow's Ragtime, on the other hand, film enters the novel as a major element in the rise of one of the novel's principal characters, the immigrant Tateh. Doctorow seems to suggest that there is a considerable price to pay for success in the American society. A person must abandon one's beliefs, class allegiance, and one's past. One has to reconstitute oneself and become a "new person." Tateh's new career in the booming film industry parallels his newly constructed identity. The parallel of film narratives on the one hand and narratives about oneself on the other also expresses one of the major concerns of E.L. Doctorow, i.e., that everything, including our identities, can ultimately be reduced to a certain kind of narrative.

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