Going Back to the Past to Dream of the Future: Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris* and Spielberg's *Lincoln*

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> "A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images — of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life."
>
> Svetlana Boym. *The Future of Nostalgia*

In their introduction to the fourth edition of *Hollywood's America: Twentieth-Century America Through Film*, published in 2010, Steven Mintz and Randy Roberts state that the Academy Awards ceremony "gives Americans a chance to recognize the movies that entertain them, engaged their emotions, expressed their deepest hopes and aspirations, and responded most successfully to their anxieties and fears" (1). But highbrow critics very often dismiss Hollywood films and particularly the ones which are Oscar winners or nominees. The reason, some claim, seems to be that they see America's "dream factory" as a kind of manufacturer of fantasies that, responding to Americans' anxieties and fears, partakes in and reinforces the hegemonic structures of the dominant American ideology and society. Using different strategies, Hollywood movies very often materialize a "reality" which, quoting Sacvan Bercovitch about his understanding of American literature of the American Renaissance, "reflects a particular set of interests and assumptions, the power structures and conceptual forms of modern middle-class society in the United States, as this evolved through three centuries of contradictions and discontinuities" (419), of utopias and dystopias. In this way, Hollywood movies "have helped form Americans' self-image and have provided unifying symbols in a society fragmented along lines of race, class, ethnicity, religion, and gender" (xi). However, undoubtedly they also underline a utopian impulse which over time, as Krishan Kumar clearly stated in *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern*

Times, was converted into *the* national ideology, which, in my view has informed most of the American imaginary and imagination (cf. 81).

Between "dreams of new beginnings" and "nightmares of apocalypse", Hollywood very often employs utopian strategies which largely contribute to the emergence of a critical dialogue with its own cultural context. Curiously, this process ends up reaffirming American society in utopian terms. On the other hand, and as Jaap Verheul states in an article entitled "Utopia and Dystopia in American Culture", "whether symbolized as a City upon a Hill, a New Frontier, or a first New Nation, the American experiment has sought to inspire other nations and cultures" (1), and this is undoubtedly another role played by Hollywood movies.

In one way or another, Hollywood movies are indeed key cultural artifacts that very often open windows upon America's shifting historical and social events and moments of crises or disillusionment. Opening these windows, as Svetlana Boym notes, discussing "Hollywood's technonostalgia", in her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, "popular culture made in Hollywood, the vessel for national myths that America exports abroad, often induces nostalgia and offers a tranquilizer" (33). Indeed, as some theorists have pointed out, "the twentieth century began with utopia but undoubtedly ended with nostalgia." (xiv)

By problematizing the historical, social and cultural changes which have affected people's lives, Hollywood frequently brings to the screen nostalgic impulses which are ideologically manipulated through cinematic codes, thus reflecting the perception that America has of itself. Indeed, if in the seventeenth century nostalgia was considered a curable disease and in the 19th century a psychological disorder, today it is seen much more as a symptom of our age, "a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals" (xiv), as Boym points out. In fact, we often look backward, because looking forward is too problematic and we need a sense of warm reassurance. Thus, the power of nostalgia lies especially in its capacity to bring before our mind's eyes images from a time when things seemed, or were imagined to be more secure and full of promise and possibilities, revealing, in this way, a utopian anxiety.

It is therefore clear that nostalgia has a utopian dimension. Ultimately, utopia is nostalgia for the perfect future much in the same way as nostalgia is utopia of the past, a longing for an idealized past that has never actually

existed. "Nostalgic longing was defined by loss of the original object of desire", remarks Boym. "At first glance it is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time. (...) In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress" (xv).

But here I will refrain from discussing different notions or theories of nostalgia; neither will I refer to Frederic Jameson's analysis of postmodern aesthetics or his and other authors' discussions of it or of the relationship between film and nostalgia. What I propose to do here is to focus on two very recent films as case studies in order to explore how, by inducing or eliciting a sense of nostalgia in the public, Hollywood reproduces hegemonic American views and values. Thus, it greatly contributes to giving voice to a dominant (and, I would daresay, American) utopian impulse, which has not only perpetuated the mythic national conception of itself, but also reaffirms the forward-looking nature of America.

The central theme of *Midnight in Paris* is nostalgia. *Lincoln*, on the other hand, elicits nostalgia in the viewer. However, in my view both films reassert America's ability to continue dreaming about the future with longing and hope. Thus, whilst Allen's film seems to suggest that hope is the cure for nostalgia, Spielberg's work produces nostalgia about the future rather than about the past. Indeed, as Boym claims, "nostalgia is not always retrospective; it can be prospective as well. The fantasies of the past, determined by needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future" (xvi).

In my view, it is not a mere coincidence that *Midnight in Paris* and *Lincoln* were directed in 2011 and 2012 respectively. At a historical moment of accelerated rhythms and crisis in the United States, the American middle class, who used to dream about the future, declares that it wants to recover the comforting security and self-confidence of the past, while the majority announces that they haven't yet recovered from the Great Recession. Americans have begun looking backwards while at the same time longing for a meaning-oriented future. Furthermore, there is a widespread notion, especially among the Afro-Americans, that movements like the Tea Party prove that there is no reason for believing in a truly post-racial America. The Pew Research Center declared on the other hand 2000-2010 a "lost decade of the middle class" and in 2011, the organization also emphasized

that forty-two percent of the middle class say they are: "less financially secure" than ten years ago, feel anxious about unemployment and their future, and are disappointed with the first Obama administration, which has not lived up to the "yes we can" promise made in 2008.

Within the context of this nation-wide feeling of disillusionment, in 2011 Woody Allen brought to the screen a story focused on nostalgia, a symptom of our difficult age, while in 2012 Spielberg directed a film which seems designed to evoke nostalgia in an audience who is experiencing hard times in the United States.

In *Midnight in Paris*, Gil Pender (Owen Wilson), who curiously lives obsessed with the idea of finishing his novel, which is meaningfully also about nostalgia, suddenly starts to be pervaded by it and, through him, the film itself becomes dominated by that sentiment. He is caught up in a romanticized version of Paris in the 1920s, an era he longs for as his Golden Age, since he feels displaced and out of sync in his present world. Gil thus seizes the opportunity to go back to his idealized time and spends each of the next few nights in the past having conversations with his artistic heroes. But Adriana (Marion Cotillard), with whom he falls in love, dreams even further back in the past. The Belle Époque is Adriana's own good old days. Thus, Gil finds out that Adriana disdains her present as much as he disdains his own. With a sequence of fantasies, the film unfolds till the moment Gil has an insight — "I'm having an insight right now [Gil states]. It's a minor one, but I'm having it. The present is unsatisfying because life is unsatisfying. But this, this isn't real, it doesn't work". Gil reaches a conclusion about his fixation on the past: the problem is not which era you happen to be part of, it's just that the fantasies of another time and place always seem better than the reality of our present existence. Gil quotes Faulkner, realizing that the past imagined by nostalgia is not even past. Ultimately he also discovers what Woody Allen himself is trying to say in *Midnight in Paris*: it is better to reflect carefully about our need to yearn for the past to avoid being trapped, like Adriana, in her emotional decision to stay in the Belle Époque.

Going back to a significant moment in the American past — the Lost Generation living in Paris — Allen brings to the screen what Boym terms "reflective" nostalgia, the one she says that "can be ironic and humorous [and] reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed

to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection" (49-50). Boym distinguishes what she considers to be two main types of nostalgia: the restorative, the one which "characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths" (41), and the reflective, more concerned with the meditation on history and imperfect process of remembrance. This distinction provides a theoretical framework to assert that the rhetoric of *Midnight in Paris* is one of reflective nostalgia.

At the beginning of the film, Gil yearns for a lost past that, indeed, has never existed, but he ends up realizing that there is a gap between identity and resemblance and decides to take control of his modern-day life. By doing this, Gil does not deny the importance of his longing but he also discovers the need to understand the true nature of this longing, just as the film suggests that the audience should do.

With the last shot of Gil, Gabrielle (Léa Seydoux) and the Alexander Bridge in the rain, Woody Allen gives the viewer the assurance that everything is perfect. A tidy happy ending, rare in Allen's films, brings us a romantically framed scene of Gil and Gabrielle taking a walk in the rain at midnight along a lovely Parisian bridge. And, as Richard Haw argues, "bridges, by their very nature, are utopian because they bring separated parts together and provide order" (46). Thus, in response to the negativity attached to the present, Woody Allen ends his film on a note of longing and hope for the future. Allen's happy ending in *Midnight in Paris* asserts the same as Boym states about "reflective nostalgia": "The focus here is not on the recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth, but on the meditation on history and the passage of time. To paraphrase Nabokov, these kind of nostalgics are often "amateurs of time, epicures of duration", who resist the pressure of external efficiency and take sensual delight in the texture of time not measurable by clocks and calendars" (49). The past is not only that which does not exist, claims Boym, but, as Henri Bergson points out, it "might act and will act by inserting itself into a present sensation from which it borrows vitality" (59-60). This is, in my view, what happens also in *Lincoln*, a historical and epic film, which is much more than about the 16th president of the United States.

Spielberg's film "plot" depicts Lincoln as a shrewd and exceptionally wise politician. It focuses upon a very limited period of time, that is, between the winter and spring of 1865, when he succeeded in having Congress pass the 13th Amendment.

The film concentrates on Lincoln's deep-rooted belief that it was urgent to act immediately to pass the 13th Amendment for both moral and political reasons. But to convince and control Congress in 1865 was a daunting and dangerous task, one which required skillful negotiation, great power of persuasion as well as wise tactics and great rhetoric. The viewers find all this in the film, but they also find overtones of political interventions and discourses of today, directed at the 44th president of the United States and at the two dominant political parties of today. As some critics claim, the film also brings to the screen the Democrats' and Republicans' divided perspectives about the role of the central government in 2012 and questions the limits of presidential powers.

Although there are only a couple of brief but memorable Civil War scenes and a few snippets from Lincoln's speeches, the film is unquestionably a historical record, partially based on Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals*. But it also brings the viewer a fictional composition and arguments which strongly contribute to making the audience reflect on more general and timeless questions such as the role of the United States in the world. Undoubtedly, Spielberg's film reiterates Abraham Lincoln's image not only as a savior, a shrewd politician, a great thinker who showed America the way forward, but also as a kind of American self-taught biblical prophet — and the shot of Lincoln (Daniel Day-Lewis) and his wife (Sally Field) talking about a possible trip to the Holy Land reinforces this image.

Spielberg's film starts by restoring/creating a nostalgic image of the 16th US president and his role and ends by inducing nostalgia in the audience. From the beginning of the film, the operations of focalization are in fact crucial to the creation of a crescendo toward a certain emotional sentiment. *Lincoln* is dominated by the technique of chiaroscuro (as the scene in which Lincoln, illuminated by a beam of sunlight in the otherwise dimly lit room, is standing, head down, apprehensively waiting for the Congress's decision on the 13th amendment) and by a lovely architecture of sound as well as by Daniel Day-Lewis's tranquilizing tone of voice. Spielberg tries to construct a kind of cinematic antidote to contemporary

times characterized by controversial questions (such as the American current financial situation, its military interventions, Guantanamo, healthcare or same-sex marriage): an antidote full of nostalgia which undoubtedly seems to seek "a direct impact on the realities of the future". Thus, besides reviving the myth of Abraham Lincoln, the film offers a kind of lesson to Barack Obama on how to wield political power at times of crisis. Thus, it also offers a representation of how to face the American future.

The closing scene is an intensely dramatic shot. Lincoln is standing on a podium and, when the camera zooms out showing the crowd within which he almost disappears, he starts delivering his second inaugural address. About twenty seconds into the speech the camera zooms in on the president, who emerges from the crowd as he continues his address, ending with his arms wide open as if welcoming the future. Indeed, Spielberg's film seems to have "stopped" rather than "ended". The plot is left open onto the future in a frankly prospective nostalgic tone, which reinforces the idea of America as a utopia still to be achieved. At the end of the film the viewer is left with a strong feeling of nostalgia reinforced by Day-Lewis's powerful presence and amazing voice proclaiming America's ability to keep pursuing the "shining city on the hill".

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Abstract

Hollywood movies are key cultural artifacts that very often open windows upon America's shifting historical and social events and moments of crises or disillusionment. Opening these windows, as Svetlana Boym notes, discussing "Hollywood's technonostalgia" in her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, "popular culture made in Hollywood, the vessel for national myths that America exports abroad, often induces nostalgia and offers a tranquilizer"(33). In this historical moment of accelerated rhythms, conflicts and crisis, Hollywood, focusing and revisiting specific times, events and moments in American history, goes back to the past to reassert alternative ways of being in the world and thus continue dreaming about the future in longing and hope.

Keywords

Hollywood; nostalgia; reflective nostalgia; restorative nostalgia; utopia

Resumo

Hollywood produz com frequência filmes que se apresentam como verdadeiros artefactos que abrem janelas sobre a história e a vida social americana ou então sobre momentos críticos ou carregados de desilusão. Ao abrir essas janelas, e como Svetlana Boym refere ao discutir o que denomina de "Hollywood's technonostalgia" no seu livro *The Future of Nostalgia*, "popular culture made in Hollywood, the vessel for national myths that America exports abroad, often induces nostalgia and offers a tranquilizer"(33). Tendo *Midnight in Paris* e *Lincoln* como estudos de caso, esta reflexão procura acentuar como, muitas vezes e sobretudo em momentos de mais crise e desânimo, Hollywood reafirma a possibilidade de continuar a sonhar com um futuro carregado de esperança.

Palavras Chave
Hollywood; nostalgia; relective nostalgia; restorative nostalgia; utopia