

“THE REAL-WORLD ACT:” THE ATTAINMENT OF FIRST PERSONAS IN DOCTOROW’S RAGTIME

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ABSTRACT: *The theories of Houdini reinforced by Doctorow’s varied use of the world-theater analogy in Ragtime help us understand the novel, which reviews the most significant and dramatic events in America’s last hundred years or so. These events have affected the life of Doctorow’s characters so profoundly that different types of personas emerged. To understand the nature of these personas and their acting roles, I will classify them into four main groups: first, those have established themselves in history books as absolute first personas, the playwrights who submit all people to their wishes, like Henry Ford and J. P. Morgan. Second, people like Houdini, Coalhouse Walker, Mother’s Younger Brother, Father, and Nesbit, who try to boost their own roles and be great actors but finish up with very modest accomplishments. The third group of characters, represented by Father and Mother’s Younger Brother, are pure models of the neglected personas. And the fourth group which includes the Boy and his Mother and Tateh and his daughter have undergone paths which fundamentally bear witness to the ease with which Houdini’s theory can be worked. In addition, I will study how the acting motif is strewn in the narrative technique.*

KEYWORDS: Modern American fiction; Jewish American fiction; E. L. Doctorow; *Ragtime*; Criticism; Personas.

INTRODUCTION

References to acting, stage, theater, movies and cinema are one of the most pervasive image patterns in E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*. However, very few critics have studied this endless exploration of acting imagery that dominates the theme and structure of Doctorow’s novel.

Houdini’s analogy between living and acting in *Ragtime* suggests E. L. Doctorow’s central view of the image as a metaphor for human behavior. Houdini believes, There was a kind of act that used the real world for its stage. He couldn’t touch it. For all his achievements he was a trickster, an illusionist, a mere magician. What was the sense of his life if people walked out of the theater and forgot him? The headlines on the newsstand said Peary had reached the Pole. The real-world act was what got into the history books. (Doctorow, 1974, 82)

Houdini seems to refer to two kinds of acting which use two different stages: the act, which uses “the real world for its stage” compared with the act, which relates to the traditional “theater.” According to him, when acting is associated with illusions, deceit and magic, it is poorly ruled on for it contains no real value or achievement. Therefore, it fails to recruit audiences and is soon overlooked. It does not last or get “into history books.” This implies that

the audiences play a crucial role. They are the judges who tell good from bad acting. Hence, good acting entails the avoidance of roles allied with magic, illusion or deception; and, instead, the actor has to choose an appropriate and decent role for himself and be able to convince the audience of its value. Therefore, it is a matter of being responsible for one's roles and its consequences and of being aware of the audience.

The world act, however, is laudable and hence convincing when it reflects integrity, truth, grace, and glory. This kind of acting, Houdini asserts, is what gets "into the history books." Again, the actor or the human being must exert his effort to select his roles, play them well, and convince crowds of audiences of their merit so that his roles can be judged as "real" and recorded in history books for future generations.

Houdini's analogy also denotes that these two stages are not separate. Rather, the real world type is an extension to the theatrical stage. An actor who excels at the traditional theater and is well remembered by his audience will accomplish success in the real world and guarantee a place in history books. But by the same token, the relation of dependency can be reversed. A failure on the traditional stage leads to a failure on the world stage and success or failure in the real world exacts a similar response on the stage.

Houdini's theory of acting sounds interesting as it binds several correlated cobwebs having to do with playwrights, performances, spectators, theaters and critics, offering what is ultimately an amalgamating metaphor in the novel. Besides, through the acting motif, Houdini ventures to spell out not only the nature of human behavior but also the essence of time: its vain trials as well as its hopeful experiences. In addition, it has a high regard for the occupation of acting whether on the stage, in motion pictures, on television, over the radio or on the stage of real life because it opposes the realm of falsehood, deception and magic and gives a vote for authenticity and one's aspiration to integrity, truth, grace and glory.

Yet, it is perfective, selective, radical and even racial. At best, it is hard to define and difficult to attain. At worst, it ignores the modest successes of oceans of crowds, rises above the common levels and does not take into account the failures without which people cannot appreciate their accomplishment or balance their deeds. Moreover, it encourages the accomplishment of pure statuses whose contents are difficult to specify, access or assess. In other words, Houdini's thesis concerning the two human species is polar and has no dynamic potential. This means that it does not offer any kind of transaction, interchange, give-and-take, clash, dialectic, and a gathering of irreconcilable ends.

In addition, Houdini assumes that only good acting is recorded in history books. As a matter of fact, history does not eternalize the deeds of good figures only. It still registers evil figures the like of Caligula, Rome's 3rd emperor, Nero Rome's 5th emperor, Vlad Dracula, the prince of Wallachia, Ivan, the Tsar of Russia from 1533 to 1584 and Maximilien Robespierre, the leader of the French Revolution, before he became a tyrant in 1794. To this list, I might as well add modern personages such as Hitler, the Nazi leader, Adolf Eichmann, the architect of the Holocaust, Stalin, the Soviet dictator from 1922 to 1953, and Khrushchev, the Russian Premier. The latter, for example, won the admiration of Saul Bellow, who noted Khrushchev's courage to dominate the press, TV screens, the UN Assembly and the midtown streets although he was an uninvited, most unwanted guest. (Bellow 1961, 106-107).

So these characters managed to get into the history books and attain their absolute individualism by imposing a dominance-submission relationship on others. They treated themselves to Philip Wander's principle of the First Persona (the speaker and his intent) or the "I" in speech, and the Second Persona, that is, the "you" in discourse, both of whom enjoy open channels of contact and free possibilities of links and expressions. Worse, they referred to others in accordance with the notion of The Third Persona "the 'it' that is not present, that is objectified in a way that 'you' and 'I' are not" (Wander, 1984 209).

The theories of Houdini and Wander reinforced by Doctorow's varied use of the world-theater analogy in *Ragtime* help us understand the novel, which reviews the most significant and dramatic events in America's last hundred years or so. These are the waning of the WASP institution paralleled by the mounting flow of migration from Europe; the dawn of Freudian sexual awareness followed by the reformed American woman's awareness; the growth of the industrial assembly line and the manifestation of a thorough assessment of capitalism. These events have affected the life of Doctorow's characters so profoundly that different types of personas emerged. To understand the nature of these personas and their acting roles, I will classify them into four main groups: first, those have established themselves in history books as absolute first personas, the playwrights who submit all people to their wishes, like Henry Ford and J. P. Morgan. Second, people like Houdini, Coalhouse Walker, Mother's Younger Brother, Father, and Nesbit, who try to boost their own roles and be great actors but finish up with very modest accomplishments. The third group of characters, represented by Father and Mother's Younger Brother, are a pure model of Wander's third persona. And the fourth group which includes the Boy and his Mother and Tateh and his daughter have undergone paths which fundamentally bear witness to the ease with which Houdini's theory can be worked. In addition, I will study how the acting motif is strewn in the narrative technique.

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Henry Ford and J. P. Morgan, the arch-capitalist financiers and the exceptionally wealthy tycoons are classical examples of the first type of characters, i. e. first personas who have managed to enter history books. Henry Ford experiences ecstasy because he has "caused a machine to replicate itself endlessly" (112), and established "the theory of industrial manufacture" which maintains that "not only the parts of the finished product be interchangeable but that men who build the products be themselves interchangeable parts" (113). At the core of Ford's invention is the idea of himself as the industry emperor, the absolute playwright, or first persona and people as mere individuals whose personal values and abilities are no longer cherished; they are neglected actors or ignored third personas, who play minor roles subject to Ford's wish. Similarly, J. P. Morgan is gripped with the principle of volatility manifested by his beliefs on reincarnation and repetition. During a lunch visit paid by Ford to Morgan in his stylish home on Madison Avenue, Morgan unveils his faith in "universal patterns of order" that keep repeating themselves over time giving "meaning to the activity of this planet" (123). He also proposes his discovery of "a sacred tribe of heroes, a colony from the gods," i. e. first personas, "who are regularly born in every age to assist mankind" (118). Because he considers himself fit for a god, Morgan sees in Ford the resemblance to Seti I, the great Egyptian Pharaoh. At the heart of Morgan's notion is the idea of the double, and hence acting, a motif that suggests links with psychoanalytical theorizations, particularly the works of Otto Rank. In other words, Morgan's proposal is pertinent to Rank, who maintains that the narcissistic esteem of one's own ego, the horror of the destruction of the self, leads to the construction of an image similar to the self in the double, thus assuring oneself of a second life (1971, 85). In order to protect their achievements even further, they both agree

to establish "the most secret and exclusive club in America, The Pyramid, of which they were the only members" (127). Importantly, Erving Goffman, who sees social interaction in our daily life from a "dramaturgical perspective," uses a similar term, "secret society," to label the relationships among members of any group of people working as a "team." According to Goffman, the players of such a "team" acknowledge to one another their own "codes" of acting, collude and cooperate voluntarily, to guarantee the success of their performance (1959, 105). Likewise, the two money emperors are content they belong to a superior race, adhering to rules and norms preventing outsiders from joining or sharing its power. Believing their stage is the ideal type of acting endowed with superior moral sense, they mastermind a script, which they insist on and impose on others as they please, when they please. They, however, are not actors on the stage. Their elated positions as exalted first personas imply they impose roles tailored to their desires on neglected third personas while they have parts in a different script whose members are semi god figures or first personas.

Their extreme power as absolute first personas is manifested in their being private individuals, to use Habermas's account, who own huge corporations that manufacture items for revenue and who make the state serve their interests. This is most obvious when the state creates the circumstances under which the activities of Morgan and Ford, representatives of the free markets, become valid and perpetual in the eyes of the people within the social system (Habermas, 1976 21).

However, the joint notions of Morgan and Ford and their practices suffer serious defects. To begin with, their philosophy and manners are not without inner paradoxes. Although Ford's propositions affirm the spirit of the duplicable and Morgan's theory confirms the cyclicity of history, their practices indicate otherwise. Their notion of volatility paradoxically suggest that their real plan is to give "fixity" to the existing racial, social and economic differences, to use Holquist's (Holquist, 1988 463). In other words, they plan to fix their status as permanent first personas while everyone else is a neglected third persona. Otherwise stated, they scheme to make the spiritual, economic and racial superiority of their group to others outside of their power circle, i. e. the ignored, marginal third personas the norm, or the rule, the original script. Moreover, their extreme self-exaltation and focus on their individual personas undermine their launched agreements. Morgan inquires about Ford's religious beliefs, but Ford responds with hesitance. He is fascinated by Morgan's idea of reincarnation insofar as it reinforces his concept of his own genius and Morgan invites Ford to join him on a trip to Egypt, but the latter declines. What sharpens their discrepancies is the sense of irony with which the unidentified narrator describes their meeting. Morgan's solemn efforts to comprehend historical mysteries completed by his journey to Egypt is contrasted with Ford's superficial enquiry. In a book which costs him twenty-five cents, Ford finds some illuminating ideas on reincarnation enough to set his "mind at rest" (127). In addition, Morgan's passion and enthusiasm is juxtaposed with Ford's assurance and self-discipline. While Morgan divulges riddles about reincarnation with bated breath, Ford is ironically preoccupied with his shoes.

Also, Morgan and Ford pose a severe problem to Houdini's theory which considers these money emperors as great actors based on the fact that their deeds qualify them to enter history books. Absurdly, it seems that Houdini's theory meets the notions of Ford and Morgan but the truth is that it lacks dialectical dynamism and does not consider moral codes for both Ford and Morgan are two narcissistic first personas who underrate human beings and turn them into neglected third personas. As such, Houdini's theory and the notions of Morgan and Ford

challenge Wander's "Third Persona," which, grounded in ethical roots, emphasizes the emancipation of "human potential" (Wander 205) and the acknowledgement of the oppressed social voice. In other words, Wander does not come to glorify first personas or morally improve their behavior. Rather, his target is the neglected third personas, whether groups or individuals who have been historically deprived of human rights, or have been biased against due to their age, sexual preference, gender, citizenship, race, or religion (Lucaites, Condit, and Caudill, 1999 370).

The list of the second group of characters include Houdini, Coalhouse Walker, Mother's Younger Brother, Father, and Nesbit, some of whom are derived from real life or history. If Houdini's principles are employed, they are supposed to be great actors. However, they are portrayed as people who are engaged in a fierce struggle to enhance their own roles and be great actors but end up with achievements less than they desire. This suggests that Houdini's theory does not really imply that entering history books is the criterion for good acting. Rather, it is the ability to attain the rank of a first persona who employs a playwright's consciousness on multitudes of neglected people without being subject to their influence. Houdini's theory of acting does not deal with hidden ugly tracks leading to history: Walker's victimization, Evelyn's defeat and Houdini's failure reveal the ugliness of its politics, and the abuse of technology represented by Morgan and Ford.

Houdini, to start with, has deep perceptions concerning life and people's conduct yet he fails to raise his acting to a level high enough to get "into the history books." Although he becomes an entrepreneur of his craft, he admits that he remains "a vaudevillian" (25) or "a trickster, an illusionist a mere magician" (83) who cannot distinguish his real life from his tricks and escapist entertainments. The narrator says,

Despite such experience Houdini never developed what we think of as a political consciousness. He could not reason from his own hurt feelings. To the end he would be almost totally unaware of the design of his career, the great map of revolution laid out by his life. (29)

His problem, as the quotation illustrates, lies mainly in his failure to understand the great power of his art and in his lack of "political consciousness." Otherwise stated, Houdini, in the manner of Morgan and Ford, has all the characteristics that enable him to sway the lives of crowds, namely be a first persona with the role of a playwright who is detached from that script himself and therefore assure himself a place in history books. Yet, he chooses to be a third persona whose life is manipulated by others. The narrator reveals that Houdini "was destined to be, with Al-Jolson, the last of the great shameless mother lovers, a nineteenth-century movement that included men as Poe..." (29). His mother possesses him so strongly that even after her death she, like a true playwright, regulates his life to the point that he dissociates himself from the present. He redecorates his house in such a way that hints at her permanent presence and tries in vain to communicate with the dead. Moreover, his performances become more sensational and breath-taking, and transcend his physical capacity: "Every feat enacted Houdini's desire for his dead mother. He was buried and reborn, buried and reborn" (170). Although his feats depend on the force of volatility, he fails to make use of this principle in the same manner as Morgan, Ford or Tateh or see that life itself is a process of repetitions and replications. Rather, Houdini is condemned to ceaseless, volatile and sensational entertainments without being able to grasp the force of replication in life, to come to grasp with the present or to devise a script which he can impose on a wide audience and consequently enter history. When the book ends, Houdini remains, almost a third persona, a trickster or a

phony performer who makes a show of appearing to struggle in releasing his strait jacket to convince his audience that "he was legitimate" (267).

Likewise, Coalhouse Walker, the skilled pianist who lives in an era dominated by the philosophy of interchangeable parts and cinema and stands for the ragtime period, has little chance to enter the field of good acting, despite his triumphs. With the melodies of his ragtime piano compared to "bouquets," it is believed that there are "no other possibilities for life than those delineated by the music" (132). So, Walker creates a new cultural form which is also connected with theater. Like a true playwright-actor, he changes his appearance and talk, adopts a courteous behavior, buys himself a luxury car and readies himself to marry Sarah, the mother of the brown child found in the garden by the WASP mother. However, Walker's new appearance and behavior is confronted by a tough response on the part of the whites: "Walker didn't act or talk like a colored man. He seemed to be able to transform the customary differences practiced by his race so that they reflected his own dignity rather than the recipient's" (134). This description of the American society where there are two completely split societies, with the black community leading a fenced, officially directed circle of life is interesting. It is actually a classical example of Goffman's concept of a "total institution," which he defines as "a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appropriate period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life" (1961, 11). Within this system the individual like an actor, should follow the role assigned to him by the playwright, observe the limits set to his masquerades, keep the confines imposed on each co-member of the production and cooperate with the "performance team" (1959, 79-80). As long as an individual, Goffman affirms, acts in accord within the norms of the institution, he saves "the show," otherwise public discrepancies are certain to happen and the individual is subject to different kinds of punishment (1959, 165). By abandoning his position as a neglected third persona, or oppressed voice reflected by transforming "the customary differences practiced by his race" which "reflected his own dignity rather than the recipient's," Walker, however, has violated the norms existing among the American society. To be specific, his appearance and car provoke many white people especially the firehouse men who challenge him and damage his Model T in punishment. After he fails to obtain social justice, Walker, like the Isaacsons in *The Book of Daniel*, refuses to compromise and is unnecessarily killed, as a result. However, the Isaacson submit themselves to the authorities and are legally executed, while Walker gives up the piano, which could have endowed him with power to be a master of duplication, or a first persona-playwright. Ironically enough, Walker is related to the system of interchangeability in more ways than one but like Houdini, he is blind to its essence. He sets up a fierce war to have his car repaired but he is unaware that the car epitomizes the notion of duplicity, mastered by Ford. Nor is he aware he has become a leader of a revolutionary group whose members choose to adopt the collective name "Coalhouse" and become representation of him. He also seizes the house of J.P. Morgan the man who proposes the theory of the cyclicity of history. What increases the sense of irony is that his career duplicates the life of Michael Kohlhaas, the hero of a 17th century novella by Kleist. Kohlhaas, who seeks social recognition of his just cause (Levine, 1985 56-7; Dawson, 1983 206-7; Knorr, 1976 224-7 and Ditsky, 1976 84-6). Unfortunately, he chooses to play the role of violator in a script designed by the system and fostered by Morgan: he becomes an outlaw who is eventually killed by a firing squad.

Likewise, Evelyn Nesbit is "an aspiring actress" (20) whose figure is actually a model for replication, but surprisingly she fails to benefit from the redemptive qualities of the cinema.

She is introduced as "an artist's model" (20), "an inspiration for the concept of the movie star," "a sex goddess" (71) and a media celebrity. But like Houdini and Walker, Evelyn is unconscious that she has the power to control historical changes and conflicts, and thus be a first-persona-playwright and enter history as a great actress. Instead, she accepts to play debased roles demonstrating the neglected third persona in a variety of scripts. According to Emma Goldman, Evelyn is a poignant example of the working classes who identify with their oppressors and oppress those beneath them. She is quoted as saying:

I am often asked the question How can the masses permit themselves to be exploited by the few. The answer is by being persuaded to identify with them. Carrying his newspaper with your picture the laborer goes home to his wife, an exhausted workhorse with the veins standing out in her legs, and he dreams not of justice but of being rich. (71)

Due to her poor consciousness, Evelyn endorses degraded and conflicting roles delineated by both Harry Thaw, the famous criminal, and the successful architect Stanford White. In Thaw's script, she is to sign an affidavit accusing the other of beating her. But she refuses Thaw's offer and follows White's instructions. When Thaw reads the affidavit, he proposes marriage. Disappointed by the low level of her acting, the narrator says, "She had only been in the chorus but she had done as well as any of the Floradora girls," (21). And after the murder of White, she is condemned to daily rehearsal of the testimony she will give in her husband's trial for the sake of money, away from a major role in cinema. Even after she develops an interest in Tateh and his little girl, and attempts to help them escape the poverty of life as an immigrant on the Lower East Side, she remains stuck with her low style of acting. One day she goes off with a professional ragtime dancer and claims that they are "going to put together an act" (95). Still, her role challenges Houdini's theory: she enters history, has a strong influence on people's lives and is considered a great actress.

The third group of characters are represented by the figures of Father and Mother's Younger Brother, two figures who are a pure model of Wander's third persona. Both are treated as "the 'it' that is not present, that is objectified in a way that 'you' and 'I' are not." (209) and negated through discourse and history despite their great potentials and immense contributions. Father is the manufacturer of flags and fireworks, who gathers wealth easily by exploiting the national enthusiasm for patriotic displays. He is an amateur traveler and the president of the New York Explorers Club to which he made a yearly payout. And Mother's Younger Brother is an innovator in the realm of explosives and weaponry. Ironically, both try to speak aloud and break through the walls of silence they are enclosed within through flags, fireworks and explosives.

To be more specific, the Father's resort to isolation and hence deterioration to the status of the neglected audience is caused by a variety of factors. First, he finds it difficult to cope with the drastic changes in history, social life, work and industry typifying his period. Second, although he was a member of a scholarly upper class East Coast family, his father had wasted their family money and as a result had led his lonely son into solitude, extra caution, superfluous restraint, and constant misery. In addition, Father seems to have been forever misplaced through his efforts to adapt to his altering environment full of immigrants. Therefore, despite his high socio-economic position, emotionally he has led a life resembling that of an immigrant. Above all, his failure to accomplish a deep sense of self-knowledge nullifies his social and economic status, and he always finds himself among the rejected and neglected third audience.

Similarly, Mother's Younger Brother spends his life looking for a playwright who can assign him in an ideal role that can reflect his idealistic principles and creative skills. He initially joins his sister's family where he adopts the role of a silenced actor and works at the family factory. Falling short of his desires, Mother's Younger Brother falls in love with Evelyn Nesbit. Again, he joins her script satisfied with the same role of a silent, neglected actor. After she dumps him, he is left with no role to play or a script to link up with. He is not even a third persona. Resentful and disheartened, he energetically joins Coalhouse's team with a dubious role. His new role that enables him to fight injustice qualifies him to be a second persona parallel to all the members of the team. He ultimately feels as if his life has a sense of purpose. Nonetheless, as a Coalhouse among Coalhouses, he is deprived of an independent role and thus a persona. After the dispersal of the team, he travels all over the United States and subsequently to Mexico, where he is engaged in a number of radical battles and where he eventually passes away as an ignored third persona. His legacy of inventions, however, could have provided him with the ticket to enter history and be a great actor.

The list of the fourth group includes the Boy and his Mother and Tateh and his daughter, whose achievements largely testify to the workability of Houdini's theory.

Precocious, intelligent, observant, and curious, the Little Boy possesses an enormous curiosity about the world around him and consistently expresses engagement in it. Listening attentively to his grandfather's stories of metamorphosis out of *Ovid*, the Little Boy is assured that these stories were "of people who became animals or trees or statues. They were stories of transformation. Women turned into sunflowers, spiders, bats, birds; men turned into snakes, pigs, stones and even thin air" (97). They engage the Little Boy's imagination and "propose[d] to him that the forms of life were volatile and that everything in the world could as easily be something else" (97). In other words, these stories not only fight solidity, motionlessness and submission to a permanent condition but also encourage change and boost hope. They motivate man to reject fixed compliance with one persona and to endorse a strategy allowing a change from one persona to another. It is this feature that helps the Little Boy, despite his young age, to understand that life, like cinema, is volatile and duplicable. In fact, the terms are derived from the cinema which is itself a world of acting and theater. In an attempt to emphasize this connection, the narrator reminds us that:

He liked to go to the moving picture shows downtown at the New Rochelle Theater on Main Street. He knew the principles of photography but saw also that moving pictures depended on the capacity of humans, animals or objects to forfeit of themselves, residues of shadow and light which they left behind. (97-98)

The Boy, who is introduced as a moviegoer and one well-acquainted with the principles of photography, affirms that cinema relies on the actor's ability "to forfeit of themselves." To test the validity of this assumption, the Boy finds "proof in his own experience of the instability of both things and people" (90). He looks at the hairbrush on the bureau and sees how it slides off the edge; he listens to the Victrola with fascination and plays "the record over and over... as if to test the endurance of a duplicated event" (98). He discovers evidence in his father who goes away and returns bearded, deformed and skinny, in his uncle and in statues which are "one way of transforming and in some humans cases horses" (98). And he takes to studying himself in the mirror:

In fact, he continued the practice not from vanity but because he discovered the mirror as a means of self-duplication. He would gaze at himself until there were two selves facing one another, neither of

which could claim to be the real one. The sensation was of being disembodied. He was no longer anything exact as a person. He had the dizzying feeling of separating from himself endlessly. (98)

The Boy's disembodiment is comparable to Daniel's. Whereas the latter performs the role of Inertia Kid who stands for total disconnection, the former tries to test the endurance of the duplicated event. As a result, Daniel's performance is dangerous while the Boy's is similar to the feeling of an actor before the camera. According to Walter Benjamin, "the feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one's own image in a mirror. But now the reflected image has become separable, transportable" (1968, 230-1).

The Boy also notices that the process of duplication marks the genius of the 20th century: "The value of the duplicable event was everywhere perceived. Every town had its ice-cream soda fountain of Belgian Marble. Painless Parker the Dentist "everywhere offered to remove your toothache" (111). As one who has tried and perceived the notion of interchangeability, the Boy believes that when it is applied in real life, it helps people to live their life with ease and without loss of their personal dignity. It is accomplished when people make a compromise, that is "forfeit portions of themselves" (97), in the way actors do on the screen. When people treat their selves as subject to interchangeability and control the process of duplication, they are liable to see the essence of reality and, thus, achieve their individuality and experience the sense of relaxation and pleasure coming from complying with the duplicability of life. Does this mean that the Boy supports the notions offered by Ford and Morgan? Not quite so. While those latter figures treat themselves as first personas and regard others as undervalued human beings, the Boy offers redemption and individuation. In other words, by interchangeability, the Boy perhaps hints at one's ability to play different roles and transition from one persona to another and by controlling it the Boy refers to one's ability to be a playwright, an actor or a member of the audience, who can play his role well. When the Boy goes to watch a baseball game with his father, he gives a true demonstration of his meaning. Although he is a spectator, he is filled with a pleasure caused by accepting the principle of repetition and interchangeability of things. Questioning the source of joy that the Boy has, the Father asks: What is it you like about the game, he said. The boy did not remove his gaze from the diamond. The same things happens over and over, he said. The pitcher throws the ball he can hit it so as to fool the batter into thinking he can hit it. But sometimes the batter does hit it, the father said. Then the pitcher is the one who is fooled, the boy said. (195)

Obviously, life is compared to a baseball game and people to players. Just as baseball depends on repetitiveness so the events of life are circular. In order for baseball players to enjoy the game and for people to enjoy life, they have to recognize that nothing fundamental can be changed or destroyed. All that players have to do is to change places and people likewise have to adapt themselves to life's volatility.

And when the Boy meets Tateh's daughter on the beach, both are engaged in games which embody the process of composition and re-composition thereby feeling happy and relaxed. Under the changing sunlight, they build models of themselves and destroy them, bury and uncover themselves in the sand over and over again. Conversely, Houdini, who cannot understand this process, is hurriedly dug out of the grave. Drained of color, he coughs blood, his nails bleed and soil falls from him.

One source that inspires the Boy's conduct and thoughts is his mother, who represents a true exemplification of Wander's theory. She is regarded as a member of a class who have been historically deprived of human rights, and prejudiced against due to her status as a "non-subject" based on gender. But she challenges her category as a third persona and insists on emancipating her human potential and letting her voice be publically heard. Moreover, she progresses toward the position of a first persona, a playwright capable of giving roles to a variety of actors without silencing their voices or treating them as non-persons. Her progress is clearly marked in several major arenas: marital, emotional or psychological, professional, sexual and social. After her husband's return from the Arctic, her relationship with him goes through a dramatic alteration. Although she occasionally feels love for her husband, she loves him as a friend or a family member rather than as a lover whom she passionately loves. Worse, she grows to regard him as dull and static especially following her discovery that he keeps the family business simple and boring. She loses the respect she has had for his professional life and in consequence, she develops the business during his absence and after his death, it thrives drastically. Her disappointment with her husband, paves the ground for her following combination with Tateh. Mother becomes captivated with the motion picture and grows conscious of its profound impact on people's daily life. Another major transformation is manifested in her swelling awareness of her own sexuality. Unlike the Father, who is morally opposed to obtaining joy from sex, Mother is elated in her growing sexual awareness. Moreover, on the social and public levels, Mother manages to achieve a prodigious progress by sheltering a blend of various neglected ethnic groups offering an image of the future structure of the American culture. She initially hosts and cares for Sarah and her baby, then fosters the baby after Sarah's death. After her husband's death, Mother, an average white American, is married to Tateh, an immigrant and moves to California with their three children: Tateh's little girl, Mother's Little Boy, and Coalhouse and Sarah's baby.

Like Houdini, Tateh or Baron Ashkenazy, whose life represents Goldwyn Meyer, the film magnate, rises from humble origins to riches and tremendous power. Tateh becomes a pioneer of movie industry, a master of "the duplicable event" the value of which is "everywhere perceived" (111), just as Houdini is a superstar in his art: "Today nearly fifty years after his death the audience for escapes is even larger" (77). Rather than follow a calculated scheme which directs their conduct and illustrates their goals in life and ascent to glory, both Houdini and Tateh point their lives along the lines of flow of American energy. Besides, both Tateh and Houdini are fake artists. Houdini lacks political consciousness and cannot combine his art with life while Tateh abandons his radical socialism, unties his alliance with the union movement and begins "to conceive of his life as separate from the fate of class" (108-109), the neglected third personas. Moreover, like a true playwright actor, he transforms his conduct appearance and conduct and creates a new existence as Baron Ashkenazy: "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" (217). Despite his success, Tateh loses his personal dignity. But what differentiates Tateh from Houdini is his ability to compromise in ways that Houdini cannot. Like Houdini, Tateh has also developed a theory of acting but while the former fails to fathom his own theory, the latter benefits from it. Describing the essence of film trade which has transformed him from a helpless immigrant to a Hollywood mogul, he says:

In the movie films, we only look at what is there already. Life shines on the shadow screen, as from the darkness of one's mind. It is a big business. People want to know what is happening to them. For a few

movement pennies they sit and see their selves in movement running, racing in motorcars, fighting and forgive me, embracing one another. This is most important today, in this country, where everybody is so new. There is such a need to understand. (215)

Tateh seems to assert that life is a kind of film, but by the same token, the film shows life its true image. When people go to the movies, they are urged by the need to understand the meaning of their real life; they want to be reassured of their existence by seeing their lives happening, reflected and eventually repeated before their very eyes. This process of reproducing on the screen "what is there already" represents the missing link needed to complete Houdini's constant worry to get the audience's approval. While Houdini can't see that this principle of volatility is able to connect his art with life, Tateh, on the other hand, does not worry about the audiences' sense of displeasure and resentment because he believes that the act of seeing oneself in movement racing, fighting and embracing on the screen has a calming effect. The audiences are not supposed to experience painful and annoying situations since the actors take people away from the present by living it for them. Yet, it must be pointed out that the situations experienced by the audiences whether agonizing or amusing, are fake and unreal and hence is a kind of deception that should disqualify an actor rather than provide him with a ticket to enter history with the title of a good actor, as Houdini's theory suggests. Once again, Houdini's theory is challenged. Tateh is an absolute first persona mastering a script where every movie watcher is a compliant third persona subject to his unconditional wish and desire. Aware of this fact, he appears at the end of the novel as one who has found in cinema the means to assert the connectedness of his family as well as of American society despite wide differences. Looking down out of the window at his dark-haired daughter, his tow-headed stepson and the Schwartze child, he has an idea for a film or even more:

A bunch of children who were pals, white black, fat thin, rich poor, all kinds, mischievous little urchins who would have funny adventures in their own neighborhood a society of ragamuffins, like all of us, a gang, getting into trouble and getting out again. Actually not one movie but several were made of this vision. (269-270)

Interestingly, now life inspires cinema because both depend on an endless process of composition and re-composition.

Since Doctorow is interested in imaginative truth rather than in objective reality he invents events in the lives of historical personages, mingles them with fictional characters and explores the transformation of the American life at the turn of the century with disregard to historical accuracy. It does not matter for Doctorow whether a certain incident really happened as long as what he portrays is plausible.

I'm under the illusion that all my inventions are quite true. As, for instance, in *Ragtime* I'm satisfied that everything I make up about Morgan, for instance, or Ford, is true, whether it happened or not. Perhaps truer because it didn't happen. And I don't make any distinction anymore and can't even remember what of the events or circumstances in *Ragtime* are historically verifiable and what are not. (Trenner, 1983, 41)

Doctorow's focus on the illusion of actuality of events verges on cinema. But what makes him really enter the field of cinema is his use of cinematic strategies reflected in the narrative line of *Ragtime*.

In the opening pages of the novel, we encounter the medium of exposition or "summary" (Brooks and Warren, 1959 684). Much of the novel's action, and background information about

characters and events existing before the story time begins are summarized in short, simple and darting sentences which are compared to the placards held up at the beginning of each scene in Brecht's plays (Gross, 1980:79). As an example, consider the following excerpt:

Patriotism was a reliable sentiment in the early 1900's. Teddy Roosevelt was President. The population customarily gathered in great numbers either out of doors for parades, public concerts, fish fries, political picnics, social outings, or indoors in meeting halls, vaudeville theaters, operas, ballrooms. There seemed to be no entertainment that did not involve great swarms of people. Trains and steamers and trolleys moved them from one place to another. That was the style, that was the way people lived.... (3)

In presenting these brief vignettes, Doctorow depends largely upon the montage-sequence technique (Metz, 1974:128-9 and Whitaker, 1970, 128-33). A few shots of a "frequentative" montage in film, as Metz says, can sum up "three years of the hero's life" or in our case can illustrate and state what the summed period is like (Metz, 18). The effect of this expository approach on the readers is enormous. It distances them from the presented events and forces them to think and get the message of Doctorow, whose historical generalizations are meant to mock our conventional view of the past as an age of innocence and harmony. What helps him achieve his goal is his adoption of a cool, distanced and slightly ironic voice so unlike Daniel's intense and involving one (Trenner, 39).

After some similar paragraphs, the story time begins and we get a narrative. The narrator tells us:

The Little Boy stood at the end of the porch and fixed his gaze on a blue bottle fly traversing the screen in a way that made it appear to be coming up the hill from North Avenue. The fly flew off. An automobile was coming top the hill from North Avenue. As it drew closer he saw it was a black 45 – horsepower Pope - Toledo Runabout. He ran along the porch and stood at the top of the steps. The car came past his house, made a loud noise and swerved into the telephone pole.... (7)

The sentences are crude, simple and zooming but they do not expose lengthened events. Each statement constitutes a film image. Although there are almost no sentence connectors, these film-image statements are continuous and have a successive temporal relationship. Thus when brought together (by the medium of montage) they comprise a unit that resembles a scene in the theater (Metz, 129).

By contrast with *The Book of Daniel* in which Doctorow adopts a kind of single-line narrational collage, the medium of montage sequence gets to the core of the narrative line of *Ragtime*, which tells the stories of several families proceeding at the same time, though at differed speeds. The events in the life of a certain family are intermittently disjointed to be infiltrated by another family's events and so on. The time relationship between two or more events in the lives of these families, like montage in films, is often simultaneous. Let us consider Walker's explosion of the firehouse. When the blast occurs, the WASP family have been sleeping poorly and Houdini is in the midst of a theatrical performance. And when Father, to cite another example, leaves the port on his way to the North Pole, Tateh enters it on board an immigrant vessel.

On certain occasions, Doctorow uses temporal cutting or duplication as in cinema to join two distant moments together. An example of this is Houdini's recollection of the image of a small boy looking at himself in the shiny brass headlamp of an automobile eight years before. At the moment of his remembrance, Houdini is upside down over Broadway and the year is 1914. To

make sense of this scene, Dawson maintains, the reader is invited to apprehend these two separate moments spatially in a single vision (1983 268), an act which demands the reader's constant attention.

But the events in the life of a certain family get their meaning only when juxtapositionally amassed. When the different stories are gathered, we get the content of the book as a whole and get an idea of Doctorow's treatment of time and notion at history. Time is cyclical and history is repetitive. The three main families are dissolved but are eventually recomposed in the form of one family that becomes a model for duplication and volatility.

What intensifies the cinematic imagery is perhaps Doctorow's unique manipulation of the narrative point of view. The narrator's acquaintance with the Little Boy's various moods might suggest the Little Boy is the narrator—an opinion that is undermined by the constant third person's narrative voice. The frequent use of "we" throughout the novel reinforces the assumption that the Boy and the girl narrate the story together since Tateh, Mameh, Father, and Mother suit the little girl and the Little Boy. Yet the information given about the different characters, and the descriptions of situations and events in American history rule out this possibility. It is very likely therefore that the narrator is a silent director who has an absolute access to a number of cameras placed at different places during various periods. Thus, this all-seeing director created and controlled by Doctorow is indeed a first persona who moves occasionally from one scene in the life of a certain character to another and back again to describing events and situations in American society throughout history.

The manipulation of this first persona-director-narrator allows Doctorow to control his material while he is simultaneously outside the story achieving good acting. Doctorow does not have to adopt a coherent or linear sequence in writing down the characters' stories, beliefs and talks, or remarking about the early twentieth century American culture. Nor does he have to be accurate when giving facts about the American social life or history. His narration mixed with irony is somehow experimental because he presents fictional situations in a seemingly objective fashion as he invents stories about historical characters.

CONCLUSION

in *Ragtime* Doctorow points out how the movie film industry has invaded people's life and shaped their behavior and thoughts. With the coming of the film industry which captures the spirit of the machine age, the ragtime era has come into end, "as if history were no more than a tune on a player piano" (270). According to Tateh, life is a kind of film and contrariwise the film holds up a mirror to life and replicates its true image. Thus, when people go to the movies, they are given the chance to see their life happening and volatilized before their very eyes. This process allows people to understand the meaning of their roles in life. Furthermore, the Little Boy maintains that both life and films define the essence of their reality from the endless process of composition and re-composition. Just as films are dependent on the volatility of successive style images to produce the illusion of reality and to entertain the audience so life is a repetitive cycle of events. In order for people to embrace life with joy, ease and relaxation, they must be either playwrights in control of the actors, like Morgan and Ford or Tateh and the Boy or be content with the volatile principle according to which life functions, like the average people, by forfeiting portions of themselves as actors do on the screen. This explains why Houdini, Nesbit, Walker, Father and Mother Younger Brother have failed. They have not been

not able to accept the volatility of the world and treat their lives as subject to invention and reinvention or be playwrights or great actors. Thus, they are victimized by the system. This denotes that the theory of the volatility of the world doesn't give man the full freedom to choose his roles. Worse, there is no guarantee that an individual can maintain his personal integrity and achieve individuation, for even Tateh, the master of the art of duplicity loses his dignity and becomes fake.

Yet in *Ragtime* Doctorow does not mean to assert the vanity of man's struggle or the futility of his existence. On the contrary, Tateh, Mother and their three children achieve a happy conclusion, having controlled the process of replication, which connects acting with life. So the acting metaphor endows Doctorow's characters with the necessary tool to enter the realm of responsibility and truth and to understand the volatile process of history which constitutes their reality.

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