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Roberto ABDALA Jr.

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2/ *Midnight in Paris*, a Film for History

Roberto ABDALA Jr.

ABSTRACT: *The film Midnight in Paris (2011), directed by Woody Allen, offers a singular opportunity for History teachers and researchers to reflect on their labor. There are many references, from the idea of a city as a "place of memories", to some of the various conventions that often get confused in traditional representation of the past. The article analyzes the film under the tools of 'Didactics of History', adding to the debate about the diversity of forms to represent the past, but also, dilemmas and opportunities in doing so.*

ABSTRACT: *Il film Midnight in Paris (2011), diretto da Woody Allen, offre una singolare opportunità per insegnanti e ricercatori di storia di riflettere sul loro lavoro. I riferimenti sono molti, dall'idea di una città come «luogo della memoria», ad alcune delle varie convenzioni che spesso si confondono nella rappresentazione tradizionale del passato. L'articolo analizza il film con gli strumenti della Didattica della Storia, aggiungendo al dibattito sulla diversità delle forme per rappresentare il passato, ma anche, i dilemmi e le opportunità nel farlo.*

1. Introduction

Cinema has always been a great challenge and a monumental source of fascination for researchers in the humanities. The “magic” and “technique” of films that, since the late nineteenth century, allowed the “real” – past, present, or future – to be seen in motion have never ceased to harass historians, anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, artists, film theorists, linguists, and semioticians. In the field of history, researchers do not always come close to poets. Within this universe, as historians, we would like to reflect on some dimensions of the seventh art, as well as highlight advances in various fields of knowledge that could shed light on the relationship between cinema and History/history¹, aiming to find in a film what Benjamin envisioned, seventy years ago, as a form of education. This text will present some observations to argue that films can be as fundamental as academic texts in reflecting on History/history.

¹ History (capitalized) being understood as the formal discipline of research and history (not capitalized) as the overall passage of time in which humanity exists.

The film analyzed here is an essay about history – its importance, meaning, magic, and ills. It represents a thorough demonstration of how cinema can lead us into reflection about complex subjects without engaging in metaphysical or rhetorical “experimentalisms” that, in cinematic language, can become monotonous or inaccessible to the great audience.

*Midnight in Paris*² is a narrative about the journey of a Hollywood screenwriter who, while successful, is in crisis over his “practical life”. The writer Gil Pender is frustrated because he does not devote himself, as he would like, to literature. As will be revealed throughout the movie, he is also dissatisfied with his marriage choices, the bride, and the love he feels for her. The “events” – real and/or imaginary – that unfold during the trip to Paris will culminate in a “rupture” in the story.

The political positions held by the family of Pender’s fiancé are conservative. From their “worldview”, the French do not seem to be politically reliable and are useful only as trading partners. Pender is, paradoxically, a progressive liberal, but the in-laws – and, perhaps, the bride – consider him a left-wing liberal. Even the soon-to-be-consolidated marriage is more like a cooperation agreement, like the one that brought the family to France. Inez utilizes Pender as an accessory to reach this higher level of culture; she consumes him as an “object” capable of providing cultural sophistication to her life, similar to how Pender consumes Paris – as a “highway” to culture.

2. Theories, methods, and approaches

Cinema is a matter of what’s
in the frame and what’s out³.

Martin Scorsese

2.1 Language, culture, cinema, and Bakhtin’s theses

Taking a film as an academic object of knowledge has proved enlightening in some debates in Didactics of History. Historians are especially concerned with method, as these procedures guarantee the scientificity of inquiry⁴. In the case of films and other audiovisual narratives, Robert Stam considers the Bakhtinian theses more appropriate for the objectives searched here in analyzing a film because they incorporate other important aspects in the analysis as it expands into other research fields that can offer a myriad of analytical possibilities.

² ALLEN, Woody, *Midnight in Paris*, Gravier Productions – Mediapro - Televisió de Catalunya (TV3) - Versátil Cinema, United States - Spain, 2011, 94’.

³ NAST, Condé, «Cinephile Follies», in *The New Yorker*, 18 August 2011, URL: < <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/cinephile-follies> > [accessed on 19 June 2021].

⁴ RÜSEN, Jörn, *Teoria da história: uma teoria da história como ciência*, Curitiba, Editora UFPR, 2015.

These theses will be used to analyze the film considering the possibility of some of the other fields with which they dialogue – especially Sociocultural Psychology (Vygotsky and Wertsch) and Cultural Performances (Bauman, Abdala Jr., and Lage). There was no concern to deepen the reflections on these Bakhtinian dialogues. We merely indicate them, as they are fundamental for the analysis to be evident and revealing.

Culture is conceived by these authors as the semiotic universe within which works of language are the main responsible for sharing human experience in time, in sum, history. If we think of a film, we can consider elements of the experience of time through an articulated set of sounds, movement-images, artistic performances, montage, among many other narrative strategies employed by cinema. In this sense, language is considered a raw material employed in the labor of forging discourses – of art, philosophy, science, politics – that provide meanings to the world of experience.

From these preliminary reflections, it is evident that the methodological key to grasping the world of experience is to employ a theoretical framework that allows an approximation to these discursive practices, according to which meanings are attributed to the real. Bakhtin's thesis's relevance lies precisely in how it allows clarification on how language operates in the processes of discourse configuration so that they fulfill their roles in culture. Thus, the *communication* made by them becomes accessible to analysis allowing their meanings to be grasped.

The Bakhtinian theory assumes that all discourses are dialogical, a condition that necessarily includes an interlocutor, an audience. The dialogical principle makes Bakhtin not interested in discourse "in itself", but in the multiple dialogues that discourses play in culture. The object of analysis for Bakhtin is the complete process within which discourse fulfills its role. In this sense, his theses aim to apprehend the «living discourse», that is, the discourse in the sociocultural and historical moment of its enunciation and require that the verbal and nonverbal elements be taken into account.

Dialogism makes the public an essential element of the analysis, as it has effective participation in producing meaning. Another fundamental element of the discourses is that, being dialogical, they promote in public a «responsive reaction» that must be apprehended in its semiotic dimension, which allows the fathom of the sociocultural impact of any statement in a specific culture.

In the Bakhtinian argument, it is not difficult to recognize that the «utterance» is conceived as a sociocultural and historically situated event. Bakhtin's passage below clarifies how discourses – or «work», as Bakhtin uses – operate in the world of practical life and the complexity necessary to analyze meanings. Bakhtin argues that:

The work, like the rejoinder in dialogue, is oriented toward the response of the other (others), toward his active responsive understanding, which can assume various forms: educational

influence on the readers, persuasion of them, critical responses, influence on followers and successors, and so on. It can determine others' responsive positions under the complex conditions of speech communication in a particular cultural sphere. The work is a link in the chain of speech communion. Like the rejoinder in a dialogue, it is related to other work-utterances: both those to which it responds and those that respond to it⁵.

It should be noted that responsiveness is an element that operates in an articulated manner to dialogism, being that every question calls for a response. The responsive reaction can be restricted to its cognitive dimension and instigate the process of teaching and learning, or unfold, socioculturally, actions, or human creations. This idea of responses inherent to statements opens possibilities for us to include aspects explored in our reflections, above all, in Cultural Performance research. More on that later.

As we consider that our purpose is to apply reflections in the analysis of an audiovisual narrative, it is important to remember how Stam proposes the use of Bakhtinian theses in Cinema. According to the researcher:

This multidimensional and interdisciplinary concept of dialogism, if applied to a cultural phenomenon such as a film, would refer not only to the dialogue of the characters within the film, but also to the dialogue of the movie with former films, as well as to the "dialogue" of gender or class voices within the film, or the dialogue between the various tracks (between music and image, for example). In addition, it could also refer to the dialogue that shape the specific production process (between producer and director, director and actor), as well as the ways in which filmic discourse is shaped by the audience, whose potential reactions are taken into account⁶.

2.2 Teaching-learning

Vygotsky states that every thought «performs some function, some work, solves some problem»⁷. Vygotsky would fully embrace the Bakhtinian argument since the «higher cognitive processes» of human beings are leaps operated on the mind as responses to challenges presented in practical life. Vygotsky is categorical in stating that:

⁵ BAKHTIN, Mikhail, *Speech genres and other late essays*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1986, p. 76.

⁶ STAM, Robert, *Bakhtin: da teoria literária à cultura de massa*, São Paulo, Ática, 1992, pp. 33-34 [Free translation. Unable to obtain the text in English, it was translated by the author of this paper].

⁷ VIGOTSKI, Lev, *A construção do pensamento e da linguagem*, São Paulo, Martins Fontes, 2010, p. 475 [Free translation. Unable to obtain the text in English, it was translated by the author of this paper. As this text is translated from Russian directly into Portuguese, we believe that holds some truth to the original. In Portuguese, Vygotsky's name is translated with an "I". In order to keep loyalty to the reference, we kept it].

[...] where the environment does not create the corresponding problems, does not present new demands, does not motivate nor stimulate the development of the intellect with new objectives, the adolescent's thoughts does not develop all the potentialities that it actually contains, it does not reach the higher forms or arrives at them with an extreme delay⁸.

The psychologist stresses the need for human beings to be challenged within the culture to make the cognitive leaps necessary to reach a higher level in their mental processes. The dialogues and appeals of culture, the «new objects» – again, understood as semiotic elements – are fundamental for humans to reach maturity by holding some of the skills they have brought about in their «genetic baggage», as Rüsen would suggest.

Considering that human beings' teaching-learning processes are based on the «appeals» and «interpellations» operated by discourses circulating in the culture, Voloshinov's observation becomes strategic. Taking into account the methodological pair «dialogism/responsive reaction» as the epistemological foundation for the functioning of discourses in sociocultural practices, the Russian thinker suggests that the apprehension of the process occurs as follows:

To understand another person's utterance means to orient oneself with respect to it, to find the proper place for it in the corresponding context. For each word of the utterance that we are in process of understanding, we, as it were, lay down a set of our own answering words. [...] Any true understanding is dialogic in nature. [...] In essence, meaning belongs to a word in its position between speakers; that is, meaning is realized only in the process of active, responsive understanding. [...] Meaning is the effect of interaction between speaker and listener produced via the material of a particular sound complex⁹.

2.3 Cultural Performances

The concept of cultural performances is not consolidated. It is anchored in researchers'¹⁰ propositions from various areas of Humanities who consider “the world as theater”. Approaching

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 171.

⁹ VOLOSHINOV, Valentin, *Marxism and the philosophy of language*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 102.

¹⁰ The concept of performance has been employed in diverse fields of knowledge and in equally diverse forms and with varied conceptual frameworks. That being, it is not consolidated as a unique concept, but widely debated among authors such as: TAYLOR, Diana, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2003; ZUMTHOR, Paul, *Performance, recepção, leitura*, São Paulo, Cosac Naify, 2007; GOFFMAN, Erving, *A representação do eu na vida cotidiana*, Petrópolis, Vozes, 2014; CARLSON, Marvin, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, Milton Park, Routledge, 2018; and, especially CAMARGO, Robson, *Performances culturais: um conceito interdisciplinar e uma metodologia de análise*, Goiânia, Editora da UFG, 2013. Within this debate, we conceptually align ourselves with Bauman's work, insofar as he is an anthropologist who employs Bakhtin's theses. Cf.: BAUMAN, Richard, *Verbal Art as Performance*, New York, Newbury House Publishers, 1977; BAUMAN, Richard, BRIGGS, Charles, «Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life», in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 19, 1990, pp. 59-88.

performance-art, individual or collective, actions or participation in society are not as significant. In other words, human actions of all kinds are regarded as enactments that may not have artistic purposes but are abundant with meanings.

Although we do not intend to deepen the debate here, we must emphasize that staging plays a key role in the filmmakers' decision-making process; in other words, the "response" they expect from their audience is relevant. We intend to provide theoretical support so that a film sequence can be taken as an object. The «responsive reaction» complexifies the work's understanding or how it reacts to the questions posed on screen. Such analysis should contain other elements of the narrative and the audiences' repertoire to apprehend a possible and expected response or how the audience's culture could dialogue and react to the questions posed on screen.

2.4 History

The following analysis takes this theoretical framework to guide the interpretation of cinematic narrative and Rösen's theses to reflect on History/history – especially concerning historical culture, historical narratives, and sociocultural functions. We will explore Rösen's argument that «historical narratives»¹¹ serve as a guide for how human beings should act in the present to overcome the dissatisfaction presented in practical life.

Rösen endows historical knowledge with the anthropological trait that modern science had removed from it, by recognizing that other works of culture also give meaning to the past – including memories and cultural expressions –, which Rösen calls «historical culture». The theorist of history observes that investigations in this field must, necessarily, be subjected to historical methods and, at the same time, academic historical knowledge, expressed through narratives, is constructed from a question that guides the processes that produce research. From this point, there is no past parted from the action of humans that look for answers. This matters because what cinema can do is to create an experience of the past that can be seen in the present as if it represented the "real" past, however, just like any other historical thought, it is produced in the present by the present and for the present.

Because of that, Rösen¹² established Didactics of History as a fundamental part of Theory of History. In his argument, the three cognitive aspects of history consist of:

¹¹ Rösen resorts to a similar notion proposed by Paul Ricoeur: «The productive imagination at – work in the metaphorical process is thus our competence for producing new logical species by predicative assimilation, in spite of the resistance of our current categorizations of language. The plot of a narrative is comparable to this predicative assimilation. It "grasps together" and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematizing the intelligible signification attached to the narrative taken as a whole. [...] I see in the plots we invent the privileged means by which we re-configure our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience». RICOEUR, Paul, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp. 2-3.

¹² RÖSEN, Jörn, *Teoria da história: uma teoria da história como ciência*, cit., pp. 247-273.

1. «empirical» which consists of a «representation of the flow of time», the continuity that exists among past, present, and future that confers «meaning and significance» to it;
2. «formal» that articulates relations among the various categories of time, it is engendered by the narrative – the narrativity¹³ – through which the effectively historical knowledge is expressed;
3. «functional» is the unity of form and content carried out by a «specific function in culture» orientating «practical human life»¹⁴.

It can be attained that there is such a thing as an «agglutinating element» of these three fields of inquiry that aid in the teaching-learning process. This element is the «question» that interrogates the past. Through those questions we structure the narrative of History/history as the «appeal» that discourses generate on the audience, the intrinsic element of the discursive dialogism that underlies all narratives.

3. Reflections concerning History in *Midnight in Paris*

3.1 A monumental scenario!

Midnight in Paris begins with a series of shots from the “City of Lights”. At the sound of Sidney Bechet, *Si tu vois ma mère* («If you see my mother»), Parisian sights and everyday scenes are displayed on screen for almost four minutes. The monumental scenery that Paris represents is presented as a landscape to be enjoyed, as the city’s motion-pictures are paradoxically stripped of the metropolis hastiness. The camera tends towards a “documentary” observation – it makes “ethnographic” recordings of Paris, manipulating them not to allow the urban acceleration to be seen. It dissects a collective memory that embodies the city’s narrative – French Revolution, Napoleon, the artists, and the bohemia. It shows us in images what exists as a shared culture of an idyllic reality that populates the western mentality. Similar to other works of art, the film introduces movie audiences to the “magic” of Paris. It explores a memory that no longer exists as an empirical experience: it can only exist as a cinematographic simulacrum. In this place of wonder, the many times they have been to Paris, been taught about Paris, heard about Paris, proves how much the city is full of «charming places»¹⁵.

Metaphorically, the Paris of the 2010s is “revealed” by Allen’s cameras. The eyes behind them modulate what is most interesting to “see” in the nineteenth century’s cultural capital. As traditional for Allen’s work, Paris is more a protagonist than a set: the streets, monuments, fairs, and cars. Paris’s monumental life is presented to us as the «place» where the narrative will

¹³ See the discussion in Rösen (*Ibidem*, pp. 162-166).

¹⁴ RÖSEN, Jörn, *Teoria da história: uma teoria da história como ciência*, cit., pp. 114-115.

¹⁵ ALLEN, Woody, *Midnight in Paris*, cit., 4':43".

unfold. Fiction takes the French capital as the setting to present a prosaic, “ordinary” plot where real and fiction will intertwine and interrogate each other.

The term «place» also has a strict meaning when referring to Paris. As explained by Nora¹⁶ in the 1980s, three elements make up memory: (a) the material dimension, as an archive; (b) the functional dimension, as a classroom manual; (c) the symbolic dimension, as a commemorative ceremony. The French capital is undoubtedly one of the universal «places of memory» of Western culture, in which these three dimensions coexist organically. Paris brings a larger historical dimension. It survived many humanistic breakthroughs that helped shape western civilization. More than New York, the most frequent city in Allen’s films, Paris represents a simultaneous past: traditional and modern, past and present, rupture and continuity.

Paris’s emblematic character for Western culture is based on elements such as the empirical experience of modern urbanity that it materializes, as Benjamin¹⁷ recalls: an urbanic experience of iluministic confluence. Thinkers from all over the world gathered there with the intent to produce a brighter future, a place where, beyond that, the universal values of Enlightenment were consolidated.

Allen goes further and introduces us, cinematographically, to the historic Paris that Hemingway, among other artists of his generation, frequented and praised. The film mentions 1920s art; also, the *Belle Époque* recalls the Renaissance heritage and, by extension, indicates the importance of all the western artistic traditions that the city represents.

The film offers the audience an almost sacred reverence for Western culture. It would not be an exaggeration to say that, as a member of the Jewish community, Allen has a special admiration for the illustrated humanism that the city conceived, welcomed, and spread throughout the world. It is not possible to neglect the historical weight of the city, although this perception can be challenged, considering the Vichy-Regime and the barbarism perpetrated by France upon its colonies. The ideals of the enlightenment can be sometimes overshadowed by a more precise and attentive gaze upon the history the city carries.

3.2 The beginning of the plot

Allen’s camera gives us current footage of a lake on Paris’s outskirts, the Giverny city that inspired Claude Monet. At the end of this sequence, we find the couple contemplating it, when Gil tells Inez that it would be romantic to live there, to which she replies: «You’re in love with a fantasy»¹⁸.

¹⁶ NORA, Pierre, «Entre memória e história: a problemática dos lugares», in *Projeto História*, 10, 2/1993, pp. 7-28.

¹⁷ BENJAMIN, Walter, *Parigi capitale del XIX secolo*, Torino, Einaudi, 1986.

¹⁸ ALLEN, Woody, *Midnight in Paris*, cit., 4':43".

Montage is important because, right after the audience watches a set of sequences that present cinematically present-day Paris, a dialogue brings the issue of fantasy from fiction to the foreground. The cinematic performance of romanticism is immediately subdued.

During a tour in Versailles, the question of history is presented more explicitly. Inez explains to Paul that Gil is writing a book whose protagonist works in an antique store, a «nostalgic store»¹⁹ – «perhaps as a museum or an archive». The public, which was apostrophized by the “Commentary”, may follow this vision or not, and at the same time, this relates to the writer’s dreams of Paris in the 1920s. Paul explains that this is the well-known «Complex of the Golden Age», which, according to him, is the mistaken idea that a different time was better than the one we live in. However, it is all «a denial of a painful present», concludes the character²⁰.

The previous sequences make the audience plunge into the thought-provoking historical debate: the Annales School’s founders debated the apparently simple questions raised by the characters. It is not a matter of randomly collecting traces of the past as an antiquarian or Pender’s book’s character. The historian’s effort is more sophisticated than collecting elements that survived time. It is fundamental to possess a proper historical methodology and erudition to produce historical knowledge. Formal historical knowledge is different from public historical knowledge. Our concerns differ. An internal and external critic of what Gil wishes to attain would be broken by academic analysis. It is fundamental to make this distinction: what began with the Annales School is the change of perspective between what is historically accurate and what is perceived by the public that was educated by the historical culture.

In a sophisticated and critical form, it is necessary to be aware of the historical culture of the time – the historiography, the society, and culture – to glimpse the historicity that gave rise to those processes. However, this quality of the historical work is still unknown to Gil and the film’s audience. From his saga through the past, Pender and the public will learn how this historic craftwork is closely tied to the current matters – similar to what Paul Bates tells him and the public. The past can illuminate obscure aspects of the present and, eventually, reveal elements that are disguised in the present, especially to those who do not want to see them. This is what Gertrude Stein does when she postulates about the plot of Pender’s book and the obvious adultery committed by Inez. In this sense, an utterance of the past provides him with sufficient elements to reevaluate the present²¹.

Analogously to the historian’s exercise, Pender’s situation will not acquire meaning only from traces/sources, but from a formulated question, so that one can shed light, interpret, and

¹⁹ ALLEN, Woody, *Midnight in Paris*, cit., 10':10".

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 10':35".

²¹ *Ibidem*, 1:24':02"- 1:24":45".

represent discursively through narratives²². The epistemological aspect of History is implicit in this audiovisual narrative, especially in its role of «orienting actions in the present» and aiming to overcome those «dissatisfactions» with practical life – following the tradition of the anthropological role played by memories as suggested by Rüsen’s theses²³. This argument will emerge and consolidate throughout the film.

Allen’s film explores the fascination that the past effectively exerts on any human being, as Rüsen, Geertz, Vygotsky and Bakhtin would distinctly say. Resorting to the shared cultural repertoire is a fundamental anthropological feature. In other words, it is a fascination that all those who make up the audiences of the narrative share – a trait that cinema shares with other forms of expression that aim to put life on the scene, to create a spectacle.

Collecting vestiges of the past is an activity that can be performed by anyone. It is a prosaic practice and may even be subject to the logic of the “market” – a condition that will be properly demonstrated following the visit of the couple and mother-in-law to an area of antique shops to buy antiques.²⁴ It should be noted that visits to Paris’ antique shops indicate that the director wants to highlight this aspect among the possibilities of visiting and revering the past.

4. Adventures between the past and present

4.1 The audience’s journey through time

On one of the first nights in the city, Gil experiences a strange moment. At the sound of midnight, an old Peugeot stops on the street right in front of the writer, and someone from inside the car invites him to come aboard²⁵. The protagonist is a little confused because he is a little drunk – as he will reflect in subsequent sequences – and the people inside the car are in clothes from the past. One supposes that they belong to the early 20th century. The following pictures make the public aware that a time gap opened, allowing Gil (and the public) to travel back to Paris in the 1920s.

The writer, the filmmaker, and the audience – with whom Allen dialogues – find themselves in an antique shop, the setting of Pender’s book, as a collector or negotiator of “memoirs”. The condition is similar to that of a historian facing the past. The writer’s trajectory is confused with that of any history teacher or historian. All these uncertainties, apprehensions, and anxieties about the past are not veiled or obscured by crystallized “discourses” for history professionals. The concrete historical reality is confronted by what Pender has as historic abstraction and repertoire – putting into question a historical knowledge consistent with theoretical chimeras or

²² RÜSEN, Jörn, *Teoria da história: uma teoria da história como ciência*, cit.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ ALLEN, Woody, *Midnight in Paris*, cit., 30':11" - 31':20", 41':41" - 45':35".

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 17 '25".

pure ideological bad faith. These emotions – embodied by the protagonist – are explicitly presented to the audience as the film unfolds.

Gil is in Paris in the first decade of the 21st century. However, as an individual with formal and artistic education, he carries with him all the dreams of what the 1920s city was: its seductive and thought-provoking magic, the artists searching for challenges and inspiration, the aura of historical baggage. In the film, these references are not clarified (the audience must have a repertoire about the iconic indications offered by the narrative that appeal to the historical and artistic culture), nor is there any concern with historical accuracy. Besides that, it is relevant that even for Pender, the past is a romantic representation: he does not deal, for example, with the diseases or sanitation problems of that time. It is a pure idealized reality.

The director's irony reverses the fairy tale's «hour of illusion» and at midnight sends the protagonist to the Paris of his dreams, and perhaps of us all, to the «enchanted city of adults». The Hollywood screenplay writer dreams and finally finds in 21st century Paris that magical city of the 1920s that brought together great artists from all over the world. Gil knew this place was once called home by Hemingway, Cole Porter, John and Zelda Fitzgerald, TS Eliot, Jean Cocteau, Picasso, Dali, Buñuel Man Ray, Josephine Baker, Djuna Barnes, Modigliani, Braque and many others. It also coexists in the plot of the film the Paris of the *Belle Époque* of Toulouse-Lautrec, Paul Gauguin, and Degas.

Allen does not skim on references precisely because it is a light-hearted film: there is no need to strive for verisimilitude, but to contextualize – historically and artistically – for the public the “reality” in which the plot unfolds. In a word, the director is *didactic*. Remembering that, unlike the teacher or historian, a cinematic narrative needs to be more direct and self-explanatory; it is impossible to answer questions or write footnotes in order to explain a shot or sequence that has not been clarified. In other words, the conventions governing the elaboration of classroom narratives, such as those of history books, are very different.

4.2 Historicity and the arduous task of History's professionals

In seeking Gertrude Stein's critiques for his fledgling literature, Pender coexists with the past characters who populate our dreams. However, they present themselves – to the protagonist and the public – with the invented arbitrariness of representations, especially those of “mass representation”. We can infer that Hemingway and the Fitzgerald couple are the most emblematic of this spectacular culture that the canvas reveals. The characters, rigorously historical, are presented to us on the screen in an explicitly schematic manner. Curiously, none of them seems real: their cinematic representation is not perceived, by a more attentive audience, as credible, except Adriana, for whom the hero falls in love, and the characters contemporary with the protagonist.

Although they have a real existence in the past, they are presented as caricatures. The strategy happens, for example, when Pender meets Hemingway at the Polidor bar. He talks to Pender and the audience rudely and about war, demonstrating an energetic masculinity and even calls him to a fight²⁶; or when the writer meets Dalí who sees rhinos in everything, or Buñuel, who only sees films and Man Ray, who sees photography exclusively²⁷. They are categorized to meet the expectation of Pender.

All the artists we know – as they will be revered for their “future” art in the coming years of the twentieth century – behave as performers of the characters in a pejorative sense of artificial representation, without human or historical complexity, even improbable – in which the media, from the 1920s, will transform them into. Allen raises disturbing but unavoidable questions for history: how to represent the real, arid, suffering, complex past human being? How to put “heroes” on-screen without stereotyping them? Would the audience recognize them if they were not stereotypically represented? How to expose this myriad of great artists in cinema as the fruit of relevant human experiences and visceral, painful, ambiguous, and fragile trajectories? Or is it even better to keep the more stereotypical, spectacularized forms of history as conceived and widespread by ordinary culture? After all, what is the real Paris? The city of the 2010s, 1968, 1920s, 1890s, 1871 or 1789?

Allen questions all of those who form the audience about this art of bringing the past to the present, the complex and intriguing questions it entails and implies. And a more forceful and intrinsic question to all of those who commit to the past and recognize the significance of some of the achievements of Western culture (such as humanism and democracy), ideals that represented modernity and whose heritage, cherished by the present, is often threatened with silencing. After all, humor is not about violating democracy, Western humanism, or art in the last two centuries of history. What to highlight and what to abandon when it comes to the past? What characterizes, in particular, the era to be represented? This is called by Germans the *Zeitgeist* – the spirit of an era. What traits of these characters should be highlighted to today’s audience, and how can their social roles illuminate the practices of the *Lebenswelt* – the world of life, meaning the practical existence governed by culture – in the past and/or their impacts on the present?

In the constellation of the film’s audiences, not many are able to identify the engagement of these artists and how deep and, at times, radical was their non-conformity with the society that constituted their positions in the politics and culture of their time. After all, it is likely that only a minority of the audience knows more about their biographies, whereas most of them probably is not aware of what personal history led these artists to emerge or what historical experiences they were immersed in. The public often has no idea of the various historicities that characterize each

²⁶ ALLEN, Woody, *Midnight in Paris*, cit., 24':08" - 24':34".

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 54':40" - 58':05".

of these artists and their works. Nevertheless, that does not disrupt the narrative, as we will argue later.

Allen's film makes us a witness of how arbitrary and unfounded a careless look at the past can be. Even if it fuels our dearest delusions – such as those of the movie's hero –, when true and meaningful experiences are put aside, times, events, and characters are no longer considered important, they lose the traits that give them humanity, their existential and historical vigor. Their historicity is lost.

4.3 The light of the past as a guide for the present

Gertrude Stein reads Gil's book for the entourage that was in her residence and the audience. It begins like this: «*Back to the Past* was the name of the store and its articles were souvenirs. What was prosaic and vulgar for a generation was transformed by the mere passage of time, becoming, at the same time, magical and simple»²⁸. The description could very well be taken as an academic definition of history. The filmmaker makes a point of emphasizing that these are not individual impressions. Prosaic and vulgar memories for a generation that experiences the passage of time – we would say the historicity of a time that remembers something as «magical and simple» – and configures it as History/history, but not for those who were not present.

The film metaphorically questions the audience: how could a historian or teacher grasp this abstract phenomenon? Namely, the historicity of a generation as complex as that which lived in the interwar period and experienced the pain, wrecks, materials, and lives of the First World War and witnessed the dismantling of the world before it. Who witnessed the attack on the Enlightenment ideals and saw the pillars of the European Belle Époque collapse, followed by the rise of fascism, the advance of intolerance and persecution of the different. The story of those men and women – the «lost generation» – experienced the collapse from Enlightenment, rationalism, and classical humanism values.

A counterpoint is structured along with the plot between temporalities and passions, since Pender's relations with the past illuminate how much he idealizes the present. Even more serious, Adriana, the girl of the past, is more real and expresses more humanity than his consumerist and frivolous bride, Inez. The narrative weaves these characteristics into several sequences but emphasizes this dimension for the audience in at least two of them. At first, when Stein, while analyzing the book, tells Pender that:

Hemingway read it, and he thinks it will be a fine book, but he did have a plot suggestion.
[Pender:] What was his suggestion? [Stein:] He does not quite believe that the protagonist does

²⁸ ALLEN, Woody, *Midnight in Paris*, cit., 37":09" – 37":24".

not see that his fiancée is having an affair right before his eyes. [Pender] Who with? [Stein:]
With the other character, the pedantic one²⁹.

From this comment, distrust becomes apparent: Inez is dating his college friend, the pedantic Paul. The sequence demonstrates how the past and its characters interfere with the present compelling Pender to recognize his dissatisfaction with the present, ultimately guiding his action and leading him to resolve his practical life. He breaks up with his fiancée and decides to live in Paris, opening the character's prospect of finding time to devote himself to literature, as his past heroes did. Allen nonetheless makes an invitation – albeit veiled – to the public to forsake their frivolous, bland world, devoid of humanity or substance, and seek to fulfill their true dreams, as did all the heroes – those of the past we “know” through the film that inspired Pender to do the same. The protagonist breaks with his illusions and starts to invest in his dreams.

The “veracity” of the past is confirmed by a record that also guides the hero. While strolling Paris fairs, Pender finds an old book in which there is a mention of Adriana. According to the book, the character dreamed of the writer she had known – Pender – and decides to surrender to him after receiving a pair of earrings. Knowing this, he – after a few adventures – buys the earrings and takes them to his new beloved. Unfortunately, the plot's outcome is not confirmed as predicted by the past's trace – the book – found by the writer.

Adriana, traveling to the time of the Belle Époque, decides to stay in late nineteenth-century Paris, so fascinated was she with the magical possibilities of the past, as Pender at the beginning of the narrative. She chooses to stay in the Belle Époque because her reality in the 1920s does not comprehend the next decades. For her, it lacks the experience that Pender possesses. A repertoire encapsulates the space of experience formed by totalitarianism, the Second World War, the Cold War, and many other events. This different historical culture organizes, orientates, and guides action – in the movie, being perceived by choosing to stay in the past or not. They have different historicities, which differ their worldview and uncertainties about the passage of time.

5. Epilogue

Thus, this cinematographic work makes a significant contribution to those interested in the past, such as History professionals – whether historians, history teachers, other social scientists, filmmakers, etc. In the text, we seek to highlight some of these contributions that may receive valuable additions.

²⁹ ALLEN, Woody, *Midnight in Paris*, cit., 1:24"16" – 1: 24": 33".

The importance and differential of historical questions being addressed by a moving audiovisual discourse lie in the fact that the arguments presented, though well-known and widely debated by History professionals, are rarely so clear and properly exposed. The clarifications arise not from the argumentative or rhetorical resources common to the texts of Theory of History but the inherent characteristics of the audiovisual language, especially cinematographic³⁰. Having in mind that this debate goes beyond the way in which cinema was formerly debated – first observing films as a work isolated from material life (theory of cinema)³¹, then, as a reflection of the society from which it originated (Ferro) and, at last, as a cultural element, the representation of reality that moves past the author's intentionality (Chartier).

The first is how temporalities and their characteristics can be displayed – in the various senses of the term – to audiences. Differentiating elements of architecture, clothing, music, dancing, transportation, lighting, courtesy treatments, customs, and various cultural practices; finally, of all the «historical culture» of an epoch. There is, of course, a detachment, a separation between the times through which Pender circulates. Despite these migrations, he does not get confused, nor does he allow audiences to be confused.

The strategy of presenting the real characters of the past in a very stereotypical manner, even though the intention is humorous, expresses inescapably their lack of humanity, or, if we will, the representation of the characters dehumanizes them. It turns them into caricatures. The fact that the past characters are presented to the public during interactions with Pender and through an audiovisual narrative gives liveliness to the whole process. As we watch the movie, the vividness and impression of reality that characterize the language of cinema culminates in emphasizing that the representation of characters created by the various media is understood in the broadest sense of the term. This representation rarely ceases to be a stereotyped formulation, often

³⁰ The specificity of historical culture concerning cinema can be observed in the following text: «The way in which we propose to observe the case shows itself as an elucidation of the ways in which actions, meanings and consciences are historically formulated by the repertoire available in certain ecosystems of a historical culture present in a certain society. It can be thought, then, that cinema is a forming part of these cultural repertoires and a contributing factor in the structured and structuring actions of the agents, and, consequently, in the construction of historical culture, subject to observation and criticism in the world of life», SANTIAGO JÚNIOR, Francisco, «Cinema e historiografia: trajetória de um objeto historiográfico (1971-2010)», in *História da Historiografia: International Journal of Theory and History of Historiography*, 5, 8, 2011, pp. 151-173, URL: < <https://www.historiadahistoriografia.com.br/revista/article/view/270/261> > [accessed on 14 January 2023], free translation.

³¹ As a semiotician, Eco accurately expresses the difference between fictional and historical narrative concerning the problem of truth: «Dealing with historical truths, historians can argue for centuries about whether a certain piece of information is relevant or not. For instance, is it relevant for the history of Napoleon to know what he ate just before the Battle of Waterloo? Most biographers would consider this detail irrelevant. Yet there might be scholars who strongly believe that food can have a decisive influence on human behavior. So, this detail about Napoleon, if proved by some document, would be extremely important for their research. [...] In contrast, fictional texts tell us, rather precisely, which details are relevant for the interpretation of the story, the psychology of characters, and so on, and which ones are peripheral». ECO, Umberto, *Confessions of a young novelist*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 78.

featuring men and women from the past without complexity or humanity, turning real people into consumable content.

Allen operates two criticisms by using these narrative strategies. First, he demonstrates to historians how fundamental it is to explore the historicity of characters. The narrative also allows one to see how the media prefers, fabricates, and reveres stereotypes. There is thus a metacriticism – acidic as it is usual in Allen’s films – to all the media apparatus of which he and his work are part of. Concerning this, a closer analysis of the work is necessary, although it may not be hard to identify all these elements.

Finally, in one of the plot’s final dialogues, Pender confronts the bride with past artists’ opinions about her relationship with Paul, the pedantic character. The dialogue is revealing. Inez replies: «Yes! Everyone has been dead for many years»³². Pender then says: «No! The past is not dead. The past has not passed» – an argument he attributes to William Faulkner³³. The dialogue clearly thematizes a key issue for all of those who have the past as their object. The dialogue makes it inevitable that the past is alive and present, illuminating the complexities of practical life. The past revealed to the protagonist aspects of his married life, whereas for her it was dead and irrelevant.

As a conclusion, we would like to quote Rösen, whose reflections on Theory of History are at present indispensable for thinking about Didactics of History. In writing about the characteristics of historical narrative, he highlights the concept of «continuity», which organizes the three dimensions of time – past, present, and future – and «fits the real experience of time with human expectations». The operation makes the experiences become relevant to «the present life and influences the construction of the future»³⁴. According to his assessment, «progress» in this field of historiography would occur «if the historians present history to their readers in such a way that on reading it they are obliged to engender for themselves the attribution of meaning to ideas of continuity, using their own reasoning»³⁵.

Rösen’s suggestion to historians serves equally well for history teachers and all of those who really devote themselves to studying the past to project much better historical comprehension, and consequently, better public debates and politics. Perhaps films and other audiovisual narratives can make significant contributions to this dream, cherished by many social scientists and artists.

Pender, by the end of the film, puts himself as an historical agent willing to act to construct the reality he wishes for himself and the world. Starting from this new relation with the past, he

³² ALLEN, Woody, *Midnight in Paris*, cit., 1:25':05”.

³³ *Ibidem*, 1:25':09”.

³⁴ RÜSEN, Jörn, *Narração histórica: fundações tipos e razão*, in MALERBA, Jurandir (ed.), *A história & narrativa. A ciência e a arte da escrita da história*, Petrópolis, Vozes, 2016, pp. 45-57, p. 48.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 57.

reorients his action in the current time. This new perception apprehended from the experience of time makes him reflect on existence and how his deliberations of the present define the future. He gains the courage necessary to let the past serve as a repository of experience and not as escapism where he does not have to deal with the gray and unsavory reality he experiences in his own life. This opens – for Pender and the audience – new horizons to pursue happiness that emerge from facing the present with fearlessness towards the unknown and disform future³⁶.

³⁶ The dialogue between Pender and Adriana leaves no doubt about the acknowledgement that the protagonist acquired in his journey through the past. The term ‘accepting reality’, points to a shift in perception about time and its outcome in practical life:

«[Pender] – Because if you stay here and this becomes your present, sooner or later you’ll imagine another time was really the golden time. And so will I – I’m beginning to see why it can’t work, Adriana. The present has a hold on you because it’s your present and while there’s never any progress in the most important things, you get to appreciate – what little progress is made – the internet – PeptoBismol. The present is always going to seem unsatisfying because life itself is unsatisfying – that’s why Gauguin goes back and forth between Paris and Tahiti, searching – it’s my job as a writer to try and come up with reasons why despite life being tragic and unsatisfying, it’s still worth it.

[Adriana] – That’s the problem with writers – you’re all so full of words – but I’m more emotional. I’m going to stay and live in Paris’ most glorious time. You made a choice to leave Paris once and you regretted it.

[Pender] – Yes, that one I regretted but it was a real choice, and I made the wrong one. This is a choice between accepting reality or surreal insanity», ALLEN, Woody, *Midnight in Paris*, *cit.*, 1:22’:44".

THE AUTHOR

Roberto ABDALA Jr., Professor at the History Faculty of the Federal University of Goiás – UFG, teaches the discipline History and Audiovisual Narratives in the History graduation and in the Post-Graduation programs in History and in Cultural Performances at the same University. Ph.D. in History (UFMG) researches the ways in which audiovisual narratives participate in the construction of interpretations about the past for their audiences. He collaborates with GUMELAB, of the Latin American Institute of the Free University of Berlin.

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