

Loes Nas

The 'unreel' in Woody Allen's *Zelig*

Abstract

By presenting Zelig (1983) in the form of a historical documentary using archival film footage, film-director Woody Allen breaks down the conventional distinction between documentary and fiction film. Through metacinematic self-consciousness Zelig hybridly 'chameleonizes' recorded historical 'truth' exposing this truth to be 'unreal': it explodes the notion of the cinematic 'real', turning it into the 'unreel'.

1. Introduction

In a review of Woody Allen's *Zelig* in *The New Yorker* of 8 August 1983 film critic Pauline Kael (1983:84) dismisses *Zelig* as "a lovely small comedy, which probably can't bear the weight of praise being shovelled on it". *Zelig* to her seems small, because "there aren't many characters in it, not even Zelig. It's a fantasy about being famous for being nobody" (Kael, 1983:84). The movie is in her eyes an ingenious, but protracted stunt, "the whole movie has been thought out in terms of the film image, turning American history into slapstick by inserting this little lost sheep in a corner of the frame" (Kael, 1983:87). And in spite of all its artfulness she sees *Zelig* as a dried-out fakery; to her *Zelig's* nothingness is simply a playful idea that Allen puts through all permutations possible. The only good thing about the film, she concludes her review, is that the term *Zelig* will probably "enter the language to describe all the non-persons we meet" (Kael, 1983:87).

Little did Kael suspect at the time that the term *Zelig* would indeed enter the English language: *Newsweek* of 25 February 1991 describes fraudulent businessman Jeff Beck, who "created a fantasy life that for years fooled colleagues, friends and even wives" as "the 'Zelig' of the decade, popping up everywhere" (Reibstein, 1991:44). Beck pretended to have been decorated for heroism in Vietnam, hinted at links with the CIA and claimed to have a private enterprise worth billions, which he called "Rosebud." Had his colleagues, friends or even his wives known their film classics, they might have been alerted by the use of this name, for wasn't it after all the lost happiness symbolized by "Rosebud" that was the driving force behind Charles Foster Kane's lust for power and public admiration? This brings us full circle to *Zelig*. It will not be a surprise to see that *Citizen Kane* is one of the numerous intertexts parodied by Allen in *Zelig*.

2. Historiographic metacinema

Zelig is the fictitious case history of the life and times of Leonard Zelig, an eccentric whose appearance changes to match his company, in the same way as a chameleon assumes the colour of its background. In the company of an American Indian for instance, he transforms into an American Indian; when he is among Chinese, he starts to look like a Chinese; and talking to a rabbi, he becomes a rabbi, and so on.

Zelig starts off as a conventional historical documentary, using the paradigms associated with this genre: archival film footage in grainy black and white, interviews with eye-witnesses, an expression of thanks to the collaborators on the film, comments by academic experts and the inevitably male, authoritative narrating voice. According to Barbara Foley (1983:171), documentaries imply that historical reality is "knowable, coherent, significant and inherently moving". But by having *Zelig* speak in the double-coded discourse of historiographic metacinema, taking the form of parody, Allen questions the objective presentation of history. Working from within the generic intertext of the historical documentary, he first installs and then undermines the conventions of the genre.

In the opening sequence we see white-lettered title credits that fade on and off a black screen; the credits, lettered and scripted in the 1920s Art Deco style, designed to create a nostalgic yearning for the past, read:

Orion Pictures and Warner Bros.

Present

ZELIG

The following documentary would

like to give special thanks to

Dr. Eudora Fletcher, Paul Deghueue,
and Mrs. Meryl Fletcher Varney. (Allen, 1987:3)

There is no sound. Then the camera cuts to a 1920s New York ticker-tape parade in black and white, which seems to be 'real': thousands of people line Fifth Avenue, cheering and waving; streamers are flung out of office windows; American flags wave in the foreground; a military band plays in the background; the crowd produces a deafening noise. The camera focuses on an open car procession in the street, in one of the cars we see two men waving to the crowds and the camera. While we hear a female voice-over speak, the camera cuts to the present day, in colour. This voice we know is Susan Sontag's, as her name pops onto the screen. Facing the camera she is sitting at an outdoor cafe, talking into the camera. The camera cuts back to the main car in the 1920s parade in which we see Leonard Zelig and Eudora Fletcher, then switches forward to Irving Howe in colour in a comfortable leather chair in a room filled with books, back into the black and white ticker-tape parade, and forward again to Saul Bellow in colour in his study.

The images and voice-overs of Susan Sontag, Irving Howe and Saul Bellow are all authentic, but the allusions to Zelig are fictionalised. By grafting Sontag's comments, "He was *the* phenomenon of the ... twenties. When you think that at that time he was as well

known as Lindbergh it was really quite astonishing" (Allen, 1987:3-4) onto the visual proof of a massive parade in New York, the viewer presumes this parade to be in honour of Zelig; and by linking Zelig to Charles Lindbergh the illusion of a historical context is created, so that both figures become part of the same 'reality'.

3. Narrative and memory

The intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel status in a parodic reworking of the past. The film not only recreates a particular historical setting, but also our cultural experience of that particular period, so that what is being evoked is not the actual past, but a narrative experience that seems to typify the experience of the 1920s. Jameson puts it thus in *The Political Unconscious*: "... history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form" (1981:35). It is the textuality of our knowledge of the past that is drawn attention to. Narrativization of history reshapes the past. Thus what we witness in *Zelig* is 'historical truth' being chameleonized, a process that John Barth in *LETTERS* (1979) refers to as the "doctoring" of history.

Some critics, of whom Jameson is the most vociferant, see in postmodernism, and in postmodern cinema in particular, a lack of "original historicity" (Jameson, 1990:221). This point is highly debatable as both postmodern fiction and postmodern cinema not only interrogate historical representation, but also stress the ideological nature of its own narrativity by questioning the master narratives of history. *Zelig* is preoccupied with narrative and memory and how we can know the past today, to paraphrase Hutcheon (1990:129).

Chameleonism becomes the film's metaphor for intertextuality. Just as Zelig himself changes to conform to his surroundings, so does the film's commentary, thereby authenticating the 'hijacked' historical images into their new context. Sontag, Howe, Bellow and later on historian Morton Blum and psycho-analyst Bruno Bettelheim speak the discourse we expect them to speak. Their words reflect their preoccupations as we know them from their writings, and, moreover, most of them, that is to say all the males, are shown in their studies, in colour, all of which seems to add to the semiotic 'truth' of what they are saying. Susan Sontag, the author of *Against Interpretation*, is of course *not* interviewed in her study, but in a restaurant in what looks like Venice. We see a bright blue sky, gondolas on the canal, sea gulls flying by the slanted roof. All of this in its turn operates as another authenticating strategy, since it serves to prove that the documentarian has gone out of his way to track Sontag down and get the 'truth' on film, even if this meant going overseas to Italy.

In these early shots of the film, the black and white sections seem to be reserved for authentic period material: we see Scott Fitzgerald, the chronicler of the twenties, writing at a table, as he has been reported to have done during parties, in black and white. But then the voice-over announces that he "writes in his notebook about a curious little man named Leon Selwyn, or Zelman," who "seemed clearly to be an aristocrat and extolled the very rich as he chatted with socialites" (Allen, 1987:8). It is paradoxical that a writer of fiction has to serve as authentication of Zelig's existence.

Another instance of this double-voiced discourse of parody is found mid-way through the

film. In a fictive contemporary interview, in colour, two retired journalists of the defunct New York *Daily Mirror* explain their modus operandi:

And in those days, you'd do anything to sell papers. You'd ... to get a story, you'd jazz it up, you'd exaggerate, you'd even maybe play with the truth a little bit ... but ... here was a story. It was natural. You just told the truth and it sold papers. It never happened before (Allen, 1987:34).

The ground between fiction and truth is constantly being shifted, and the viewer ends up in a dizzying purgatory, somewhere between what we used to consider the 'real' and the 'unreal', but which, thanks to Linda Hutcheon, might now be defined as the 'unreel' (Hutcheon, 1989:109). What happens here is a mocking of one of the most authenticating devices used in investigative journalism: interviews with family, friends, colleagues and contemporaries, people bearing witness to the events portrayed.

4. Construction of subjectivity

The interview was one of the strategies employed by director Warren Beatty in *Reds*, released in 1981, about the life and times of Jack Reed, American eyewitness to the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the only American to be buried in the Kremlin. Beatty's film serves as one of Allen's parodic intertexts. *Reds* is built up along two lines: on the one hand there are the historical events leading up to the Russian Revolution, which Jack Reed covered for American magazines. These events are reenacted in colour in order to be as historically 'truthful' as possible. Two years after *Reds* Allen would parody Beatty's use of colour by using black and white to denote historical 'truth'. And on the other hand, interspersed between the historical reenactments of the Russian revolution we are shown 'authentic' interviews, also in colour, with Jack Reed's 'real' friends, all of whom expand upon the reenacted visual evidence. Their aging faces and grating voices work as an authenticating device: they are 'real' witnesses of the 'real' events portrayed in the film. One of the interviewees eg. is author Henry Miller, who had been a friend of Jack Reed's during his college days. Miller's cinematic presence is obviously used for authentication purposes.

The historical evidence that is reenacted in *Zelig*, is in black and white, and made to look aged. Allen has used a coarse grain film and added scratches and hiccups, so that the new fictive footage can hardly be distinguished from the 'authentic' footage. But instead of corroborating the 'authentic', archival evidence, the interviews in *Zelig* deconstruct this authenticating device.

If the early interviews in the film are still plausible, as the film progresses, the interviews become gradually more and more improbable and 'unreal'. Take for instance the interview in colour with the mother of Dr. Eudora Fletcher. Dr. Fletcher had become famous after she first discovered, then cured and finally married Zelig. In the interview with her mother both narrator and interviewer attempt to create a generically American, rags-to-riches profile of the daughter's life. It is the interpretative imposition of the historian who 'interrogates' facts. But instead of taking on a passive role, the facts answer back: Eudora's mother completely undermines the reporter's attempt at construction as she blatantly contradicts his suppositions in a conversation that goes like this:

Radio reporter: I might ask you about the many sacrifices you've made to put your daughter through medical school ...

Mrs. Fletcher: Sacrifices, we had none. John was a stock broker, we had plenty of money, and I came from a wealthy Philadelphia family, so ... (Allen, 1987:90).

The direction the interview takes unnerves the reporter, but he tries again, this time from a different angle. "Well, I'm, I'm sure that your daughter *always* wanted to be a doctor, ever since she could remember", to which Mrs. Fletcher shakes her head and responds: "I don't think so, I always thought she would want to be a flier like her sister Meryl, and raise a family. But she was a very moody ... child" (Allen, 1987:90). Having reached this stage, the interviewer gives up in desperation.

This sequence not only challenges the status of the interviewer, but it also calls into question the integrity of the narrating voice that had attempted to construct Dr. Fletcher's subjectivity along the lines of the rags-to-riches paradigm. This attempt fails, the reliability of the 'authoritative' narrative voice collapses and all that the spectator is left with, is the realization of the fictional nature of this documentary, and by analogy of perhaps all documentary films.

5. Deconstructive film

In film theory deconstruction does not, as we know the concept from Derridean theory, refer to "isolation and explication of what are supposedly the *inevitable* contradictions of a text" (Carroll, 1985:111), but it rather functions as a critique and refers to the dismantling or subversion of the dominant conventions of film making, as Noel Carroll (1985:111) points out in an essay on postmodern film. Deconstruction, he writes, is characterised as "the nature of an aim or goal that can be pursued in many ways, by many means, and across many different genres". This dynamic notion of deconstruction in film ties up with what Hutcheon (1989:7) sees as the fundamental confrontation of the postmodern, i.e. "where documentary historical actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody".

Carroll's definition of postmodern film, very much like Jameson's, has what Carroll (1985:111) himself refers to as a "destructive connotation" to it. Hutcheon's definition on the other hand seems to be deconstructive and constructive at the same time, concerned with the constitutional positionality of the subject and the narrativization processes involved in historiography. She (Hutcheon, 1989:9) refers to *Zelig* as a deconstructive film, one that is "quite parodic, yet historically grounded". The word "yet" is peculiar in this context, for it is by virtue of its historical grounding that parody can exist.

Yet *Zelig* is, though historically grounded, not imprisoned in the past, it is rather a celebration of stylistic multiplicity, one of the characteristics of postmodern cinema as identified by Steven Connor in *Postmodernist Culture* (1989:177). Add to that Hutcheon's "ironic rethinking of the past" (1987:11) and *Zelig's* generic heterogeneity lurching between comedy and tragedy, adventure story and romance, historic documentary and psycho-analytic treatise; what we end up with then is the collapse of stylistic hierarchies and genre expectations, accompanied by the erasure of historical boundaries between high and low culture as well as of ontological border lines between history and reality, fact and fiction. Woody Allen's appropriation and reappropriation of the historical past has led to a challenging, and at the same time disturbing multi-layered inscription into that same past, as spectator and director, as reader and writer of history.

Thus Woody Allen can be regarded as a deconstructionist film maker, to borrow Noel Carroll's terminology (1985:112). Deconstruction in film, he writes, always requires an object, for "to deconstruct in film is always of necessity to deconstruct something, that is, something else, something other than the deconstruction itself. That object is usually of the nature of a familiar cultural artifact" (Carroll, 1985:112). His definition comes close to Hutcheon's definition of parody. In *Zelig's* case the artifacts parodied are of a varied intertextual nature, of which I have already mentioned the documentary genre with its authenticating strategies and films like *Reds*; they also include amateur films, such as the one shot of the 'simple ceremony' of Leonard Zelig and Eudora Fletcher's wedding, "captured on home-movies," as we read in the Filmscript (Allen, 1987:127); the Hollywood melodrama, mellifluously parodied by Allen in *The Changing Man*, the Warner Bros. version of the life of Leonard Zelig, released in 1935, which is a film-within-the-film; the 'Movie-Tone' newsreels of the 1920s and '30s, already parodied by Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*, and re-parodied as "Hearst Metrotone News" in *Zelig*, and finally German war propaganda newsreels. Old newsreels are taken out of their original context, dislodged and placed in a disjunctive, new setting, blended with newly shot material, which is made to look like the original newsreels, fragments are rearranged through reediting or rephotography, allowing for anything to happen on the screen, 'constructing' history. Visual traces from the past, i.e. documentary footage, are 'doctored'.

Thus in one sequence we can find Zelig on Easter Sunday amid the papal entourage on his holiness' balcony in Rome, creating a scuffle after which "Pope Pius the Eleventh tries to swat the intruder with his papal decree" (Allen, 1987:84), and in another sequence we first see Zelig at a National Socialist Party march in Berlin, dressed as a brown-shirt, which later culminates in his chameleonisation into one of the party officials at a Nazi party gathering in Munich in 1933.

One of the most hilarious scenes in the film ensues. At a Nazi rally in a huge stadium in Munich we witness Adolf Hitler addressing the crowd with a fiery speech. His hands are clasped; he gestures while he yells. Behind him, in front of a line of flags, are several of his chancellors, seated at a table. The audience is totally mesmerized, they cheer, applaud, salute *der Führer* outstretching their arms, shouting "Heil Hitler." Suddenly the camera catches a glimpse of Zelig, seated behind and to the right of *der Führer*, in between the other officials. In the audience is Dr. Eudora Fletcher, who had been looking for Zelig for months after his sudden disappearance from the hospital. Zelig notices her and starts pointing at her, thereby creating such commotion on the platform that Hitler, being disturbed in his speech, angrily turns around. Then the film cuts to the Hollywood version of their reunion, as seen in a clip from the Warner Bros. version of the life of Zelig: Zelig and Fletcher, played by glamorous Hollywood stars, passionately embrace, while romantic music swells to a climax in the background (Allen, 1987:114-121).

6. Poststructuralist mimesis

By appropriating the conventions and codes of the Hollywood melo- and docudrama, *Zelig* not only deconstructs and unmasks the Hollywood artifice, but by reducing a Nazi party rally to the backdrop of a love story, also exposes the notion of the cinematic 'real': historical events are in a turn-around way made subservient to the desire to achieve romantic closure. Through intertextual mimesis, fiction and documentary take on indistin-

guishable resemblance in serving one narrative *telos*, thereby calling into question the very acts of production and reception of narrative as well as of documentary films.

And when the film, after narrative closure has been achieved *and* deconstructed, cuts back to the present day and we witness an aged Dr. Fletcher in colour say: "It was nothing like ... it ... happened in the movie" (Allen, 1987:121), we have arrived at a form of what Robert Con Davis calls "poststructuralist mimesis". The text exists solely as an imitation, not of 'reality', but as a product of a mimetic act, imitating other works. Mimesis is thus seen as imitation of imitation, not leading out to the 'real' as referent, as in traditional forms of mimesis, but to an absence of the 'real', to the presence of the 'unreal', or rather, in the film's case, of the 'unreel'. The past seems forever out of reach, condemned as we are, "to seek the historical past through our own ... stereotypes about that past" (Jameson, 1983:118). So in poststructuralist mimesis we do not have an imitation of the world, but of linguistic, and in this case, cinematic activity: words and images are dislodged, tied together, shuffled around and assembled in a new context.

Zelig is in this sense unashamedly imitative, operating as it is in the double codedness of parody: repetition and reenactment, inherent in mimesis, have, with a Derridean *différance*, become a condition of the narrative process. We see in *Zelig* an incessant play of *différance*, which Derrida (1981:27) has defined as "the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other". In this poststructuralist sense, the film would be a "writing by gesture that repeats only difference in itself, and substantially 'imitates' nothing" (Davis, 1985:68).

The chameleon metaphor is of course a perfect illustration of this type of intertextuality. The film, like its protagonist, imitates or adapts to the camouflage of its interlocutory texts and explores the palimpsestuous levels of this allegorical chameleon: cinematic chameleonism, historical chameleonism, the artist as chameleon, the assimilated Jew as chameleon, and ultimately the self as chameleon. If, as Jameson suggests, parody capitalizes on the imitation of styles, seizing their "idiosyncracies" and "eccentricities" in order to produce an imitation which mocks the original (Jameson, 1983:113), then what finer palimpsest than *Zelig*, the human chameleon, 'the changing man', to extend this notion of metacinematic parody. After all, when stylistic innovation is no longer possible, and "all that is left to do is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the imaginary museum" (Jameson, 1983:115), *Zelig* assumes the very nature of poststructuralist mimesis itself.

7. Conclusion

Stam and Shohat (1987:192, n. 7) report that some spectators, after having seen *Zelig*, came out of the cinema making remarks to the effect that "If that guy *Zelig* was so important, how come I have never heard of him?" One of the comments addressed to me after reading this paper at a conference dealt with a similar question as the addresser was concerned whether Susan Sontag, Irving Howe and Saul Bellow had been aware of what they were lending their images and voices to. Both questions draw attention to the ways in which historical legitimacy is still passively accepted, and at the same time point to the fact that the authenticating documentary procedures, even of deconstructed documentaries, continue to be taken as a matter of faith.

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University of Cape Town