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*Original Paper*

# "I imagined Something Small": Radio Writing in Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*

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***Abstract***

*American Jewish writer Philip Roth reimagines the history of the United States between 1940-1942 in his novel The Plot Against America. Such alternative historical imagination is inseparable from Roth's historical consciousness that history encompasses not only the sequence of completed events, but also the hypothetical historical events, whose haunting traces in the factual history constitute a sharp reminder that history might take a different turn. This paper factors in Roth's historical sensitivity and probes into Roth's ironic representation and parody of radio broadcast text. It argues that through radio writing Roth not only holds the "harmless" historical discourse into question, but also expresses concerns over the dual nature of mass media as both a facilitator of the democracy and a catalyst of racism and xenophobia.*

***Keywords***

*Philip Roth, radio, The Plot Against America, media*

## 1. Introduction

In *The Plot Against America*, Philip Roth casts a backward glance and reimagines the history period prior to the United States' engagement in the World War II: What if Charles Lindbergh, the well-known and charismatic pilot, replaced Franklin Roosevelt as the 33rd President of the United States? Roth describes the story as what "could easily have happened in an American presidential election in 1940" (Roth, *The Story Behind*, p. 3), and it paradoxically assumes the features of self-reflexivity and historicity at the same time. The self-referential voices of the child "I" and the present aged "I", which he describes as "a mediating intelligence" interweave throughout the novel and present a vivid picture of American's Nazi-sympathizing regime's impact on Jewish family and community (p. 5). Besides, Roth's uchronia is underpinned by meticulously designed details. In the essay he writes for this novel,

Roth declares that "I imagined something small, really, small enough to be credible" (p. 3). Apart from the counterfactual historical imagination as the context, Roth's portrayal of the 1930s and 1940s largely aligns with reality. With these strategies, Roth intentionally blurs the line between fiction and history to challenge what he refers to as "harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable" (Roth, *The Plot*, p. 114). Due to the novel's skepticism of historical discourse and its too conspicuous features of historiographical metafiction, researches on this novel under the scope of new historicism are too many to enumerate. For example, Jason Siegel (2012) draws on Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction to demonstrate Roth's view of history that identity of a nation remains unfathomed until other potential plotlines beyond linear history are thoroughly deliberated (p. 131). Jennifer A. Slivka (2012) discusses how Roth adopts multiple points of view, one of the two modes of narration Hutcheon outlines in her discussion of historiographical fiction (p. 137). This paper is also inspired by insights of New Historicism, but it takes a narrower scope. It pays particular heed to the description of radio, the dominant medium of communication in the mid-twentieth century. The radio in Roth's narrative carries multiple connotations. It is not only a recorder of events home and abroad, but also witnesses vicissitudes of families on the brink of collapse during political turmoil. Firstly, this paper revisits the role radio plays in factual history to illustrate that the radio writing in the novel is upheld by historical evidence, which justifies Roth's assumption that history might have been otherwise. Secondly, it examines Roth's ironic representation of radio and parody of historical broadcast text. With these strategies Roth lays bare the duality of the radio as both a facilitator of the democracy and a catalyst of racism and xenophobia.

## 2. The Historicity of Radio Writing

Hutcheon defines the historiographic metafictions as novels "which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon, p. 5). With the same vein, Roth borrows heavily from his own experience of growing up in the 1940s in fabricating the fictional history. "To alter the historical reality by making Lindbergh America's 33rd president while keeping everything else as close to factual truth as I could—that was the job as I saw it" (Roth, *The Story*, p. 10). The depiction of radio, among many details in *The Plot Against America*, could find its origin in verifiable historical context. Roth grows up during the golden age of radio, and his eponymous protagonist shares this experience. Radio was a must-have item in every household. "Sandy and I couldn't help but continue to follow from bed the proceedings being aired over our own living room radio and the radio playing in the flat downstairs and…the radios of our neighbors to either side and across the way" (p. 15).

In the 1930s and 1940s as a distinct historical period, the most important political event related to radio was President Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chat. As is pointed by Lenthall, the United States during the Great Depression Era was in dire need to reshape the value of democracy and enhance its influence

on the public, whose enthusiasm for public affair had already been dampened by the aftermath of the Populist movement in the late 1890s and the big business's surging influence on national politics (Lenthall, p. 85). Under such condition, radio emerged at the opportune moment and delivered new solution to the political dilemma. "It served as a vehicle that might recreate a sense of intimacy within the public sphere, enabling ordinary people to feel they could have a meaningful but new civic role" (p. 85). F.D.R. took notice of the role of radio and utilized it to strengthen the nexus between him and the public. "Roosevelt, working with a team of speech writers and mobilizing his superb rhetorical skills, was able to reach a vast audience" (Sloan, p. 339). In *The Plot Against America*, young Philip's father Herman was a stalwart supporter of F.D.R. The whole family listened to F.D.R.'s speech on his acceptation of presidential nominee. For the young Philip, F.D.R.'s voice was both "alien" and intimate when he addressed him and his family members as "his 'follow citizens'" (p. 28). For eight years, his poignant speech "had inspired millions of ordinary families like ours to remain hopeful in the midst of hardship" (p. 28). As the antisemitic forces swept across the Europe, Roosevelt's firm stance as an interventionist brought American Jews a relative sense of security.

Historical evidence suggests that the uchronia under Roth's pen is equally plausible. During the 1930s, the isolationism reigned supreme in American culture. When Asia and Europe were dragged into the abyss of warfare, a strong anti-war sentiment permeated throughout the United States, and the American public's generally negative attitude toward getting involved in European affairs got aggravated due to political propaganda via different forms. For instance, a song named *American First* proclaimed unscrupulously that Americans should place the welfare of their own country ahead of international troubles that the other countries caused themselves (p. 339). Roth grows up under the shadow of such publicity. He recalls that radio broadcast and the newspaper his father brought home enabled him to caught sight of what took place in Europe and the United States (Roth, *The Story*, p. 1). At the onset of the novel, Roth depicts the haunting terror left by the conjectural pro-Nazi regime in the voice of the young Philip: "Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear" (Roth, *The Plot*, p. 1). Such fear is not just a traumatic response to young Philip's encounter with drastic life changes in the fictional history, but also a sensation of fear perceived in real history. Roth's experience of hearing the speech of Nazi German top brass is also in line with the verified history. "As a small child I heard on our living room radio the voices of Nazi Germany's Fhrer and America's Father Coughlin delivering their anti-Semitic rants" (p. 10). As elucidated by Raymond Williams in *Television: Technology and Cultural From* (1990), although radio is defined as the mass media, it is originally designed for individual use; "It is interesting that the only developed mass use of radio was in Nazi Germany, where under Goebbels orders the Party organized compulsory public listening groups and the receivers were in the streets" (Williams, p. 24). Gobbles also appears several times in the fictional history. When the First Lady, Anne Morrow Lindbergh pled guilty in the weak of the political upheaval, she claimed that her husband's speech of reception of presidential nomination was written by Goebbels (Roth, *The Plot*,

p. 323). Although Anne Morrow was suspicious of wiggling out of responsibility, her statement of confession indicated an affinity and complicity in propaganda between the pro-Nazi government in the United States and the Nazi government in Germany. Other associations between radio and Lindbergh are not ungrounded either. Lindbergh, the renowned aviator who completed the first solo transatlantic flight in human history in 1927 and thereby garnered worldwide attention, is also known as a zealous anti-Semitic. In Roth's postscript "A True Chronology of the Major Figures", a corroboration of his possible version of history, Lindbergh is recorded to deliver a radio speech entitled "Who Are the War Agitators" and accuse "the Jewish Race" for pushing the U.S. into a war "for reasons which are not American" (p. 371). His agitated address won enthusiastic response from eight thousand listeners. The historical practice of the Nazis who expanded their influence in the United States and Europe through radio broadcasts provides a reference for Roth's conception of an alternative history.

### 3. Roth's Ironic Representation of Radio

After briefing radio's mixed role in history which lays the ground for Roth's historical imagination, this paper tries to specify Roth's ironic representation of radio in the fictional history, one of the two ways through which Roth instills the novel with a dimension of political critique.

For Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction "demands of the reader not only the recognition of textualized traces of the literary and historical past but also the awareness of what has been done—through irony—to those traces" to realize its power of subversion (Hutcheon, p. 127). With this regard, Lindbergh's manipulation of radio contrasts jarringly with the practice of F.D.R., and it is with this discrepancy Roth invites readers to ponder over the undesirable edge of mass media as a propaganda tool. In the novel, Lindbergh, the former pilot and Republican presidential candidate, emerged as a representative of anti-Semitic and isolationist forces. His claim to ultimate power and the subsequent implementation of anti-Semitic policies were much attributed to propaganda disseminated through radio broadcasts, in which he was portrayed as a vigorous and charismatic pilot, as well as an adamant and passionate patriot. Such propaganda set the stage for his electoral victory. He forged his image as ''fearless Lindy, at once youthful and gravely mature, the rugged individualist, the legendary American man's man who gets the impossible done by relying solely on himself'', which made Roosevelt's feeble image pale into comparison (p. 29). Roth wrote ironically that although he took off "unannounced(ly)" at the airport, every wire service in America and every radio station and newspaper in New York had a reporter on hand to witness the takeoff (p. 29). After his presidential inauguration, he continually relied on the publicity of the aviator image as a political public relations strategy. Lindbergh's unprincipled collusion with Nazi forces escalated and gave birth to a fictional American Nazi alliance that generated lasting impact on American Jews. In commemoration of the Iceland understanding, a token of the collaboration between U.S. and the Third Reich, the Lindberghs hosted a national banquet for German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop. This diplomatic overture,

together with Under U.S. government's tacit approval which enabled the anti-Semitic group, the German-American Bund, to openly express support for the Nazi regime and attack Jews at their rallies caused the public's discontent that Lindbergh gradually deviated from his campaign promises and pushed the country towards the verge of disaster (p. 176). In response to this political crisis, Lindbergh again resorted to his radio propaganda. He took off in a plane wearing a pilot's coat, and "everywhere his plane set down the cluster of radio microphones was waiting for him" and he refrained from disclosing any connection with Nazi top-ups (p. 179). Roth's writing exposes the monotony of this "crisis-response" strategy, which ironically yielded certainly effects in the fictional history. This divulgence stimulates readers into reflecting the role radio played in public propaganda.

Lindbergh government's manipulation of radio broadcast is essentially a sort of spectacle. Guy Debord insightfully points that mass media, "the most glaring superficial manifestation" of spectacle, is "in no way neutral", and "and that it has been developed in accordance with the spectacle's internal dynamics" to cater to the need of social administration (Debord, p. 13). Or, in Adorno and Horkheimer's words, radio is the nation's mouthpiece despite its "deceptive form of a disinterested, impartial authority" (Adorno & Horkheimer, p. 129). In the novel, the one-dimensionality of mass media is evident in that voices in favor of government's anti-Semitic policy were endorsed; whereas the critical voices were muffled. In terms of the former, Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf, who aligned himself with the anti-Semitic government, leveraged his position as a religious leader and urged his ''radio congregation'' to support the anti-Semitic regime. In his radio broadcast he glossed over Lindbergh's passage to Germany and defended his policy to tear Jewish community apart. His hybrid of doctrine and political opinions received political rewards. He became an honorable guest to the Whitehouse and an intimate friend of the First Lady. In contrast, the experience of Walter Winchell, the news commentor and columnist who was highly critical of the government's anti-Semitic policy, seemed to be bleak. Winchell was dismissed from the radio station for his unsparing rebuke on Lindbergh government. He was deluged with harsh criticism and malicious attack which reached the peak when he was assassinated as a presidential candidate. His death was perfunctorily announced:

> "We interrupt this program to bring you an important bulletin. Presidential candidate Walter Winchell has been shot and killed. We repeat: Walter Winchell is dead. He has been assassinated in Louisville, Kentucky, while addressing an open-air political rally. That is all that is known at this time of the Louisville assassination of Democratic presidential candidate Walter Winchell. We return to our regularly scheduled program" (Roth, The *Plot*, pp. 272-273).

The irony within this broadcast unveiled itself when the "important bulletin" was skimmed over. As the scheduled program of fifth game of the World Series proceeded, audience' attention was soon diverted and there was barely space for mourning the deceased. "Such mourning might (or could) effect a transformation in our sense of international ties that would crucially rearticulate the possibility of

democratic political culture here and elsewhere" (Butler, p. 40). The cursory mention of Winchell's death suggested a possibility of not being allowed to mourn, and it also deprived the audience of the chance of moral reflection. Following President Lindberg's mysterious disappearance, the crowd's furious interrogation ''Where is Lindberg?" remained unanswered. Baudrillard's concept of ''implosion'' materialized in a one-dimensional society without response. ''Messages no longer have an informational role, they test and take polls, ultimately so as to control'' (Baudrillard, p. 84).

**4. The Parody of Lindbergh's Broadcast Text**

Parody, for Hutcheon, became a privileged form of historiographical metafiction in that it "seems to offer a perspective on the present and the past which allows an artist to speak to a discourse from within it, but without being totally recuperated by it" (Hutcheon, p. 35). In *The Plot Against America*, Roth makes a parody of Lindbergh's historical anti-Sematic speech "Who Are the War Agitators", mentioned earlier in the paper. Roth says,

> "What matters in my book isn't what he does, but what American Jews suspect, rightly or wrongly, that he might be capable of doing given his public utterances, most specifically his vilification of the Jews, in a nationwide radio address, as alien warmongers indifferent to America's interests. He gave this speech on Sept. 11, 1941, in Des Moines at an America First rally; in my book I move the speech back to the previous year, but I don't alter its content or impact" (Roth, *The Story*, pp. 4-5).

In the original text, Lindbergh labelled the Jewish as one of the three groups of war agitators, the other two being the British and the Roosevelt's government (Roth, *The Plot*, p. 387). The Jews were referred to as "the other people", distinct from the American people (p. 387). If the three elements of a well-organized speech (ethos, pathos, and logos) are taken into account, Lindbergh's speech appears to be rather bombast, relying solely on pathos to appeal to the audience. In Roth's parody, the kernel of the text appeared repeatedly in each of Lindbergh's radio speech, which enables readers to better appreciate its hollow contents and inconsistent logic.

> ''It was always succinct and went like this: To prevent a war in Europe is now too late. But it is not too late to prevent America from taking part in that war. FDR is misleading the nation. America will be carried to war by a president who falsely promises peace. The choice is simple" (p. 31).

Lindbergh's speech was brief yet provocative, and he positioned himself as the opposite of war. He conflated multiple concepts by associating the war with the Jews, equated tolerance of Nazi aggression with protection of the nation and claimed himself to be a peacemaker. This strategy simplified complex issues into absolute binary oppositions and obscured the logical deficiencies in his argument. The narrator derided the barrenness of such discourse, commenting: "that was the whole of it—forty-one

words, if you included the A for Augustus" (p. 30). His speech was seditious and simple; yet for his radio audience it was his typical "low-key, taciturn, winning way" (p. 179).

In Roth's parody, the nature of Fascist propaganda was clarified. As expounded by Adorno, such propaganda possesses two features: the similarity of the utterances of various agitators and endless repetition (Adorno, p. 133). With respect to the former, the essence of Lindbergh's radio speech shared much similarities with other agitators, such as anti-Semitic radio priest Father Coughlin; with respect to the later, the meaning of his speech was exhausted in his repetitive utterance. It was in line with Adorno's observation that ''the speeches themselves are so monotonous that one meets with endless repetitions as soon as one is acquainted with the very limited number of stock device'' (p. 133). Lindberg's radio speeches, like products on an assembly line, mechanically created an illusion of peace and stability to meet the psychological expectations of voters. "Mass media, the dream industry under the cover of altruism and public interest, does not so much fabricate the dreams of the customers as introduce the dreams of the suppliers among the people'' (p. 93). As Roth points out in his book, Lindbergh betrayed the voters' expectations, and he dragged the country to the brink of turmoil. Rather than being a defender of democracy, he was an ambitious populist.

## 5. Conclusion

One may ask, is it still important to discuss this topic when radio itself has already stepped off the historical stage? This paper takes an affirmative stance. In *The Plot Against America*, the radio is a tangible object as well as a highly symbolic one. As noted by Kellman, "Anticipating by sixty years the frenetic culture of cable television, e-mail, and Weblogs, *The Plot Against America* re-imagines a world in which the mass media of radio, newsreels, and newspapers create celebrities, and celebrities—commentators as well as aviators—amass power" (Kellman, p. 115). Although the extreme racist rhetoric prevalent in mass media is much on the decline after World War II, the media has never retreated from American political life and continues to exert its influence on public opinion. Through alternative historical imagination, Roth presciently points out the potential dangers that mass media could pose in modern life. Roth's reflection of mass media is not limited to *The Plot Against America*. In *The Dying Animal* (2001), Roth, through the voice of the senile protagonist, literature professor David Kepesh, reveals the harsh truth about television. "All the disorder is controlled disorder punctuated with intervals to sell automobiles. TV doing what it does best: the triumph of trivialization over tragedy" (Roth, *The Dying Animal*, p. 145). These two books encapsulate different facets of Roth's reflection on media, and the latter more explicitly captures people's indulgence in sensory gratification in a world where the unitary order no longer holds sway. Roth's meditation on television and radio can be seen as a pivotal footnote to history, serving both as a warning about the risks of American unilateralism in the post-9/11 era and as a reminder to readers of the dangers of self-alienation. Despite Roth's reluctance to have his novels interpreted as commentaries on contemporary society, the issues

about mass media he probes into have been corroborated in the contemporary context and continue to draw readers' reflection on mass media.

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