"This is Roosevelt's World" - FDR as a Cultural Icon in American Memory

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Chapter 6: Dr. Win-the-War – FDR's Versatility as an Allegory for American War Narratives

Introduction

As someone who became president more than eighty years ago and died seventy years ago, Roosevelt's presidency falls squarely into the "floating gap" Jan Vansina distinguished between Jan Assmann's cultural memory on the one hand and communicative, lived, memory on the other. Few people alive today remember consciously living through his presidency, which is not yet mythologized in the way Washington's or Lincoln's are. Moreover, the last decades have seen a shift in popular interest away from leadership narratives towards the experiences of common people and communities. Nevertheless Roosevelt characters have continued to be central to cultural artefacts representing World War Two, and I argue this is because FDR lends himself exceptionally well to being allegorized in various ways, positive as well as negative. I will outline and exemplify these and analyze how Roosevelt allegories activate and enable particular remembrance practices.

As John Bodnar argues, "the public performance of the victory in the 1990s had privileged romantic myths about ordinary individuals more than the contributions of wartime leaders like Franklin D. Roosevelt" (227). There are many examples that back up this claim, including Studs Terkel's successful oral history "*The Good War*": *An Oral History of World War Two* (1984), journalist Tom Brokaw's best-selling *The Greatest Generation* (1998) and Ken Burns' seven-part documentary *The War* (2007), which narrates the war from the perspective of four paradigmatic American communities. Each of these mainstream and successful cultural artefacts are part of the new mode of privileging "romantic myths about ordinary individuals" Bodnar describes, and if FDR comes up at all, it is either indirectly, as a source of inspiration, or as a paradigmatic figure, a common man himself, who happened to be called upon to fulfill the role of president. It is easy to read the FDR Memorial in Washington DC (1997) as such: it portrays Roosevelt both as a common man himself, and as someone surrounded by other ordinary individuals, in the shape of sculpted human figures – more a representative *pars pro toto* than an elevated leader like Jefferson or Lincoln in their Washington memorials.

Such synecdochic representations of Roosevelt are not allegorical – they treat him as a randomly chosen individual, "your typical American", but not as a metaphor for America as a whole – but do suit Roosevelt's autofabrication. Essentially the movement towards the social history of the people mirrors FDR's successful rhetorical embodiment of the common man. His public image is forever joined to his foregrounding of the plight of "the forgotten man." And even though that phrase is taken from the context of New Deal, it sits well with the post-1970s popular interest in "people's history", bottom-up, revisionist history, with Howard Zinn as its main proponent in the

United States, and the History Workshop movement in the UK. While Brokaw is by no means a postmodern or left-leaning oral historian – his mode is that of the documentary maker even if *The Greatest Generation* is a book – he too invokes Roosevelt explicitly to pull together the experiences and popular perception of countless common Americans whose war stories he tells. He cites Roosevelt's famous and endlessly echoed epigram: "This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny",[1] and continues the generation trope in his introduction:

> I am in awe of them, and I feel privileged to have been a witness to their lives and their sacrifices. There were so many other people whose stories could have been in this book, who embodied the standards of greatness in the everyday that these people represent, and that give this generation its special quality and distinction. (…) This is the greatest generation that any society has produced. (xxx)

This revives and interprets Roosevelt's "rendezvous with destiny" and is, moreover, a strong claim in its own right which Brokaw is not shy or cynical about. The book's basic cultural assumption is that while Europe was bogged down in Nazism, communism and Old World imperialism, America became the dominant world power thanks to its freedom and democracy, and the moral uprightness and bravery of its people, which it was then in honor bound to share worldwide. In this context, World War Two remains one of the most basic moral touchstones, with a clear-cut opposition between good and evil that escapes relativism, as Michael Rothberg discusses as length in the introduction to *Multidirectional Memory*. Thus, the war also provides Roosevelt with a logical and heroic place in history, as a *primus inter pares* in various ways: on the one hand a man of the people and on the other an eminent receptacle to accommodate, communicate, and give weight to others' stories. While the war operates to provide Roosevelt with the stamp of moral righteousness and lasting remembrance, he is the one who has positioned himself so as to be able to fill so many different roles as representative of that remembrance.

Although Brokaw, like Terkel and Burns, tells the stories of a number of individuals, each of whose experiences stand in a synecdochic relation to the American experience as a whole, he, arguably – like Burns but unlike Terkel – suggests that those stories in sum "embody the standards of greatness" of American society and culture during World War II, i.e. that collectively they *symbolically* represent the nation over and above the sum of their parts. As such *The Greatest Generation*, through a title that provides an indexical link with FDR, as a whole takes on an allegorical notion of representing the nation. Moreover, it includes war narratives of a number of "Famous People" (Brokaw xiii), most notably President George Bush, who says "Serving in World War II, I was a tiny part of something noble" (278), and actually resists Brokaw's suggestion that his narrative is representative of the American experience in a much larger sense: "In a way, America came to know itself better through this common experience" (273).

1 Brokaw 3; Roosevelt, speech before the Democratic National Convention, June 27, 1936.

Robert Burgoyne's *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* argues that Hollywood film has moved, from mainstream heroic historical narratives undergirding American grand narratives, towards narratives that allow for narration "from across", and negotiation with perspectives from "outside" or "below" (3):

> [R]ecent historical films can be seen as part of the ongoing revisionary enterprise of the late twentieth century; they reenact the narrative of nation in terms of its tributaries, in terms of stories of ethnic, racial, and gender struggles to reshape the national narrative, and to make the experiences of marginal groups a "formative and necessary part of the story." (6)

This "ongoing revisionary enterprise" may be seen as a cinematic variety of the interest in synecdochic people's histories and in the plights of those marginalized by the grand narrative. However, the marginalized individuals, while they do function as exemplary of bodies larger than themselves, are not embodiments of the nation as a whole. Nonetheless, those late-twentieth century films do represent historical narratives as allegories of nationhood, Burgoyne concludes:

> Despite highly critical messages concerning the national past, the films that form the core of this study preserve and revivify some of the basic tropes of traditional narratives of nation – the image of a mystic nationhood that is revealed only on the battlefield, for example, or the importance of warfare in molding a sense of ethnic and national community. (7)

Thus, the films Burgoyne analyzes, are like older less critically nationalist films, in that their synecdochic portrayal of members of marginal groups eventually does "revivify basic tropes of traditional narratives of nation", who are centralized to narrate allegorical stories of nation. The dynamic Burgoyne's analyses find again and again is that of complex historical narratives, which allow for non-dominant synecdochic elements "from across" the rift between the dominant mainstream and the margins of society, yet eventually preserve allegorical "narratives of nation." Like *The Greatest Generation*, many of the films Burgoyne analyzes, suggest that "mystic nationhood" in which the whole is larger than the sum of its parts, is attained through experiences of war and battle. This mystic nationhood is the allegorical outcome of collectivized individual war experiences, as told in historical narratives. White male figures like George Bush, in Brokaw's case, or Forrest Gump – one of the characters Burgoyne analyzes in depth – are by far the likeliest carriers for the allegorical construction of nationhood through war experience.

This is relevant to our understanding of Roosevelt as an allegorical figure, for several reasons. First, it is important to note that FDR's versatility to war remembrance is not only as an allegorical figure; he is also able to provide implicit endorsement and an indexical connection to synecdochic narratives of seemingly randomly chosen individuals outside the circuits of power. Second, it shows how mainstream historical narratives tend to function as allegories for

nationhood, though often moderated by synecdochic figures "from across." This association of the grand narrative with allegory and the marginal with synecdoche is particularly important since FDR can occupy both positions. Although we shall see that he is mostly an allegorical figure, as one might expect of a heroic president, we will encounter examples of FDR as an individual shaking up and revising national narratives as well.

Allegory and Multidirectional Memory

I consider allegory to be a metaphor extended into narrative. Just as a metaphor "treats something as something else" (Culler 72), an allegory is a text with a symbolic secondary narrative. The narrative of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is famously not just the story of the pilgrim's adventures, but also of man's religious growth. Many narratives of Roosevelt's "overcoming" his disability, carry an implicit narrative of America overcoming major and debilitating challenges, for instance the attack on Pearl Harbor. Detailed examples will follow, but what is important for now is the idea that an allegory involves two narratives, a literal level and an allegorical level, which influence one another: because something works as it does on one level, it presumably works similarly on the other. However, the relation between those levels is not always the same. How and why a narrative, or, as in the case of FDR, a person, is allegorized has implications for what it is possible to show or obscure through the underlying narrative. Moreover, I argue that FDR as an icon in cultural memory is not just open to functioning as an allegorical figure for a range of ideologically diverging narratives, but also to different accompanying modes of allegorization. I broadly discern three of these: FDR can function as a *screen* on which the past is projected for the present, as a *bridge* to cross the rift between past and present, and as a ruin or a fragment of the past in the present.

Each of these modes of allegorization provides a link between the past and the present, each functioning in a different way. They are thus also modes of remembering, strategies of transposing the past to the present, so as to make elements of the past understandable for a present audience. This transposition is obviously never disinterested, and the choice of mode of allegorization directs the shape of the narrative in the present, based in one way or another on historical events and texts. In the context of cultural remembrance – the negotiation of memory – Michael Rothberg has coined the apt and productive term multidirectional memory, to study these "dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance" (11).

Rothberg's agenda is in the first place to move out of the paradigm of competitive memory in which various ethnic, religious, and other groups compete for attention in cultural memory in what seems to be a "zero-sum game", into an understanding of memory as multidirectional. He argues for instance that the remembrance of the Holocaust has not only usurped, but also aided the cultural acceptance of remembrance of American slavery ("the black holocaust"),

and that decolonization in the decades after World War Two gave rise to particular forms of remembrance of colonialism, but also influenced how the Holocaust was remembered. While I agree with his view, for me the most important point lies in the complex interaction Rothberg analyzes between pairs of temporally and otherwise different cultural texts. Whereas in his study these texts mostly share the fact they can both be seen as memory, for me the interaction is between a historical context and the memories it has produced. I regard the FDR icon within that as a go-between of sorts, and analyze the various ways in which he is used to mediate.

Icons like Lincoln or Washington equally function often and successfully as allegorical figures, carrying a range of complex and chaotic pasts into narratives remembering those pasts in the present. Indeed, a key characteristic for anything to be thought of as an icon is its potential to transgress beyond the "parameters of its initial making, function, and context" (Kemp 3). FDR is a special case because he is unusually adaptable, allowing for a considerable but not limitless range of allegorizations and synecdochic representations. He has become a versatile figure on screen – poignantly so, because it is a medium the historical FDR tried to avoid – whose narratives are often profoundly tied to his beleaguered body, inviting comparison with other bodies.

Franklin Roosevelt appears as a character in many films, most of which are – primarily or also – about World War Two. Although he is often a minor character representative of authority and the highest level of decision-making, his character is usually developed narratively at least to some extent. Such films use historical elements and attributes from Roosevelt's life and as a rule lend themselves well to being read as an allegory or vehicle for a national American narrative. As Kemp argues, iconification and allegorization both imply transplantation of themes and transgression of parameters, to often far-flung other contexts (3-5). Still, it is no surprise that the initial transgression of presidential icons happens into the realm of national narratives and patriotic remembrance. What precisely these narratives entail or argue differs, but FDR is often, as one might expect, implicitly or explicitly allegorized to represent the US and its ideology, e.g. in *Pearl Harbor*, *Annie*, *Hyde Park on Hudson*. Nonetheless, there are also cases and moments in which the opposite happens: American nationhood is reconfigured through the absence or failure of the FDR character.

Screen Memory and *Pearl Harbor*

To explain what kinds of mechanisms *Multidirectional Memory* analyzes on the collective scale of cultural remembrance, Rothberg discusses Freud's concept screen memory, which operates on the individual level, and suggests that multidirectional memory uses a similar mechanism on a collective level. In his essay "Screen Memory" (*Deckerinnerung*, 1899) Freud interprets early, seemingly irrelevant childhood memories of psychologically healthy people as screens

for repressed traumas or desires in the present.[2] The German *Deckerinnerung* points to the covering-up that the early memory performs, but the English translation is in a sense more felicitous than the original, because it also refers to the fact that the memory functions as a projection screen for what is repressed, which is therefore discoverable through analysis. Freud does not doubt the authenticity of the essence of the childhood memories, but rather reads peculiar details as manifestations of why an otherwise irrelevant memory has been retained. Such manifestations may thus be projected onto the screen of another "innocent" memory, or remain hidden behind it. A second reason why the English translation "screen memory" is so felicitous, is because the cinematic screen is particularly inviting to latent content, and relatively open to its analysis.

A screen memory is not directly an allegory – rather it is a memory that incorporates elements that, beyond their literal meaning, have a symbolical meaning, referring to the latent content that the manifest memory screens, or screens off. These elements do not directly represent the repressed content, but are literal in the screen memory, and symbolical of the repressed content in the latent narrative. Thus, there are, like in allegories, two levels – in Freud's example one memory and one desire, but it could also be two memories, an innocent one and a guilty or traumatic one, for instance – which are in complex conversation with each other. They are not equal, or even necessarily very similar, but their pairing is somehow productive. The displacement itself can seem productive. The traumatic or otherwise uncomfortable content is "parked" where it seems innocuous and harmless. However, to narratively address the traumatic or guilty content is eventually more productive. This requires acknowledging that there are indeed two levels, which need disentanglement and working through. Many Roosevelt representations can fruitfully be read as collective screen memories, screening off and, when analyzed, bringing into focus, fears, desires and traumas central to American nationhood. Particularly representations of Roosevelt's disability in the context of World War Two can be read as addressing issues that seem connected to but in reality are far removed from the historical FDR or World War Two.

An almost embarrassingly simplistic example is that of 2012 movie *FDR American Badass!*, in which FDR contracts polio because he is bitten by a Nazi werewolf. The poison paralyzes his legs, but spurs him on first to become US president and then to, singlehandedly, with the use of various threatening hypermodern war machines, particularly the "Delano 2000" wheelchair-tank hybrid, defeat the Axis powers. Roosevelt's disease and prostheses seem to be the peculiar details in FDR memory that refer to underlying other issues in our own time. It is telling in that context that his disability and wheelchair have in recent cultural memory become virtually FDR's primary attribute, whereas they were hardly directly relevant to his presidency. *FDR American Badass!* turns his disability into a virtue, a mark of martyrhood, giving him the status

2 Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memory", 301-322.

of a war veteran. As the survivor of an alien infestation by a virus, an invisible enemy threat that is looking to infect and terrorize the United States from the inside, the *Badass* FDR appears as a leader to a far more modern America. I do not argue that *FDR American Badass!* is or intends to be a political commentary – the producer in an interview assured me that it does not mean to be – but in its very triviality the film responds to fears and threats that exist today.[3] These are, no doubt unintentionally, projected onto the past, in such a way that the Nazis become werewolves (monsters, yes, but strikingly more like terrorists than like Nazis) and Roosevelt in combination with his superpower wheelchair becomes the epitome of swaggering yet morally righteous American proactiveness.

FDR American Badass! however, is not a mainstream Hollywood movie – it was made in Hollywood, but not by one of the major studios. A more subtle and more widely distributed example of a film that uses a screen FDR as a plot device to screen off the national trauma of Pearl Harbor while revealing it indirectly through FDR's body is Michael Bay's *Pearl Harbor* (2001). Released in the year of the 60th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and months before the terrorist attacks on 9/11, it became a box-office success and an Oscar winner in the months after. Although the movie was viewed by many in its shadow, it was produced and made most of its revenue – a gross of just under $200,000,000 against an estimated budget of $140,000,000[4] – during the last triumphalist months of the long 1990s (1989-2001) in which the United States was the unchallenged world hegemon (Hobsbawm 19). It features an important FDR character, but, like *The Greatest Generation*, *The War*, or *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg, 1998) and other cultural representations of World War Two from about the same period, it is a film about the heroism of common American fighting men. However, the Roosevelt character is very important, because it introduces, alongside synecdochic individuals representing America, an allegorical one who embodies it, and who, more specifically, functions as a screen for traumatic collective memory of Pearl Harbor.

As Emily Rosenberg argues in *A Date Which Will Live*: "Pearl Harbor" remains "one of the most emotive icons in American culture", a "dramatic story" that has been "told and retold in thousands of print and visual representations" and "invoke[d] … in variable, even inconsistent, contexts." (10). Pearl Harbor as a set of national American narratives is captivating, both in the sense that those narratives are told and retold infinitely, and in the sense that there is a limiting and repetitive loop, that imprisons parts of the experience, away from being settled or understood in the present. FDR can function as an allegory to lift "Pearl Harbor" out of its loophole of culturally reenacted trauma, in the film *Pearl Harbor* particularly, because he functions as a screen, protecting the viewer from all too painful imagery and allowing for elements of the trauma to be projected onto his body.

3 Interview with Ross Patterson, September 3, 2014.
4 http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0213149/business?ref_=tt_ql_dt_4

The historical Roosevelt understood that the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor and other American bases on December 7th, 1941 would loom large, but would also be problematic in American memory. In his historic address the next day, FDR called it "a date which will live in infamy", and asserted: "Always will our whole Nation remember the character of the onslaught against us."[5] "Pearl Harbor" has indeed ever since remained a key "emotive icon in American culture", for instance, as the first point of reference to be invoked following September 11, 2001. However, only parts of it are habitually referred to in mass culture productions, while others are not. Part of the problem lies in recognizing what the attacks did to the US and how the US allowed them to happen. There is a stark contrast between the habitual self-impression of the United States as proactive and shrewd, and the devastation caused by the surprise attack at Pearl Harbor. Some of the cognitive dissonance at the time was dissipated, Rosenberg convincingly argues, through the – much older – trope of the US as a "sleeping giant", an innocent and benign but extremely strong superpower, awoken by a "dastardly attack" as FDR termed it in his Pearl Harbor speech (December 8th, 1941).

The Sleeping Giant metaphor also comes up in *Pearl Harbor*, when a Japanese general just after the raid expresses his fear that "all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant." However, the film's main defusing mechanism in making Pearl Harbor bearable as an event to be incorporated into the American narrative is the Roosevelt character, who functions as an allegory both to make the attack on Pearl Harbor fathomable for a twenty-first century audience, and as part of that, to circumspectly address the collective trauma incurred. The film's primary heroes, airforce pilots, respond to the pain and humiliation of the attack not with words, but with a silent determination to take revenge; they go to war in a quiet rage. Instead of narrating the attack in words or images, at a number of key moments when the shock and pain of the attacks are shown at their worst and most unbearable, these are broken off by a cut to the Roosevelt character. Thus, the screen shows FDR literally screening the attack itself off from view. When this happens, there is a particular interest in his wheelchair, which as a metonym becomes an important element in the allegory, representative of both the debilitating effect of war and the possibility to overcome the impact of external siege.

Pearl Harbor represents precisely that take on the function of Roosevelt's wheelchair. His first entrance, showing the wheelchair before its occupant, already signals that the President's disability is attributed an important role in the film, however tentatively it is related to its subject and action. In the same scene, introducing the narrative of the decision-making officials, Roosevelt opens the meeting by saying :

> I'm afraid I'm in a bad mood. Churchill and Stalin are asking me what I'm asking you. How long is America going to pretend the world is not at war? … But our people think Hitler and his Nazi thugs are Europe's problem. [33:00].

5 Franklin Roosevelt, Address to Congress Requesting a Declaration of War, December 8, 1941.

Clearly at this stage, that is also what the present chief officers think, but Roosevelt sees ahead, and characterizes the enemy in terms of a spreading infection, made worse by America's petrified denial of its global contagiousness. Thus Roosevelt, together with the film's audiences, who, presumably, know largely what happened during World War Two, recognize the threat of contagion. As a figure in and from the past, with interpretations and a kind of discourse that rather suits the present, his character makes the past accessible for audiences in the present, and already foreshadows the resolution of the conflict at the moment America is still at its most defeated.

Further into the film, following dramatic footage of the Pearl Harbor attack, including a series of shots of lost or to-be-amputated limbs, Roosevelt is wheeled towards a messenger whom he asks "How bad…?". This cut and Roosevelt's question, suggesting that he too is somehow a direct, physical victim of the attack, conjures up a link between his disability and the invalidity of those anonymous Pearl Harbor veterans. This suggests that Roosevelt embodies the US as a beleaguered nation and implicitly evokes a sense that Roosevelt is the ideal man for this job because he is experienced, if not directly as a war veteran, then at least as someone who knows what it means to be the bodily site for a fight between good and evil. As such, his particular narrative of conquering disability is an apt placeholder for what is too devastating about Pearl Harbor to address head-on. The scene seems to argue that trauma is best confronted frankly and straightforwardly as Roosevelt does in *Pearl Harbor*. Clearly here, the Roosevelt allegory functions both to mend and to communicate to a twenty-first-century audience the trauma of Pearl Harbor. On the other hand, the scene's own shift to Roosevelt as the focus of attention also hints at the failure of achieving true resurgence: it suggests that the direct confrontation with Pearl Harbor is so painful that an allegorical substitute is needed.

The more manifest triumphalist allegory, however, is later confirmed and elaborated on, first by the combination of Roosevelt's famous war speech (cited above) in voiceover, with more extensive and dramatic footage of Pearl Harbor, connecting the sheer atrociousness of the trauma to the reassuring and fearless voice and message of FDR. This documentary-style interlude repeating words and visual images that remain highly familiar in cultural memory, is followed by another scene of a meeting between FDR and his military chiefs of staff. Again, Roosevelt is portrayed as eager to fight back and show America's spirit. Again, body metaphors are used to connect, or indeed metaphorically replace, Roosevelt's body with that of the nation, for instance when FDR invokes a boxing expression: "We are on the ropes, gentlemen." This casts the US and Roosevelt personally in the same position of being nearly beaten down physically and mentally, with the difference that Roosevelt has already had time to recover from his injuries, at least psychologically, an experience the rest of the nation, evoked here by the military leaders surrounding him on the screen, clearly have not yet had, as their panicked response in the meeting signals. In a charismatic and meditative monologue Roosevelt says:

> Gentlemen, most of you did not know me when I had the use of my legs. I was strong and proud and arrogant. Now I wonder every hour of my life, why God put me into this chair. But when I see defeat in the eyes of my countrymen, in your eyes right now, I start to think that maybe He brought me down for times like these, when we all need to be reminded who we truly are, that we will not give up or give in.

The scene ends dramatically when, in answer to this speech, one of the generals says "what you're asking can't be done." Roosevelt, refusing all help, gets up out of his wheelchair, and replies: "Do not tell *me* it can't be done!" Here, the cinematic Roosevelt implies that it is precisely his disability that has caused him to be mentally prepared and equipped, unlike the others, for a crisis situation like this. The primary meaning of "in this chair" is "in this wheelchair", but it could also be taken to refer to "this position" or indeed "in this throne"; this conflates the office of the presidency with being disabled, underlining that the two are united in one person, and stressing the divine interference at work here. As such Roosevelt's body politic takes on the trauma, and screens it off from the nation as a collective. When the cinematic Roosevelt says that "maybe He brought me down for times like these, when we all need to be reminded who we truly are", he implies that being "brought down" by polio is after all an empowering experience, strengthening him perhaps not physically but psychologically, to be able to buck up a nation under duress. The scene's own drama and its dramatic juxtaposition to the shocking Pearl Harbor footage that precedes it, produces a structure in which Roosevelt is an obvious emotive embodiment of Pearl Harbor. In that allegory, Roosevelt's courageous move out of his wheelchair foreshadows the future of America. From being "on the ropes", it will – like Roosevelt – move on to become more powerful than ever.

Roosevelt's literal standing-up, as well as, by implication, his metaphorical re-sistance to the idea that "it can't be done", is, however, also troubling. Physically, the cinematic Roosevelt cannot really stand independently, and his refusal of help makes the gesture more powerful, but simultaneously exposes his vulnerability, not just physically but also psychologically. One of the widespread narratives surrounding Roosevelt's paralysis and his process toward rehabilitation and integration of the disability in his life, is that he utterly refused to acknowledge that he would not walk again. Gallagher and other chroniclers of Roosevelt polio narratives regularly repeat how in social situations FDR often professed that "with a year or two more of progress he would be able to discard his braces and walk unassisted" and that even in private, he kept assiduously practicing to walk in ways that were realistically unattainable given the permanent condition of his leg muscles (Gallagher 64). By implication, the suggestion is that denial is also part of what was at stake in the situation of the US after Pearl Harbor. However, this suggestion seems unintentional, which strengthens the allegory on the one hand, but on the other, weakens its power as a repairing force. Because Roosevelt's vulnerability is exposed as well as the nation's, he becomes a more viable screen to project the national disaster onto, but at the same time it points to the fact that doing so is a coping strategy rather than a durable working-through of a collective trauma.

Owensian Allegory and *The Plot Against America*

The above cases work as allegories in the sense that they present two layers of narrative, that of Roosevelt's body and that of the attack on the US. They work as screen memories in the sense that they – as memories often do – anachronistically conflate the two. In that process FDR becomes the screen onto which the collective trauma is projected. This is a multidirectional process, changing both the narrative of FDR's disability by suggesting he is a kind of war veteran himself, and reinterpreting that of the attack on Pearl Harbor, suggesting it is the noble suffering that underlies America's rise to world power. *Pearl Harbor* is, on a secondary level, legible as itself a screen for the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers. It was not made of course as a film to address the fears and trauma incurred on 9/11, but it works well as such nonetheless, precisely because it does already without knowledge of 9/11 allow for temporal, geographical and corporeal conflation of events. Many other allegorical Roosevelts function differently, because they maintain more distance between the literal and the allegorical level.

In "The Allegorical Impulse", Craig Owens argues that allegories function because of their "capacity to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear", and that "its two most fundamental impulses" are "a conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it for the present" (68). Thus Owens stresses that allegories function as bridges, connecting the past and the present, and particularly, making the past comprehensible for the present. Allegories select and emphasize those elements of the past that lend themselves to translation to the present. Allegorizations of Roosevelt – narratives in which Roosevelt can be read as an allegorical figure representative somehow of his time and context – usually work in ways pointed out by Owens as well. In the reification of World War Two many key elements gravitate to the Roosevelt icon, who remains a relatable representative. Roosevelt representations can, as discussed, be a healing factor in resolving and overcoming painful or traumatic history for the present. Because the allegory is instrumental in narrativizing a troubled past, it is healing, if we take seriously the central claim of trauma theory, that the impossibility to convert the trauma into narrative is its key characteristic (Bal et al., 1999). However this healing is, as Owens argues, never entirely successful – allegory works to mend problematic history, by presenting an interpretation of it that is relatable in the present. But that also overlooks precisely those elements that are not relatable, i.e. cannot be narrativized. Those elements are simply left out of the allegorical representation, without attracting attention, but also without losing their poignancy.

The particularly rich case study which I employ to illuminate how FDR can be allegorized as a bridge between past and present, while also drawing attention to that which is significantly left out of the transposition from past to present is Philip Roth's novel *The Plot Against America* (2004). This is a counterfactual historical novel, in which Roosevelt is not reelected in 1940, but beaten by staunch isolationist and champion aviator Charles A. Lindbergh. The iconic Lindbergh, like FDR, can function as a bridge between a remote past and the present because of his technological

modernity and focus on the future: he is a pilot, uses modern media, and campaigns personally, using aspects of his private life. Because of his political convictions, however, Lindbergh does not lend himself easily to being modernized in memory, unlike FDR. Thus *The Plot Against America* portrays Roosevelt as particularly amenable to Owensian allegorization, while itself presenting a fragmentation of America through following up one of the sharp edges of the triumphalist narrative. Thus Roth's book essentially glorifies FDR, maintaining him as a bridge between past and present, while also showing what might have happened, which because of this bridge all too easily forgotten. Thus, Roth belies the Greatest Generation rhetoric of Tom Brokaw and others. The fact that Roth needs to remove FDR to do this attests to the strength of his character as allegorically upholding the discourse of American moral righteousness.

In Lindbergh's 1940 America fascist tendencies are increasingly abounding, to the detriment of main character and focalizer, the secular Jewish child Philip Roth. This novel essentially in a fictional exercise takes Roosevelt out of the locus of power, and asks what might have happened if he had not then embodied America. As a result, the novel should indeed be read as a plot against America's heroic reading of itself: a country where anti-Semitism and racism in general were actually painfully close to the isolationism of more than half of its population in 1940. Roosevelt is thus cast as the allegorical figure holding together both a nation and its congratulatory self-perception in cultural memory, but what the novel does, is to extract FDR from his historical context, leaving that context an ideological ruin.

Although Franklin Roosevelt is a looming absence in Roth's counterfactual novel, he is represented in relative detail: many of the very personal Roosevelt trivia in the child Philip Roth's awareness are still part of cultural memory and have become more so through the publication of this novel in 2004. *The Plot Against America* does not only honor old Roosevelt myths but uses them to frame its narrative and bridge the gap between the family history of its child protagonist and world history. Its plot intervenes in history in the most literal way possible: it is a fictional autobiography in which Franklin Roosevelt is beaten in the 1940 elections by Charles Lindbergh. The novel's basic plot revolves around the anti-Semitism young Philip's family is subjected to as soon as Lindbergh, and not Roosevelt, has become president. It is important to note that, while Roth changes the course of history, he is very reticent in changing actual historical facts other than who became president in 1940: the isolationist and anti-Semitic things Charles Lindbergh is quoted as saying, he did say in reality, though not of course as president or presidential candidate as he does in the novel. Roth incorporated an extremely extensive list of historical sources and data as an appendix, so as not to create any confusion about what happened historically, and what was added by him.

The novel shows how young Philip's knowledge of Roosevelt's personal life helps him to feel represented by his president and helps him to reduce the world to a scale he can cope with. Thus Philip's experience mirrors that of twenty-first century readers: Roosevelt functions as a vehicle

for grasping a time and political context that is otherwise incomprehensible. Early on, Philip introduces himself as "a third-grader a term ahead of himself – and an embryonic stamp collector inspired like millions of kids by the country's foremost philatelist, President Roosevelt" (1). Stamps remain important throughout the novel, linking the child, whose identity and personal history is profoundly reflected in his stamp album, with national history, and literally bring it down to his scale and level of comprehension. Thus the pictures on the stamps, for instance of American national parks symbolize for Philip his attachment and belonging to the US, and his later nightmare that each national park picture is overlaid with a giant swastika symbolizes the alienation and exclusion from his home soil he experiences as soon as the atmosphere changes after Lindbergh's election. Similarly, the fact that no US stamp has yet been issued portraying a Jew significantly brings the level of latent anti-Semitism in America home to Philip and the reader, and the fact that he cannot part with his stamp portraying Charles Lindbergh in his airplane Spirit of St. Louis suggests even to himself that he too, despite Lindbergh's overt anti-Semitism, still harbors admiration for the strength and visual attractiveness he exudes.

In many ways Charles Lindbergh in *The Plot Against America* can be read as a foil for Franklin Roosevelt: the fictitious Lindbergh is in some ways obviously very different from FDR, but in other ways actually very similar. Many of the successful media strategies that Lindbergh uses in the book, such as literally appearing out of the blue – dropping from the sky – are actually strategies that Roosevelt also used, famously in 1932 when he flew to Chicago to personally accept his nomination for the presidency by the Democratic National Convention. Also Lindbergh's attractive media presence, his communicative genius and his strong personal link with innovation and modernity are reminiscent of FDR. Part of the effect is that the novel suggests that these elements – which also served the charismatic European dictators well – were perhaps as decisive in the re-election of FDR in 1940 as his internationalism. Like FDR, Lindbergh in *The Plot* works hard to personalize the presidency, that is, to use elements of his private life in a public manner to garner sympathy. For instance, Lindbergh's public dealing in the novel with the loss of his son through a kidnapping is comparable to Roosevelt's victory over polio. Both are presented as losses that have made the President a stronger person who can empathize with others' suffering. Equally, the active role Lindbergh's wife Anne Morrow takes as writer and publicly visible First Lady is reminiscent of Eleanor Roosevelt's position during and after Franklin Roosevelt's presidency.

Other indirect but obvious references to Roosevelt are made for instance through Philip's cousin Alvin, who, when Lindbergh becomes president, joins the Canadian army and loses his leg fighting in England and has throughout the rest of the novel to struggle not only with learning to walk on a prosthesis, but particularly also with his anger and frustration at his incapacitation. In a similar manner, radio reporter Walter Winchell, who later in the novel becomes presidential candidate, represents and foregrounds the massive social and political power of radio. Winchell is historically too, like FDR, one of the first public radio figures who developed a successful and charismatic radio style, who was politically similar to Roosevelt, so Winchell is an obvious choice

to replace Roosevelt in his fictional absence. Through shifting such defining characteristics of FDR onto other characters in the novel, Roosevelt remains conspicuously present through his best known personal and public emblems.

The novel insinuates that without FDR America might have become fascist, or at least, that the FDR icon allows Americans in the present to believe that fascism was no factor in 1940s America. In his essay "The Story Behind *The Plot Against America*" (*New York Times*, 19 September 2004), Roth acknowledges that it remains important, significant and by no means coincidental that America did not become fascist when other countries did. Rather, he argues that it could have happened more easily than one tends to think with the benefit of hindsight:

> I imagined something small, really, small enough to be credible, I hoped, that could easily have happened in an American presidential election in 1940, when the country was angrily divided between the Republican isolationists, who, not without reason, wanted no part of a second European war – and who probably represented a slight majority of the populace – and the Democratic interventionists, who didn't necessarily want to go to war either but who believed that Hitler had to be stopped before he invaded and conquered England and Europe was entirely fascist and totally his. Willkie wasn't the Republican to beat Roosevelt in 1940 because Willkie was an interventionist himself. But if Lindbergh had run? With that boyish manly aura of his? With all that glamour and celebrity, with his being virtually the first great American hero to delight America's emerging entertainment society? And with his unshakeable isolationist convictions that committed him to keeping our country out of this horrible war? I don't think it's far-fetched to imagine the election outcome as I do in the book, to imagine Lindbergh's depriving Roosevelt of a third term.

So what *The Plot Against America* essentially does is bring out the contingency of history, in various ways. In doing so, it also exposes the way in which icons like FDR tend to be employed to make what we study as history seem more inevitable than it really was. Casting Lindbergh as World War Two president instead, Roth brings out the isolationist and anti-Semitic tendencies that did also exist in the US at the time, not so much because of what Lindbergh in the novel actually does, but because he releases pre-existing popular sentiments. In that sense it dispels or at least questions the popular historical plot that America's Greatest Generation was simply good and righteous during the "Good War." As such, it engages in the memory wars about who gets to tell what story of America's role in the World War Two, not through criticism of Roosevelt, but rather through exposing the implicit effect of most Roosevelt allegories, which, like *Pearl Harbor,* allow one to believe in a purely heroic United States, in which any brokenness only contributes to its moral uprightness and determination.

Some of the conservative responses the novel received were predictably rabid. Bill Kaufmann for instance, calls the book "a repellent novel, bigoted and libelous of the dead, dripping with hatred

of rural America, of Catholics, of any Middle American who has ever dared stand against the war machine." Taki Theodoracopulos writes: "One cannot suspend disbelief, as fiction requires, when a hero like Lindbergh is besmirched, no matter what Roth says about not trying to send a message. One cannot suspend disbelief when it was American farm boys who died fighting those who were murdering Jews." Although these authors point to an ethical problem inherent in fictionalizing historical characters, Roth's efforts to detail historical events in the novel effectively dismiss their argument, and moreover, the point is not so much that the novel denies America's heroic role in the war, but rather says something about the clear-cut celebratory quality the past tends to assume in the process of becoming "History." Calling to mind Walter Benjamin's storm and chaos in the Angel of History vignette, Roth writes:

> Turned wrong way round, the relentless unforeseen was what we schoolchildren studied as 'History,' harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic. (113)

Roth, however, in *The Plot Against America*, also does "turn a disaster into an epic", by providing a plot, a consistent narrative, even if that narrative exposes unpleasant traits of 1940s American society. In doing that, Roth shows how a connection with FDR couches historical events more firmly into triumphalist American war memory. However, the act of reconnecting past and present through the reinstatement of FDR in the novel is highly problematic. In terms of plot, it is by far the most contrived and the least credible moment – the need to provide closure and a return to the historical course of events is clearly problematic after the novel's extensive investment in an alternative. The removal FDR icon is employed in *The Plot* to expose festering American anti-Semitism in an era whose moral imperfections have been forgotten, in part through FDR allegories, but when Roth tries to reinstate the FDR icon as the nation's embodiment and thereby rebuild the bridge, he is not wholly successful. As Owens argued, healing of the breach between past and present through allegory is not entirely possible.

Benjaminian Allegory and *The Golden Age*

All examples discussed so far have been largely celebratory of FDR – even those critical of the United States have sustained the heroic public image of FDR as a larger-than-life icon. However, Roosevelt was also a very controversial and intensely hated politician, and in many environments remains so in cultural memory, though perhaps less rabidly so than during his presidency. The Roosevelts in both *Pearl Harbor* and *The Plot Against America* are fundamentally healing figures in the remembrance of past trauma and strong links, connecting past and present in a meaningful and positive way, but, as Owens notes, allegories also tend to involuntarily show up some of the cracks they heal. Walter Benjamin even goes so far as to argue that that is the main

thing they do: in his short essay "The Ruin"[6] he maintains that history "stands written on nature's countenance in the signscript of transcience", suggesting that any representation of history in the present is by nature associated with loss and fragmentation:

> The allegorical physiognomy of natural history, which is brought onstage in the *Trauerspiel* is actually present as ruin. In the ruin, history has merged sensuously with the setting. And so configured, history finds expression not as a process of eternal life, but rather as one of unstoppable decline. Allegory thereby proclaims itself beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things. (180)

Benjamin proposes a reading of allegories as ruins, fragments of the past that continue to exist in the present, not to integrate history or make the past relatable to the present, but rather as reminders of life's "unstoppable decline." This reading may, in terms or memory studies, be read as a prefiguration of Pierre Nora's later claim that *lieux de mémoire* are dead or near-dead traces of a congealed past, where previously there were lively *milieux de mémoire*. Although Benjamin does not explicitly address anything like what Nora called *milieux de mémoire*, both share the notion that the modern landscape is littered with literal and figurative ruins, whose meaning lies not in their ability to produce a connection with the past, but rather in their stress on the loss of that connection, which both deplore.

Gore Vidal, in *The Golden Age* (2000), the last of seven novels that together make up the Narratives of Empire series, too, deplores the corruption and fragmentation of American politics. *The Golden Age* ironically and disenchantingly deflates the maneuvering of FDR in a way that is almost sadistic. Vidal was a Democrat, but also eager to deflate mythologized heroes as a historian – although he used fiction to allow himself leeway for speculation he would not have had in historical research. In *The Golden Age*, a corrupt and power-mongering Roosevelt invites the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and deviously engineers his re-election in 1940. The novel describes the years 1939-1954 from the perspective of Caroline Sanford, fictional Roosevelt friend, and her nephew Peter Sanford. Thus, while the focalization is supposed to be sympathetic, it is also critical and aware of the hiatus between Roosevelt's public image and his individual character and manipulation. Caroline, for example, reflects on the fragility of her Roosevelt connection: "The nation was littered with former Roosevelt intimates who had been found unusable." (178) Through such comments on FDR's disloyalty to "unusable" friends, Gore Vidal, though a staunch Democrat, resists hagiographic interpretations, favoring a representation of Roosevelt as he assumes FDR was seen by contemporaries in Washington.

6 In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media,* 180-186. Cambridge (MA): Belknap Harvard, 2008. Written in 1925; published in 1928. *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 353-358. Excerpted from *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, section 3, "Allegory and Trauerspiel." Translated by Michael W. Jennings.

Through the eyes of Caroline and Peter, Vidal also offers a glimpse no historical monograph could give on the relationship between Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt:

> Eleanor had been late in joining them. "There has always been something odd about my blood. But the doctor says there's nothing really wrong." As the President wheeled himself past her, he gave her a friendly slap on the bottom. "But what did he have to say about this big fat ass of yours?" Without a pause, Eleanor had said "I'm afraid, dear, you were never mentioned." Even the President had laughed, with every appearance of heartiness; and Caroline had glimpsed another aspect of the Roosevelt relationship. It was the shy Eleanor who held the knife and so was the one to be feared. (81)

Although witty and endearing in a way, Caroline's analysis is that it is really Eleanor who despite appearances holds power in the relationship. Elsewhere too, it becomes clear how deeply Eleanor Roosevelt is engorged in the wielding power over, with and in lieu of her husband:

> Peter was awed by the millions of votes these three men represented; and he watched, again with awe, as Mrs. Roosevelt put her lions through their paces. She spoke to them in a low voice; they listened closely. This was brute power and she was now exerting it. (124)

Although Eleanor Roosevelt is here entirely on top of the party bosses she is commanding, she is also tainted both by her association with them, and by her exertion of power she has not democratically won. Both these passages eroticize Eleanor Roosevelt by representing her as the one holding the whip. In the first instance this belittles FDR, and in the second it contributes to his re-nomination in 1939, but in both cases she is the decisive player, not FDR. Throughout, the novel goes out of its way to debunk Roosevelt's positive and inflated public image and simultaneously expose the manipulative performance of power. In doing so, Vidal punctures the imperial and glorifying cultural memory of FDR, while at the same time the loss of integrity in politics is presented as regrettable. The FDR icon in this instance is not the heroic representative of a glorious past, legible for Americans in the present and contributing to historical justification for American overseas interventions in conflicts. Rather, the pettiness and deceitfulness of the historical FDR is brought out. Though writing fiction, Vidal does claim a form of historical veracity and this leaves the iconic figure disappointingly fallible and unattractive. *The Golden Age* thus carries out Benjamin's vision of allegory as deplorably fragmenting.

The Golden Age is on some level a conspiracy novel: its plot revolves around Roosevelt's advance knowledge, indeed conscious provocation of the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor. The title refers to the 1940s as a pinnacle moment for America as a central power in the world, but also back to the eighteenth century in which the US came into its own domestically, as an independent former European colony. It refers back to Vidal's earlier novel *Burr*, another counternarrative in which he argues that Thomas Jefferson had illegitimate offspring with his female slave Sally Hemings.

Vidal's suggestion is that his novels present the other side, the unheard and unwanted narratives of American history, and thus, "The Golden Age" is an ironic reference to undue credit given by officially sanctioned history. The title is also reminiscent of "The Gilded Age" – a term for roughly the 1870s and 1880s coined by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in their novel *The Gilded Age, A Tale of Today* (1873), that satirizes the greed and corruption of politicians. The Gilded Age is their ironic name for the era following the Civil War, marked by seeming success and growing wealth, but actually characterized by poverty, immigration problems and raging corruption. *The Golden Age* thus reads Roosevelt similarly as a supposedly glorious era, which is in fact fundamentally – through FDR himself – permeated with corruption. And finally, *The Golden Age* implicitly claims to also be "A Tale of Today": published in 2000, it is a product of the previously mentioned long 1990s, in which the US was the unchallenged world hegemon – superficially again a golden age, though in fact plagued by internal and external conflict and impending danger.

While Vidal, rightly or wrongly, attempts to lay bare mechanisms of power, politics and iconification which, despite the vindictiveness of his tone, he essentially seems to deplore, he does, by writing a counternarrative that effectively supports a popular conspiracy theory, tap into a long Republican tradition of mistrusting and discrediting FDR. In his afterword to the novel Vidal writes:

> It was well known in the whispering gallery of the day that FDR had provoked the Japanese into attacking us. In fact, our pre-eminent historian, Charles A. Beard, was on the case as early as 1941 with *President Roosevelt and the Coming of War*. Needless to say, apologists for empire have been trying for fifty years to erase him.

The whispering gallery in Washington is indeed the key location in which *The Golden Age* is set, and the novel speculates about what it is one might have heard there. However, the conspiracy narrative Vidal presents is also one that has been repeated like an incantation in Republican circles ever since. The notion of a whispering gallery thus assumes a new meaning – it is not just a place where one hears whispered the truth that never makes it into the history books, but also one in which repetitive sounds create a rhythmic babble, a right-wing antithesis to the similarly ritualized tale of the "apologists for empire" whom Vidal here upbraids.

Conspiracy narratives about Pearl Harbor have indeed flourished since the early 1940s, and are eerily echoic of one another. The argument Beard made in *President Roosevelt and the Coming of War, 1941: Appearances and Realities* is echoed in Charles C. Tansill's still popular *Back Door to War: The Roosevelt Foreign Policy, 1933-1941* (1952). The same arguments and sources are also to be found in Robert B. Stinnett's *Day of Deceit: The Truth About FDR and Pearl Harbor* (2000) and Gordon Prange's *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor* (1981, 60th anniversary reprint, 2001). Although such retellings are plenty and often successful through many reprints,

they are essentially very similar in narrative structure, phrases and tone, as their titles attest. In these books the same sequence of events is conjectured to have taken place as Vidal lets occur in his novel. Thus there is a sense of collage, creating a Benjaminian allegorical structure of the kind that Owens aptly calls "the epitome of counter-narrative, for it arrests narrative in place" (72). These are counternarratives, not only in the sense of narratives that go against the dominant reading, but also in the sense that they defy further narrativization.

The Golden Age, however, is different from these echoic whispering gallery arguments, not only because it is a novel, but because the novel is mildly sympathetic of FDR even while it exposes him as an Emperor-like leader with imperial ambitions not unlike Hitler's and Mussolini's. Vidal does not reject politics itself, but its corruption, whereas most other conspiracy theories, over and above disliking a big-government imperial president like FDR, express a wholesale mistrust of all politics and the state as such. As a result, they do not deplore, but actually relish the demolition of FDR as an icon. The fact that FDR continues to function as a gratifying icon to hammer on, however, is in itself telling of how flexible the icon is in allowing for a range of different kinds of allegorization. Roosevelt as a ruin that continues to invite ritual destruction, has, to return to Rothberg's thesis, a particularly interesting form of multidirectionality. Practically any government involvement can be interpreted as yet another version – even a copy, in a Beaudrillardian sense – of FDR's double-dealing in the case of the war engagement or the New Deal. Neither of these are the original instance, but they are key notes in an incantation, sung by the neoconservative movement in the 1980s, and more recently by the Tea Party, that is itself part of the fabric of American society. While *The Golden Age* enacts Benjamin's pessimistic interpretation of allegory as an ever declining ruin of the past that lives on in the present to disappoint, there is also a strongly anti-government contingent of natural FDR-haters who forever recast and repeat the same narrative which easily subsumes a fixed array of Roosevelt narratives.

Conclusion

FDR is an unusually fruitful cultural icon, especially to represent the nation and state because he is open to various kinds of allegorization. These allegorizations all connect past and present in one way or another, leading to a multitude of potential configurations of Roosevelt narratives in cultural memory. The Roosevelt icon lends itself to the projection of screen memories, in which he becomes the receptacle for collective issues and traumas that cannot comfortably be addressed directly. In other cases, the two texts involved in the allegory are not overlaid and mixed up to the same extent, but there is a clear correspondence between them – while their distance from each other is retained, the allegory provides a bridge between them. The FDR icon, because it is so easy to present as relatable, often forms that bridge. And finally, at times, Roosevelt is, sorrowfully or gleefully, presented as a ruin from the past that persists in the present. Although these are three different modes of allegorization, especially the first two are not always rigidly separable. The point is that all these diverse narratives use FDR allegories as a driving force.

In the following chapter I will explore why the Roosevelt icon is so open to interpretation as an allegorical figure. As a president he is obviously a logical metaphor for the nation as a whole, but he is so in a wide variety of ways. In line with Robert Burgoyne I have argued that, while Hollywood historical films – and, I would add, other mainstream narratives of nation – have in recent decades complicated their construction of historical narratives to include marginalized groups and troubling issues, Roosevelt as an iconic leader has continued to function in these narratives as an embodiment of the United States. He seems to do so to an unusual extent and in an unusually broad variety of ways, compared to other presidents. The key attribute to enable this, I will propose in the following chapter, is his disability, which allows him to function as, what Mitchell and Snyder call a material metaphor.