

ALEXANDER PAYNE'S NEBRASKA AND THE RETURN OF THE GRAND NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT:

This article analyses Alexander Payne's film *Nebraska* from the perspective of the paradigm shift produced after the much-debated passing of postmodernism, announced by theorists such as Ihab Hassan or Linda Hutcheon. We shall examine how the lack of grand narratives makes it almost impossible to give structured meanings to the concept of reality. Payne's project can be viewed as both an allegorical and a physical journey that takes the character to no specific destination in his search to make amends with the harsh reality that, ultimately, spells the end of the American Dream.

KEY WORDS:

Alexander Payne; post-postmodern cinema; New Sincerity; transcendentalism



In his article “Declaration of Independents,” Alexander Payne appealed to the recovery of the American individual as an artistic motif: “For some 25 years we’ve had American movies but not movies about Americans” (2004: no page number). On the other hand, he also exposed the power of art “to combat the fearsome, awful animal side of man that today controls events” (2004: no page number), celebrating the independent cinema of the time when the article was written. In a display of what may be called New Sincerity,¹ very much in line with the arguments of the rebel hero to which David Foster Wallace appealed in “E Unibus Pluram,”² he contends that:

To portray real people with real problems, real joys, real tears will serve as a positive political force, a force for comfort and possibly for change. With the inhumanity forced upon us by governments and terrorists and corporations, to make a purely human film is today a political act. To make a film about disenfranchised people is a political act. To make a film about love is a political act. To make a film about a single human emotion is today a political act. And bad things happen when good people fail to speak up. (1993: no page number)

In a time of crisis, Payne appeals, in a Thoreauvian way, to the creative power of the individual independent of his economic success. Interestingly, the Declaration of Independence of the United States, to which the title of Payne’s article obviously refers, states that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” However, the root of the American Dream—the unalienable Right to pursue happiness—derives from Lockean thought, which is connected with the right to have property. Thus, Thoreau’s notion of happiness, i.e. that happiness is not related to property but to self-knowledge achieved through the observation of nature, clashes with this precept, cornerstone of the American Dream. As Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla and Pablo Echart argue, in Payne’s films, the characters’ stories “reflect on success and failure, ideas that are inextricably bound up with the American Dream and its fulfillment [*sic*] or frustration in times of crisis, in the personal life of individuals, in the home and/or in the nation as a whole. Irrespective of the sphere of action, success and failure are depicted in a family setting that is already destroyed or seriously damaged in material or moral terms” (2016: 100). At the centre of Payne’s filmography lies this dichotomy of the personality of the American people: the mismatch between the capacity of the individual to lead a meaningful life—an idea that was shaped by Ralph Waldo Emerson and his transcendentalist companions

1 This term, which Adam Kelly related to the author of *Infinite Jest* in his article “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction” (2010), can be applied to the works that deal with the crisis of the change of millennium by getting rid of postmodern irony and recovering the value of a fiction based on sincerity and honesty.

2 “The next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of ‘anti-rebels,’ born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that’ll be the point, why they’ll be the next real rebels” (Wallace 1993, 192-193)

of Concord—and, on the other hand, the harsh reality of economic liberalism.

Since his beginnings as a director, Payne has portrayed a society based on the ability of the most ambitious people to succeed and the repercussions that this has on those described as “losers.” On the other hand, the characters in his films suffer the consequences of the cultural ideology of an America that has its anchor in two positions that, paradoxically, go hand in hand and that are mutually exclusive. The individual in search of the American Dream, and his or her legitimate right to pursue happiness, remains in an existential limbo, which in turn is the result of the effort and ambition of their most successful compatriots, the ones living the American Dream, the so-called “winners.”

Payne wrote his “Declaration of Independents” during a period, we could argue, of a paradigm shift in the Kuhnian sense of the term.³ The 9/11 attacks opened the door to a questioning of the unchallenged status quo of post-modernism at the end of the 20th century. The loud bang of the Twin Towers awakens the American society from the slumber of the end of history advocated by Francis Fukuyama.⁴ The shock of the terrorist attacks reveals an incongruity between the postmodern way of seeing reality and the events provoked by the clash of civilizations worldwide. There was a need for a better way to look at reality in order to understand it. Proof of this is the myriad competing theories that appear at the turn of the millennium to name the new post-postmodern era.⁵

As Tim Vermeulen and Robin Van den Akker state in their article “Notes on Metamodernism,” “[t]he postmodern years of plenty, pastiche, and parataxis are over” (2010: no page number). In 2001, shortly after the attacks on the Twin Towers, Graidon Carter, editor of *Vanity Fair*, famously branded the event as the end of the age of irony.⁶ Indeed, in his article “Irony, Nihilism and the New American ‘Smart’ Film,” John Sconce talks about “[a] new sensibility at work in certain corners of North American cinema and culture over the past decade, one that manifests a predilection for irony, black humour, fatalism, relativism and, yes, even nihilism” (2002: 350). In the same page of that article, Sconce includes Payne in a list of directors whose works are attached to adjectives that can be associated with a postmodern sensibility.

3 In his seminal book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Thomas S. Kuhn exposes his theory about paradigm shifts in science. Since its publication, Kuhn’s ideas have been widely applied by theorists in a great variety of fields, including the humanities and the analysis of the so-called passing of postmodernism at the change of millennium.

4 Charles Jencks dated the passing of modernism with the death of modern architecture with the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex “in St Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972, at 3:32 pm” (1977 23). Thus, he claims, “[m]odern Architecture went with a bang” (1977, 23). Minoru Yamasaki, who also designed the World Trade Centre, designed the complex. We could argue that the demolition of these projects, designed by the same architect, frame the postmodern era.

5 Many of these new competing theories have the word “modernism” in them: Jeffrey T. Nealon’s “post-postmodernism,” Gilles Lipovetsky’s “hypermodern times,” Alan Kirby’s “digimodernism,” Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker’s “metamodernism” or Charles Jencks’s “critical modernism.”

6 Eric Randall speaks about the death of Irony after the attacks in his article “The ‘Death of Irony,’ and Its Many Reincarnations” (2001), where he reproduces Graidon’s famous claim: “I think it’s the end of the age of irony” (no page number).



Sconce speaks about “emotional nihilism,” “postmodern screwball comedies.” “Post-*Pulp Fiction* black comedies,” “‘cold’ melodramas,” “‘matter-of-fact’ surrealism,” “hipster anomie” and he talks about Alexander Payne and his films *Election* (1999) and *Citizen Ruth* (1996), describing them as “‘blank’ political satires.” Most of the authors included in this list—like many other creators of the first decade of the 21st century—echo the change of paradigm from postmodernism to something further. They begin to leave aside postmodern irony in favour of a different approach: a way of creating that is closer to the path of sincerity—New Sincerity—and authenticity opened by David Foster Wallace in literature. The films of this group of smart directors reflect on how the postmodern American society deprives its dwellers of a structure of reality. The contrast between Payne’s postmodern acid comedies of the 1990s and the works that he directs after 2001 reveal a clear change in the sensibility of the director’s work. The four films he directs after the turn of the millennium, *About Schmidt* (2002), *Sideways* (2004), *The Descendants* (2011) and *Nebraska* (2013) reveal a different attitude toward the characters who suffer the consequences of relativism and the postmodern lack of referentiality, i.e. solipsism, nihilism and existentialism. In these films, Payne deepens on the complexity of the character’s emotions and, as Larry Gross aptly put it, they are “less comedically invulnerable” (2013: 26).

In *Nebraska*, Payne tells the story of Woody Grant—played by Bruce Dern—, an old man with senile dementia. Woody’s son, David—played by Will Forte—, discovers that his old father has been the victim of a mail fraud aimed at swindling gullible people to sign up for a magazine. In a journey of more than 1000 kilometres, Woody intends to walk from the city where he lives in Montana to Lincoln, Nebraska, to collect a million-dollar prize. After arguing with him, David decides that the best thing to do is to accompany his father to collect the money and, that way, keep him away from harm. On their way, they pass through Woody’s hometown, where the ghosts of the past and the difficult relationships with his family and with old friends and acquaintances lead him to trouble with several people who believe in the validity of the prize and intend to take advantage of the old man. Woody confesses to David that he needs the money to buy a new truck—the one he has is broken down—because he wants to leave something to his family when he dies. When they arrive at Lincoln’s office to claim the prize, they tell Woody that the number that he has was not the winner and they give him a cheap baseball cap as consolation prize. In the face of his father’s desolation, David sells his car and buys a Truck for his father. They return to Woody’s hometown and David gives him the steering wheel and hides under the dashboard so that people can see only his father driving the new truck. Woody drives slowly through the town in front of the faces of some of the people he met during his stay in Hawthorne. When they leave the town, David sits behind the wheel of the truck and drives them back home to Montana.

The beginning of the film, introduces the characters of Woody and David as two losers. Sánchez-Escalonilla argues that “Payne’s film foregrounds the metaphysical rather than material dimension of the American Dream . . . In light of the greed that father and son encounter on their journey, *Nebraska* underscores the demeaning social effects of an exclusively material

understanding of success” (2016: 24). The absence of transcendentalist American idealism to balance the effects of economic liberalism has left the United States populated by a plethora of individuals who do not understand their place in society and are unable to pursue the desired American Dream. This scenario leaves them empty of purpose. The cinematography in black and white reflects the outline of this reality without structure. The only solution to recover the lost referentiality after the relativism caused by postmodern language games is to try to return to a previous stage. In order to recuperate a glimpse of the concept of truth as it was conceived before postmodernism there is a need to continue what Jürgen Habermas called the “unfinished project of modernity.”⁷ It is essential to return to the mental framework of the cultural moment before the cause of the crisis. However, once faith in the grand narratives is lost, regaining it is practically impossible.

To explain what happens in the cinematic field of the early twentieth century, we will resort to what Vermeulen and Van den Akker argue in the aforementioned article “Notes on Metamodernism”: the solution lies in a kind of Kantian *as-if* thinking. They use this idea to explain the way in which faith in a Hegelian vision of history can be recovered. If we have lost faith in meta-narratives, as Lyotard defined postmodernity, maybe we could pretend that we still believe in them and, thus, are able to give a sense to reality again. Thus, Vermeulen and van den Akker contend that “[a]s Curtis Peters explains, according to Kant, ‘we may view human history as if mankind had a life narrative which describes its self-movement toward its full rational/social potential’ . . . humankind, a people, are not really going toward a natural but unknown goal, but they pretend they do so that they progress morally as well as politically” (2010: no page number).

A clear way to explain this theory would be the popular story about Kafka that Paul Auster tells in his novel *The Brooklyn Follies*. One day, while walking in a park in Berlin, Kafka finds a little girl crying. When he asks her what the problem is, the girl replies that she has lost her doll. Kafka, to comfort her, assures her that the doll is not lost, but that she has gone on a trip, and that he knows this fact because the doll has sent him a letter to tell him about it. Kafka promises the girl that the next day he will bring the letter with him to the park to show it to her. That night he writes the message of the doll relating her travels and, during three weeks, Kafka composes a letter every single day for the girl. In the last one, she tells her that she is married, that she is happy and says goodbye to the girl forever.

By that point, of course, the girl no longer misses the doll. Kafka has given her something else instead, and by the time those three weeks are up, the letters have cured her of her unhappiness. She has the story, and when a person is lucky enough to live inside a story, to live inside an imaginary world, the pains of this world disappear. For as long as the story goes on, reality no longer exists. (Auster [2005] 2006: 155)

Kafka is providing the girl with a story she can believe, a story that will give structure to

7 See Jürgen Habermas’s “Modernity Versus Postmodernity” (1981).



something she does not understand. Auster uses this story in his book to introduce the same Kantian *as-if* thinking that Payne uses in *Nebraska*. In fact, that novel is also considered a turning point in Auster's narrative, a change of sensibility and it is included in what Peter Boxall calls the "9/11 novel."⁸

In the same line, the million-dollar prize provides Woody's reality with a new structure; it gives a temporal meaning to his existence. When Woody's other son, Ross—played by Bob Odenkirk—tells his brother David that they need to put his father in a nursing home, David replies: "The guy just needs something to live for." The Thoreauvian journey of self-discovery, so recurrent in American literature and cinematography, works in *Nebraska* as the backbone of the story. At the end of the film, the moving gesture of Woody's son supports the need to believe in something, perhaps fleetingly, that can bring back the lost referentiality to reality. At the beginning of the film, we see Woody as a pathetic impersonation of Thoreau in his journey of self-discovery, trying to make sense of his existence in a traditional way. However, instead of being a glorious scene of natural beauty, as Thoreau often describes it in his books and diaries, the scene is grim and pathetic. It unfolds on a very gray road full of traffic. It is filmed in black and white and there is grain added on purpose.⁹ All this matches the same grim landscape, which seems to have no color in reality. Gross argues that the choice of "black and white is Payne's way of telling us that there's a darkness in this world, that it existed before the story started and the characters appeared, and that it can't ever be entirely dispelled" (2013: 28). Despite the above, and although the film is entirely shot that way, there is an underlying beauty in the grim aesthetic; there is a halo of dignity in the director's gaze.

In the film, David says that Woody is a man who "just believes in stuff that people tell him." Woody's credulity is representative of the fiction of the early twenty first century. This brings them close to the way children understand the world. Children understand language in a univocal way, and that is why they are gullible. This brings Woody closer to transcendentalism, since Emerson defends that children are symbols of sincerity—which is a perfect device for creators of the New Sincerity. For many authors who publish their works from the beginning of the new millennium, the elderly and the children have a purer relationship with reality. Children, because of that univocal use of language; and the elderly, because they are bearers

8 Boxall argues that after the attacks there is an abundance of novels dealing with the subject. Apart from the works of Auster, he includes in this category "Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children*, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Kate Jennings' *Moral Hazard*, Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin*, Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World*, Amy Waldman's *the Submission* and Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*, among many others" (Boxall 2013, 126)

9 In "Director Alexander Payne on *Nebraska*," Damian Houx asks Payne why he shot the film in Black and white and the director answers: "I can't tell you exactly why. The only way I can tell you why the film should be in black and white is that you should see the film and the film will tell you why . . . wish I could give you a more substantive answer about why black and white, but just because" (Houx 2014, 217)

of absolute prepostmodern truths—metanarratives.¹⁰ This is the case of Woody, who was born before postmodernism and he is a veteran of the Korean War. In *Nebraska*, David has a conversation with Peg—played by Angela McEwan—, a woman who used to go out with Woody when they were young. She tells these words to David as she shows him a picture in an old newspaper of his father as a young man wearing a uniform: “Your dad was never much of a talker, and when he came back, he hardly said a word.” In postmodern fiction, these men usually appear as characters who, after having lived through the horror of a warlike conflict, remain silent for the rest of their lives. The dysfunctional families of, for example, the novels of Paul Auster are full of this type of characters. The novels and films of writers and directors of the next generation, the one represented by David Foster Wallace and those who follow in his wake, represent the repercussions of growing up in a family with one of these silent parents who do not contribute a structure to the lives of young postmodern people. This is a topic dealt with by authors like Dave Eggers or Jonathan Safran Foer and directors like Wes Anderson, Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton, Sam Mendes or Miranda July. The horrors these pre-postmodern men lived literally fighting for meta-narratives in which faith was later lost, make their voices seem de-legitimized. There is a desire in them to recover a previous sensibility founded under the aegis of the possibility of an objective idea of truth in a reality free of relativism. However, they know about the consequences of these metanarratives and choose, as in the case of Woody, to remain silent.

During the years of the economic recession, the American Dream becomes an illusion that makes individuals find themselves in a limbo of eternally delayed self-realization. When Woody is in Hawthorne, surrounded by people who give him a standing ovation for winning the fictional million dollars, Woody seems to be close to the feeling of being a winner. For the first time in his life, he does not feel like a loser, even though everything is a lie. The confusion of economic success with success on a personal level makes it impossible for the Americans who are suffering the economic consequences of the crisis to reach personal realization, which immerses them in existentialism. Although Payne does not offer plausible alternatives to the problems created by the crisis and his characters are still lost in a lack of vital sense, the sensibility has certainly changed and there is a longing for past times with a solid referential structure.

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10 According to Emerson, children are closer to a real concept of truth—backbone of the structure of reality—because they speak a language which closer to the purity of a pristine unmediated language. The language spoken at the beginning of time: “Children and savages use only nouns or names of things, which they convert into verbs, and apply to analogous mental acts” ([1836] 1998, 1081).

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