

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE WORLD WAR II IN WOODY ALLEN'S *RADIO DAYS*

Lívia Segadilha¹

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

Renata Gonçalves Gomes²

Universidade Estadual do Paraná

ABSTRACT: This article aims at analyzing Woody Allen's *Radio Days* (1987) through its representation of history. The analysis focuses on two historical representations of the 20th century that are interrelated: the radio as an entertaining and news technology, and the World War II. The analysis of the film within the historical representation perspective is based on Marc Ferro (1988) and Hayden White's (1996) studies. It is argued that the Jewish family portrayed in *Radio Days* changes its behavior as if following the changes of the political context broadcasted by the radio after the invasion of the Pearl Harbor by the Japanese. Therefore, it can be concluded that *Radio Days* is a film that represents history through the radio golden age and the aftermath of the World War II.

KEYWORDS: *Radio Days*, Woody Allen, Representation of history.

RESUMO: Esse artigo tem como objetivo principal analisar o filme *Radio Days* (1987), de Woody Allen, a partir da perspectiva de representação da história em filmes. Tal análise tem o foco principal em duas representações históricas específicas do século XX, e que estão relacionadas entre si: o rádio como uma tecnologia de entretenimento e de notícia, e a II Guerra Mundial. Os estudos de Marc Ferro e Hayden White embasam a análise do filme a partir da perspectiva de representação histórica. Tendo em vista tais objetivos e escolhas teóricas, esse artigo tem como argumento principal que a família judia apresentada no filme muda de comportamento como se seguisse as mudanças tecnológicas e político-sociais resultantes de acontecimentos que permeiam a II Guerra Mundial, noticiados pelo rádio. Portanto, pode ser concluído que *Radio Days* é um filme que representa a história através da era do rádio e da II Guerra Mundial.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *A Era do Rádio*, Woody Allen, Representação da história.

¹ Discente da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. E-mail: liviassegadilha@gmail.com. Telefone: (43) 9 9144-1554. Endereço do currículo *lattes*:

<http://buscatextual.cnpq.br/buscatextual/visualizacv.do?id=K8516586E3>.

² Docente da Universidade Estadual do Paraná, campus Apucarana. E-mail: gomex10@hotmail.com. Endereço: Rua José Francisco Ferreira, 165, apto. 1204, Jardim Vale do Sol, Apucarana/PR, CEP 86803-130. Telefone: (43) 9 9143-1481. Endereço do currículo *lattes*:

<http://buscatextual.cnpq.br/buscatextual/visualizacv.do?id=K4483833Y7>.

In this article, we analyze Woody Allen's *Radio Days* (1987) through the perspective of historical representation in films. At the same time Allen's film evoke the collective memory of the radio through a filmic narrative, it makes a representation of the World War II from the private memory of a Jewish testimonial narrator of the US 1940s. Joe Needleman narrates the golden age of radio through his personal memories of his Jewish family and through the gossips and news spread out by and because of the radio.

The collective memory supported in the film — and told in a flashback voice-over by Needleman about his childhood memories — is constructed through the technology of the radio in the 1940s. It is portrayed not solely as a relevant entertainment media, but also as a journalistic one that was being used to transmit the reports about the World War II. This article sustains the hypothesis that the Jewish family changes its behavior as if following the changes of the political context that the radio, as a medium of communication, was broadcasting after the invasion of the Pearl Harbour by the Japanese.

Woody Allen is precise when defining the “turning” of the 20th century with scenes of the before and after the WWII. In the first part of the film, the narrator describes his Jewish family — a great family of several members who lived all together in the same house due to poorness — and their relationship with the radio. At that time, radio played an important role in relation to entertainment. A poor family that lived in Rockaway, a neighborhood near Brooklyn, New York, that had the radio as a main entertainment media for listening songs, morning shows, soap operas, series, etc.

In the book *Cinema and History* (1988), Marc Ferro develops the argument that films have become sources for understanding history. Moreover, Ferro also states that at

the same time that films are sources for comprehending history, they have also become agents of history, since they have been shaping its course.

[...] this was the case for several films made shortly before and after 1940; these films were historical “agents” which prompted us to “choose” our friends and enemies at the time of World War II. Now, however, these very films are “source” of history since they reveal our attitudes to us. Sometimes these attitudes are disquieting. (FERRO, 1988, p. 12)

In addition to Ferro’s argument, it is possible to analyze films as historical agents of the World War II because they represent attitudes and behaviors of that specific time. In the case of *Radio Days*, the flashbacks show collective and private memories in relation to the beginning of the World War II and the heyday of technology in the 20th century. Therefore, even though Woody Allen’s film was not made in between the war period, it lightens history from a perspective different from that of the historical films about the World War II quoted by Ferro. *Radio Days* reveals the war through the radio discourse and its impact within the daily lives of the US citizens and families during the 1940s, especially Joe’s Jewish family and the personal experience of Sally White and her attempt to become a radio star.

Memory and experience are mainly related to the Benjaminian conceptualization of history. The collective and private experiences, when narrated, become history. Maria Leandra Bizello, in “Sons e imagens do rádio: *A era do rádio*” (2013), argues that *Radio Days* is a historical film that shows a US citizen, Woody Allen, as the film director and screenwriter, retelling his country’s history through its society’s behaviors, either as private or as collective (BIZELLO, 2013, p. 68). Woody Allen, when being interviewed by Eric Lax about *Radio Days*, mentions the issue of private and collective memories in relation to the World War II. Allen says that the film was partially based on his childhood

memories and partially on the historical event that was occurring at that time.

Yes, part of the domestic life [portrayed in the movie] mirrors my domestic life because we always lived with other relatives. The nights were like that. We used to listen to the War news on the radio and my uncle and my dad, or my aunts and my dad used to play gin runny, my mother used to knit, and the radio used to be on, we listened to the news about the course of the war in the 7 p.m. news, or in the 9 p.m. one. (LAX, 2009, p. 62)³

Although there is no intention of analyzing *Radio Days* through an autobiographical perspective, it is interesting to think on how the representation of history — in this case, the World War II as a historical event — is inserted in Allen's private memory. Both private and collective memory are showed in the film as a product of the radio reports of the war. In this sense, the narrative of the radio news fostered a collective imaginary about the World War II.

Joe Needleman is the narrator of *Radio Days* and one of the characters of the story. However, Needleman tells the story of when he was a child while never actually “appearing” on screen as an adult. There is no image of Needleman as an adult in the film, there is only his adult voice. This can be understood as an analogy to the language of the radio: the invisibility of the narrator or character. Needleman narrates the stories of his family that was surrounded by the radio along the World War II and also the stories about the radio celebrities of that time. Some of the stories, however, as the narrator suggests, are mixed with his fantasies about them, some were heard and developed a bit over by him and some are reproductions of what he experienced during his childhood.

One of the narrated stories is that of Sally White, who is portrayed as a silly

³ The text was originally written in English, however this is my translation of the Portuguese version. “É, uma parte da vida doméstica [retratada no filme] espelha a minha vida doméstica, porque nós sempre moramos com outros parentes. As noites eram daquele jeito. Ouvíamos as notícias da Guerra no rádio, e meu tio e meu pai, ou as minhas tias e o meu pai jogavam *gin rummy*, minha mãe ficava tricotando, e o rádio ligado, a gente ouvia reportagens sobre o andamento da guerra no noticiário das sete da noite ou no das nove.” (2009:62)

woman and aspirant radio star. She owns a sharp, nasal, almost *falsetto* speech that leads the audience, at first sight, to think she will never really succeed in her intentions. However, White, as the narrator mentions, is “one of those **characters** that always seem to be around when things were happening” (00:41:06-00:41:09, our emphasis).⁴ Ironically, her silliness is what prevents her of being murdered, and moves her closer to her goal.

Afterwards, Sally White starts attending diction lessons. It is interesting that Needleman points out that this clever idea came from the “voice of God” and not from her own. So, her foolishness is surpassed by the cleverness brought by the voice of God, what changes her life completely. In telling this event, Allen uses the narration technique in which characters tell stories orally: God tells White to attend the lessons, and so she tells her biographer, up to the point where Needleman’s memory and voice become the ultimate sources of this event. Such technique in *Radio Days* can be understood as an analogy to the radio’s characteristic as a mean of communication in which orality prevails.

It is possible, then, to argue that *Radio Days* shows the limits of the reconstruction of history through memories — private and collective. The focus here is especially in the family core, considering it as a stereotypical Jewish-American one.⁵ In the narration of *Radio Days* it is possible to notice three main representations of history: Needleman’s history — his and his family’s biography —, the radio history in the US and its shows

⁴ Here, the use of the word “character” instead of “persons”, for example, supports the hypothesis of an existing balance between fiction and reality, or memories and history in Allen’s movie.

⁵ A good example of this stereotypical Jewish-American family is that Needleman’s parents are always arguing about money. Mrs. Needleman is always asking her husband to have a profitable job, complaining that they are poor people. It is possible to argue that such behavior relate to the Jews’ stereotype — known as stingy people, always concerned about money. However, Woody Allen plays at it ironically, using it as a comic technique playing with his own biography, since he is Jewish-American born in Brooklyn, N.Y.

(with the parallel biography of Sally White), and the World War II. These three histories are interconnected in the film: the representation of the Jewish family, the radio and the war are parts of the US 1940s history told by Needleman. Bearing this in mind, it is relevant to problematize history not only as a single story, or as a product of one point of view that resumes the truth of a certain period of time⁶.

Undoubtedly, *Radio Days* is a film that retells the story of the World War II in the imaginary of the US families brought by the radio reports and news. The turning point of the film is when the radio becomes a mean of communication in order to announce the War events instead of only being an entertainment medium. This way, the US 1940s society astonishment before the war events is represented as history in the film, through collective and private memories. In this moment, the families became affected by the War events and had changes in their behaviors — from singing along with the radio to being silent to pay attention to what the radio was reporting about the war. There is a tone shift in the film, from a noisy and messy Jewish-American family to a more quiet and introspective family that was worried about the Jewish people's future, and thus, their own.

Despite the focus on the family, Needleman also focus his narration on Sally White, as mentioned before. In the film, White has always dreamed about acting in a radio show and being a radio celebrity. She used to work as “cigarette girl”⁷ in parties promoted for the radio celebrities. A very distinct situation happens to White when she

⁶ Chimamanda Ngoze Adichie, in her text “The danger of a single story”, affirms that it is common to know only one story related to a person, a people, or a nation. Adichie, then, problematizes the issue of knowing history or stories from only one perspective, affirming that this usually reinforces stereotypes that bias us to understand only a tiny part of a whole. This text was pronounced by Adichie at a TED event, and it is available to watch it through: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUtLR1ZWtEY>.

⁷ Cigarette girl is the term used to refer to women who worked in parties and social events selling cigarettes and cigars to guests in the early 20th century. They usually wore a saloon-like uniform and a tray held by a neck strap.

witnesses a murder and is kidnapped by the murderer in order to be killed. However, before trying to murder White, the murderer takes her to his mother's house, and they find themselves interested in White, enjoying her company. The murderer and his mother, then, instead of killing her, decide to indicate her name to a relative who works in the radio, since they notice White's passion and desire for working on radio shows. White's career seems to become what she has ever wanted it to be, however, in the first day of her job — on a quite serious dramatic radio show, playing one of Chekhov's characters —, just a minute before she had interpreted the first line of her part, an urgent news interrupted the show. A news presenter reports that Pearl Harbor was attacked, and due to the need for covering such war event, White's show was cancelled.



Needleman's narration: The country never got to hear her act, because at the last minute, fate stepped in.

News Reporter - The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor. Earlier this morning

a surprise attack was made on our naval base with enormous casualties to the United States. We are pre-empting this show to bring you a special report on the enemy attack and a statement from the President of the United States.



Sally White - Aren't we gonna do the show? What do we do? Come back Monday? Who is Pearl Harbor?

In one terrible moment world events had come between the listening public and Sally White. And suddenly, the nation was at war and lives changed. (00:44:46 – 00:45:24)



In this scene, the focus changes twice, from a personal history, Sally White's, to a collective one, the World War II, and comes back to Sally White's alienated perspective of the war event. These two histories narrated by the radio and the film medias make them remediated histories. White's alienated perspective about the war can be analyzed in contrast to Needleman's family one. Whereas Sally White does not even know what Pearl Harbor means, the Jewish family is very concerned about the war. White's last name, a possible irony in relation to her ethnic representation as being Caucasian, contrasts with the preoccupations about the war by Needleman's Jewish family. At the same time that White is concerned with her private history in the moment of the Pearl Harbor attack — whether she will succeed or not as a radio artist — Needleman's family is concerned with the collective one.

While Needleman narrates in voice over the episode about White conquering her first role as a radio actress, the members of the radio show are on air while White is just

waiting for her moment to start acting. The camera closes up slowly into White's figure, as if preparing the spectators to, finally, watch her participation on the radio. However, behind White there is a door from where a news reporter enters suddenly to interrupt her participation in the show, in order to give the war news and to cancel the show. The tragic tone of the film regarding White's experience and the US political moment is broken by the comic tone, raised by White's naivety and will to act on the radio, when she asks "Who is Pearl Harbor?".

This is a reflection of the duality from the personal and collective perspective regarding historical events: White was so concerned about her own personal interests that the war only affected her because of the cancellation of the radio show she was about to begin acting. The memory of the historical event is constructed through a personal perspective, in this case, White's perspective told by Needleman's narration. However, it gives the collective memory idea, since the event is seen through the dissemination of it by the radio to the US society.

Moreover, there is an interesting scene that represents the impact of the war in the families and in the radio, through the Jewish-American family's changing of behavior after the attack of Pearl Harbor reported by the radio. At the same time that the US families were terrified by the war, there was no way of escaping from the subject, since the radio stations were all reporting the event. The songs, shows and regular news that used to entertain the families turned into the insistent war reports twenty four seven. The main leisure of the US families' homes was almost over, as it is represented in the scene below:

Reporter 1: - Meanwhile, on the second front, Japanese have taken control of two more islands in the Philippines and are advancing on American...

Reporter 2: - This is John Jenkins, broadcasting from London and the bombs

are falling even as we speak.



Reporter 3: And the morale of the boys is good here in Guadalcanal despite heavy losses.

Mrs. Needleman: - What do you think, Martin? You think Hitler's gonna win?



Mr. Needleman: - Sometimes I wonder about the wisdom of bringing new life into the world, I'll tell you that.

Policeman: - Come on. Lights out. It's blackout.

Needleman's aunt: - Oh, God. Another air raid drill.

Needleman's uncle: - Between the Nazis and the Communists, give me those Reds.

Aunt: - Stick to your fish.

Mrs. Needleman: - What do they want, those Nazis...to slaughter everyone on the planet?

Mr. Needleman: - The Nazis, the Communists. The world would be better off without any of them, believe me. (00:55:08 - 00:55:55)

The Jewish-American family neither complains about money anymore, nor they dance along with the songs played on the radio, as they were used to do before the war. The tone changes and the family is preoccupied with the future of the nation and of their children, because their lives are surrounded by radio news about the war. Regardless on which channel is on, they all report the war. The leisure of the family, which used to be the radio with the celebrities' shows and songs, during the war resumes to be to knit, for women, and to play cards games, for men, a stereotypical view of gender regarding the 1940s families⁸.

About the representation of the Jewish-American people in Woody Allen's films, since it is a recurrent type of character in his films, Don L. F. Nilson, in his text "Humorous Contemporary Jewish-American Authors: An Overview of the Criticism", writes:

Before Allen started writing, ethnic humor was mostly based on negative stereotypical traits. The Irish were constantly brawling; the Germans were drinking beer and eating Limberger cheese; the Blacks were fainting every time they saw a white sheet move; and the Jews were counting their shekels. The stereotypical humor was written to appeal to a largely immigrant, working class audience. Before Allen, no Jewish writer or performer wanted to appear as too Jewish. (NILSON, 1996, p. 71-72)

Radio Days may be analyzed as an autobiographical film⁹, and due to the fact that

⁸ Although this subject of stereotypical performances of gender would compose a very interesting article, or would be a relevant relationship to do with the stereotypical performance of the Jewish-American family in *Radio Days*, it is not the main purpose of this paper and because of the limits of pages, it will not be developed as it would be interesting to be done.

⁹ About *Radio Days* the Brazilian writer Neusa Barbosa, in the book dedicated to the work of Woody

it can be concluded as based on historical events — Allen’s life and the US history, through the World War II and the radio era. There are also implications of fiction in it, as Hayden White argues in her text “The Modernist Event”. Even though the scholar develops her argument based on the modernist literature, especially the novels, she asserts that it can also be applied to art in general. Hayden White says that the modernist and postmodernist novel differ from the 19th century novel due to the relationship between fiction and reality when dealing with concrete reality.

The interference had the effect of endowing the imaginary events with the concreteness of reality while at the same time endowing the historical events with the magical aura peculiar to the romance. However, the relationship between the historical novel and its projected readership was mediated by a distinctive contract: its intended effects depended upon the presumed capacity of the reader to distinguish between real and imaginary events, between facts and fiction, and therefore, between life and literature. Without this capacity, the affect in which the familiar (the reader’s own reveries) was rendered exotic while the exotic (the historical past or the lives of the great) was rendered familiar could not have been produced. (WHITE, 1996, p. 67)

Hayden White explains that it is important for the reader to differentiate real and imaginary events, since a fact may be told — in prose, film, art, etc. — with both artifacts, as techniques to find a middle point to rend the familiar with the exotic. *Radio Days* is one of these works that asks the spectator to pay attention to the idea of memory linked with the imaginary of personal experiences. That is to say that not everything that is accounted in reference to an event, in this case the World War II, from a particular

Allen, affirms: “Insisting in the comic key, *Radio Days* (1987) goes deep in the Brooklyn Jew roots, where the director of the film was born. (...) *Radio Days* would be his [Woody Allen’s] *David Copperfield* — one of the masterpieces of Charles Dickens.” (2002, p. 81-82, *My translation*). Barbosa not only refers the film as being connected to the Jew culture in the US, but also as having an autobiographical tone. Tomás Creus’ entitled “When Harry met Zuckerman: Self-Reflecivity and Metafiction in Philip Roth and Woody Allen”, published in the journal *Ilha do Desterro*, presents a comparative study about the works of Woody Allen and Philip Roth. Creus mentions the Jewish works of both by present the similar biography both have: “Writer Philip Roth and film-maker Woody Allen share a curiously similar background. Both have about the same age, both are Jewish- American (and both have been eventually criticized by orthodox Jews), both live or have lived for a long time in New York.” (2006, p. 265). This is a quite interesting issue to develop, but due to this article’s main objective, it will not be developed deeply regarding Woody Allen’s *Radio Days*.

point of view, is reliable. Needleman, in the film, asks himself about his memory, doubting if scenes remembered actually happened or if they are reflections of his own imagination. Therefore, it is possible to consider Needleman an unreliable narrator. During the narration, Needleman says that some of the stories told by him in the film are fantasies, i.e., his imaginary sometimes leads the narrative in the same level as his real memories, both consciously.

Ultimately, *Radio Days* shows the technology of the radio in the 1940s as shaping the collective memory of the US people, thus providing a remediated (the radio era shown by a film) representation of the World War II. Also, as discussed before, it is relevant to make a parallel between the private experience and the collective memory regarding events of the World War II, as it is exposed in *Radio Days*. The collective memory of historical events, according to Hayden White, balances the real and the imaginary. This balance is largely approached in Needleman's discourse and narration about his childhood memories and events that he experienced, such as the World War II and the radio days.

REFERENCES

ALLEN, Woody. *Radio Days*. USA: MGM, 1987.

BARBOSA, Neusa. *Gente de Cinema Woody Allen*. São Paulo: Papagaio, 2002.

BIZELLO, Maria Leandra. “Sons e imagens do rádio: *A era do rádio*, in *ALCEU* v. 13, n.26, jan./jun. 2013, p. 56-70.

CREUS, Tomás. “When Harry met Zuckerman: Self-Reflecivity and Metafiction in Philip Roth and Woody Allen”, in *Ilha do Desterro*, n. 51. Florianópolis: UFSC, 2006, p. 265-282.

FERRO, Martin. *Cinema and History*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988.

LAX, Eric. *Conversas com Woody Allen*. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2009.

NILSON, Don F. L. Humorous Contemporary Jewish-American Authors: An Overview of the Criticism, in *Melus*, vol. 21, n. 4, 1996, p. 71-101.

WHITE, Hayden. The Modernist Event in *The Persistence of History* (ed. Vivian Sobchack). Routledge: New York, 1996, p.17-38.

Recebido em: 16/05/2017

Aceito em: 24/06/2017