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Postmodernism and Fragmentation in *The Plot Against America*

Philip Roth's 2004 novel *The Plot Against America* is highly postmodern with its presentation of an alternative history in which a fascistic government is instated. According to Linda Hutcheon: "The term postmodernism, when used in fiction, should, by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past. In order to distinguish this paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction, I would like to label it 'historiographic metafiction.'" (Hutcheon, p. 3). Historiographic metafiction mixes history and literature while often being self-reflexive about its fictionality. *The Plot* is precisely such a text: Taken from real life and adapted, at some points it reads like an autobiography. At other points self-reflexive, the novel comments on the nature of history, engaging with the "what-if?"-question posed on the first page, when the fictional narrator Phillip wonders what would have happened if Lindbergh would not have become president or if he had not been a Jew. In Postmodernism, fragmentation and disorientation are no longer tragic. Postmodernism, on the other hand, celebrates fragmentation. Postmodern literature often tries to break away from conventional storytelling where the narrative is logically structured. *The Plot* is, as a counter-factual history, a fragmented work in itself. In its celebration of fragmentation, with its high level of realism, and with its engagement in American history and politics, early receptions were divided,

mistakenly interpreting the novel as a political allegory (Shiffman, p. 61). *The Plot* entangles fact and fiction, by mixing Roth's own childhood memories with fictionalized events, and also by taking important historical characters of the real America and giving them prominent roles in this alternative, fascistic America. Further fragmentation is encountered in the family household, where the schism between pro-Lindbergh and anti-Lindbergh sentiments influence the family dynamics. On a small scale, the disturbance and fragmentation within the Roth household, and within their social circle, can be seen as a representation of what is going on in the country as a whole. The effect that the political climate has on certain characters, in this essay, mainly Alvin and Sandy, can be seen as further fragmentations on an individual level. This essay argues that fragmentation is not only encountered in the divided reception of the novel, but serves as a continuing leitmotif in *The Plot Against America*, realized in the verisimilitude of the novel and also, on an individual level, experienced by the characters of the novel.

The Plot focuses on a particular fragment of history, the first 2 years of the Second World War in America. As the real Roth remarks, in a short piece for *New York Times*, it is in these years that he is particularly interested:

"Some readers are going to want to take this book as a roman a clef to the present moment in America. That would be a mistake. I set out to . . . reconstruct the years 1940-42 as they might have been if Lindbergh, instead of Roosevelt, had been elected president in the 1940 election. ... I am interested in those two years. They were turbulent in America because they were catastrophic in Europe. My every imaginative effort was directed toward making the effect of that reality as strong as I could, and not so as to illuminate the present through the past but to illuminate the past through the past." ("Story Behind")

Here, Roth does away with all the literary readings of his text that treat it as a critique of contemporary politics. In fact, many academics have read parts of the text as criticizing the Bush administration. Gabriel Brownstein, celebrated writer, asserts that the "references to

George W. Bush's America are impossible to miss." Jonathan Yardley, critic, writes, "That Roth has written *The Plot Against America* in some respect as a parable for our times seems to me inescapably and rather regrettably true," and Ron Charles, another critic, goes as far as to claim "our appreciation of the political climate depends upon [Roth's] book." (Shiffman, pp. 61-62). The association is perhaps easily made as the text sometimes draws strong similarities with contemporary politics and national affairs. *The Plot*, however, was not written with this allegory in mind, as Roth states. It was also not a response to terrorism and 9-11 as other reviewers thought (ibid). Interestingly, Shiffman remarks that Roth likes to engage in a "catch-me-if-you-can" with his readers through his writing. In his engagement with the media he sometimes gives off mixed signals, for example, when, he specifically points out the fact that the Lindbergh speech criticizing American Jews was delivered on *September 11, 1941* ("Story Behind"). In relation to the same article, Shiffman also remarks that, it is not really hard to read Roth's statement about the tendency to turn disaster into an epic and think of Former President Bush, a man who Roth describes as "unfit to run a hardware store let alone a nation" (ibid). Perhaps, these readings are all much more contemporary in their interpretations than Roth meant. In present-day time, 2021, some readers would perhaps be inclined to draw an analogy between Lindbergh and Trump, both of them being presidents who came from a celebrity background, riding the wave of fame towards their presidency, but ultimately, being more of a showman than being presidential.

In Roth's previously mentioned piece for *New York Times Magazine* Roth himself characterizes *The Plot* as a "thought experiment" ("Story Behind"). According to Siegel, as both counter-memoir and counter-history, this work is the pinnacle of his aspirations as a writer to explore the relationship between fact and fiction. Roth's exploration is often autobiographical and historical in approach. This exploration began in his first Zuckerman trilogy and in the *Prague Orgy* (1985) and was subsequently developed in *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993) and the American trilogy (Siegel, p. 135). The postscript at the end of the

novel further challenges the reader to compare his reading to the actual history. As Roth notes, in this thought experience, his "...every imaginative effort was directed toward making the effect of that reality as strong as I could, and not so as to illuminate the present through the past but to illuminate the past through the past." ("NY Times "Story Behind"). In this exploration between fact and fiction, Roth effectively creates an American catastrophe, similar to the catastrophes in Europe during the world war experienced by a younger him and his family.

As a historiographic metafiction, *The Plot* is a mixture of fact and fiction. The verisimilitude employed by Roth gives the alternative history a sense of authenticity while sometimes leaving the reader uncertain about factuality. Feeling uncertainty about truth is a highly postmodernist reading experience, as postmodern literature frequently engages with the concept of truth and argues that there is no solid truth. With its counter-factual presentation of history, *The Plot* engages in this discussion. By creating an alternative version of the years 1940-1942, and by mixing fact and fiction, Roth's creates a narrative that is, in postmodern terms, a fragmentation of history. The text raises questions about the extent of its authenticity and the implications of its fictional history. Secondly, it raises questions about the likelihood of such a history. Furthermore, it also raises questions about the author's specific choices in creating this alternative history.

The Plot arguably realizes its authenticity and realism by drawing on sentiments that were existent in American society around the time of the Second World War. Most of the main antagonists of the novel all existed in real life. They were chosen for their specific roles because of their real world version's historical significance and personal alignment with isolationist, fascistic and anti-Semitic ideologies. The postscripts supplies the reader with facts that highlight this alignment with ideologies that are now considered unethical in the West. Roth's deliberate choice to feature precisely these characters in precisely these roles adds to the realism of the novel and has the effect of making it seem not very far removed from

reality. Of the antagonists, next to Lindbergh, Senator Burton K. Wheeler serves as Vice President and Henry Ford is nominated as Secretary of the Interior. The choice for these persons seems logical because Lindbergh, Ford and Wheeler were part of the same network and met in real life. In fact, Lindbergh and Ford were friends and met each other regularly. In a 1940 Detroit interview, Ford once remarked: "When Charles comes out here, we only talk about the Jews." (Postscript). Ford was consciously promoting anti-Semitic propaganda, in 1920, going as far as to buy a local weekly and producing 91 articles devoted to exposing "The International Jew: The World's Problem" and serializes *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. Subscriptions are forced upon Ford dealers as a company product (Postscript). Another fact that signals Ford and Lindbergh's alignment with "the German cause", it that both Henry Ford as Charles Lindbergh received the German Service Cross of the German Eagle which rewarded Nazi-sympathizers for their contributions to "the German cause".

The fact that America did harbour sentiments associated with Nazi Germany is given further credibility when looking at more historical evidence. Media records, for example, documentation about institutional policies and political movements, all acknowledge the existence of such sentiments. The novel rightfully claims that to some degree America was fascist, anti-Semitic and isolationist, an easily ignored part of history if we limit our definition of historical truth to a factual chronicle of events and outcomes (Siegel, p. 135). During the first half of the 20th century, anti-Semitism was fairly widespread across the United States, manifesting at "every level of society and across the country," writes historian Julian E. Zelizer in the *Atlantic* (Zelizer). Radio personality Father Charles Coughlin regularly spouted anti-Semitic sentiments to his audience of some 30 million weekly listeners. Even institutions like Harvard, Yale, Columbia and Princeton enacted anti-Semitic policies: As Zelizer writes, all four universities imposed quotas on the number of Jewish students admitted (ibid). Real world Lindbergh was the biggest proponent of the America First Committee, a committee founded in 1940 by a group of isolationists at Yale University. At its peak this committee had 800,000

members recruited from all regions of the country. However, other well known figures were involved as well, e.g. future president Gerald Ford and future Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart. Wheeler, the unofficial advisor of the America First Committee, at a one of the committee's rallies appeared to give the Nazi salute. In fact, a recent article in *Smithsonian Magazine*, written due to the release of a HBO TV-adaptation of *The Plot*, shows an old photo of both Senator Wheeler and Charles Lindbergh giving a Nazi salute at one of these rallies (Solly). The committee was dissolved on December 10, 1941, three days after the attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the war. As a "thought experiment" in which he wanted to explore the boundaries realistic fiction, Roth's mixture of fact and fiction achieves such a high level of realism because his choices are logical. The fragmented history that he thus creates is based on pre-existing sentiments and therefore grounded in reality.

Next to the fragmented nature of the text itself, further fragmentation is encountered in the family household, where the schism between pro-Lindbergh and anti-Lindbergh sentiments influences the family dynamics. The friction in society caused by this schism leads to different kinds of personal fragmentation in the social lives of each of the characters as well. The characters' personal engagement with history's (alternative) development shape their beliefs and world views and causes some members of the Roth family to be in complete opposition toward each other at times. The opposite camps cause the household to be divided, with aunt Evelyn and Sandy being Lindbergh supporters and Herman, Elizabeth, Alvin and Philip being anti-Lindbergh. Although, some of the family members' affiliations are unstable as they change their support and shift their position at certain points in the book (e.g. Alvin and Sandy). In effect, the opposition felt within the household causes the family members to alienate from each other while at other points escalating into conflicts.

Sandy's actions and his affiliation with Lindbergh are a cause for conflict and fragmentation in the family household. Central to Sandy's role and his personal deviation from his family is the involvement of his aunt and the state funded Just Folks programme. The Just

Folks programme is framed as “a volunteer work program introducing city youth to the traditional ways of heartland life” (p. 36). The Just Folks programme is meant to give ethnically non-western American children a real American experience in order to stimulate American cultural absorption. When Aunt Evelyn introduces Alvin to the programme, he participates enthusiastically. When Alvin comes back from a summer spent at a farm in Kentucky owned by a certain Mr. Mawhinney, he has learned to speak in a Kentucky accent. Since the start, Sandy was already quite in favour of Lindbergh and had a carefree disposition towards the changes happening around him (i.e. Sandy hides a sketch of Lindbergh under his bed). After his stay at the Mawhinney’s farm, Sandy has become further alienated from his family. This alienation, or fragmentation, from his family is made apparent when Sandy compares Mr. Mawhinney to his father. Sandy extols Mr. Mawhinney extensively, dedicating approximately 400 words to him while concluding with only a couple of words for his father “...my father, of course, was only a Jew.”(p. 39).

Aunt Evelyn plays an important role in Sandy’s fragmentation from his other family members. Evelyn is fond of her cousin, and because Sandy is an attractive boy she grooms Sandy as a poster boy for the Just Folks programme. Paying no attention to the fact that her sister Elizabeth and Herman do not appreciate her involvement. Later in the novel when Evelyn proposes to take Sandy to a state dinner in honour of the German foreign minister Von Ribbentrop, Herman is outraged. The influence that Evelyn has on Sandy’s alienation and the effect this has reaches a climax when Sandy, in the argument that arises from this invitation, using aunt Evelyn words, calls his parents ghetto Jews and his mother slaps him: “He didn’t flinch when she hit him, and now, all resistance, he undertook to enlarge his heroism by brazenly telling her, ‘ I’m going to the White House with Aunt Evelyn. I don’t care whether you ghetto Jews like it or not.’ ” (p. 74). Later in the novel, Sandy changes sides, realizing that he is ultimately Jewish, and becomes more aware of the America that Lindbergh’s movement encourages. However, aunt Evelyn is eventually ostracized by her sister.

Of all the characters in the book, it is initially Alvin who is most opposed to Lindbergh's America. He is arguably also a character who, perhaps partially due to his temper, experiences a lot of fragmentation, both physically and socially. Early in the book, fascism, Hitler, and everything related infuriates him. At this point, he is already distrustful of American politics. It is therefore not strange that he enlists himself for the Canadian Army. Albeit, there is a stark contrast between the Alvin who goes to war to fight Germany and the Alvin that comes back discharged after losing a part of his leg. The fragmentation between these two Alvins is remarkable. While the former Alvin is a staunch supporter of the war against Germany, the latter Alvin is wholly uninterested in politics. On page 18 of the novel, when *The Newark Times* features a photo of Rabbi Bengelsdorf, an influential Jew supporting Lindbergh, and later when Bengelsdorf speaks through the radio, the former Alvin reacts critically. Although Herman is shocked and in disbelief, Alvin directly asserts his opinion, describing the anti-war Bengelsdorf as a sell-out: "'Yep,' Alvin said, ' they bought him. The fix is in. They slipped a gold ring through his big Jew nose, and now they can lead him anywhere.' " (p. 18). The latter Alvin does not trouble himself anymore with politics. The intense agony he experiences over his physical defragmentation causes him to become sullen. Philip notices that Alvin leaves the house every night when Herman reads the news aloud from the paper. When Germany is successful against the Russians, Philip observes: "Alvin didn't care one bit. No longer was he burdened by concern for anyone's suffering other than his own." (p. 62). In fact, Alvin seems to have lost all purpose of life at this point. He spends his days doing nothing and after dinner he hangs out with old high school friends. There is a certain irony in the fact that, Alvin's fervent wish to take part in the war causes him to eventually lose all interest in it. Hence, Alvin's resulting physical defragmentation causes further defragmentation: a detachment from the external world at large.

In the social domain, Alvin's changed persona and the resulting friction and fragmentation is perhaps best captured by the scene in which a physical altercation erupts

between Alvin and his uncle Herman. As Boese notes, although the conflict in the country seems to enter the living room here, it is not entirely clear if this altercation can be seen as a depiction of the political climate, especially, because Philip on more than one occasion misinterprets causal relations (Boese, p. 288). However, based on what the characters say, it does seem highly likely that the political developments in society and what they mean for Jews led to the heightened emotions that caused the conflict to happen: “A Buick automobile, a sharpie’s suits, the scum of the earth for your friends—but do you know, do you care, does it bother you at all, Alvin, what’s happening in this country tonight?” (p. 111). Alvin, enraged by his uncle’s remark, angrily rebuffs by claiming that he went entered the war for the Jews, shows his maimed leg, and as Philip recounts: “...he added his final heroic touch by spitting into my father’s face.” (ibid). It is shortly after the assassination of Winchell that this disastrous dinner takes place and it is precisely Herman’s remark, a remark based on the events taking place across the country, that causes the situation to escalate. Philip himself muses about the possible causes and how such an absurd situation could have taken place. He considers the possibility that Alvin was to blame: “Perhaps if Alvin hadn’t shown up in his flashy clothes and his snazzy car...” On second thought, the political situation also seems a possible factor to him: “...perhaps if Winchell hadn’t been assassinated twenty-four hours earlier...” Nevertheless, Philip can not possibly be sure about the ultimate cause, and it is clear that the altercation of his older relatives left a strong impression on him: “...perhaps then the two grown men who mattered most to me throughout my childhood might never have come so close to murdering each other.” (p. 110). Alvin’s grudge about his stump surfaces in this conflict when he tells his uncle: “I wrecked my life for the Jews! I lost my fuckin’ leg for the Jews!” (p. 111). The passage makes abundantly clear how resentful and angry Alvin is with his situation and how Alvin’s physical defragmentation causes further social defragmentation.

In conclusion, fragmentation serves as a useful leitmotif in *The Plot Against America* and can be found on multiple levels. On one level, fragmentation can be found in the reception

of the novel which was divided (read: fragmented) as interpretations of the text varied and some scholars saw the novel as a political allegory. However, according to Roth, it was simply “a thought experiment”. With *The Plot*, Roth simply wanted to see how far he could go with realism, building on prior experience that is accumulated in this addition to his oeuvre. On another level, fragmentation can be found in this historiographic metafiction’s engagement with the concept of truth, and in Roth’s mixture of fact and fiction which becomes a sort of fragmented historical account in itself. On a third level, fragmentation is also encountered in the social sphere: as in the characters’ lives and in the household, divided political alignments cause friction between the family members. As the current essay argues, this is highlighted through Sandy’s affiliation with Lindbergh and participation in the Just Folks programme and also through Alvin’s changed disposition after partaking in the war. *The Plot Against America* is a highly postmodern novel, and as a Postmodernist novel it celebrates fragmentation and disorientation by employing it pervasively. At some points self-reflexive about history, for instance when Sandy muses about causality, at other times dramatic, the novel engages the reader with the postmodern experience of fragmentation. This essay does not presume to have given an inclusive account of all forms of fragmentation in the novel as there are doubtlessly numerous other examples of fragmentation to discuss, for instance, in relation to Philip. Nevertheless, this essay has tried to elaborate on some of them while also emphasizing the inherent relationship between fragmentation and postmodernism. On a fourth level, perhaps, the most obvious fragmentation found in the novel is Alvin’s stump: the physical fragmentation of Alvin’s leg.

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