

Disappearance of the Self and Its Constitutive Outside in Kafka and Woody Allen's *Zelig*

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Abstract

Although parallels between Kafka's hybrid characters and Woody Allen's Leonard Zelig have been noted in literature studies (Bruce 1998), the underlying interpretative synergy is not exhausted and occasions a revisit, timely in light of the social tensions of the century-later-present. Juxtaposing counterfactual history with actual highbrow commentary in quasi- or mockumentary film genre allows Woody Allen to transpose Kafka's grotesque into American realm of the 20s and thus Americanize it. The contention of this article is to suggest that Leonard Zelig, a changing man, is a derivative of Kafka's characters, primarily cat-lamb in Hybrid, but Allen's postmodern visual language in Zelig radically alters their inner metamorphoses and hybridity serving as a social critique, if only seen through triviality of its humour. Interpreting Zelig alongside Kafka's Metamorphosis and Hybrid, we can trace genealogy of themes of anti-Semitism, racism and fascism resolve into contradiction of individualism versus petit-bourgeois mass culture marked by commercialization, commodification and assimilation, features that still define our present. The takeaway may be phrased in terms of a constitutive outside. That is, Leonard Zelig, the omnipresent-self, renders certain truth about society predefined by the cult of individualism by re-constituting his lack of individuality as inherently social phenomenon – constitutive outside, and thus disturbing it. In an ironic twist then, Zelig, released around the time of Margaret Thatcher's famous denial of society, can be read as a structuring-absence revealing fiction, that of a non-existent society.

Keywords: Franz Kafka, Woody Allen's *Zelig*, the *Metamorphosis*, roaring twenties, social ontology

It is somewhat enigmatic and certainly hilarious that a quirky little gem of Woody Allen's, just like Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, has gradually traversed cultural theory in diverse interpretations offered (Bloom 1988: 144-6; Perlmutter 1991; Bruce 1998; Michaels, 1998: 95-6; Lawler 1999: 111-6; Gaddis 2007; Johnston 2007; Nas 2012; Feyerabend 2015), yet unlike the novel, the film itself remains little known or remembered, perhaps not even

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by Woody Allen's fans themselves. This mirrors *Zelig's* story arc centred around a fictional character named Leonard Zelig, "the phenomenon of the '20s" (Z 2), as announced by Susan Sontag in the opening of the documentary-like (mockumentary) sketch of manipulated vintage footage alongside commentary of actual prominent American writers and cultural theorists from the Twentieth century. "His story reflected the nature of our civilization, the character of our times, yet it was also one man's story" (Z 6-8), reiterates Irving Howe followed by Saul Bellow's observation on the irony of it having so "quickly [...] faded from memory" (Z 12), given the scale of his extraordinary achievement, and admission that he "touched a nerve in people, perhaps in a way in which they would prefer not to be touched." (Z14-5). As argued in the following, the juxtaposition of cultural commentary with Zelig's portrayal through factuality-alluding footage helps Woody Allen transpose Kafka's grotesque into a self-parody of American culture, which achieves social criticism if only seen through its melancholy and trivial humour, sustaining *Zelig* as a satire, an absurdist fictional comedy and as such, seemingly, yet unluckily, undeserving of a serious reading.

Given the references to Kafka present in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977) and the Kafkaesque themes in his *Shadows and Fog* (1991), it is hardly surprising that *Zelig* (1983) resembles Kafka's characters, as already noted and explored by Iris Bruce (1998). Approaching Leonard Zelig and Gregor Samsa as both suffering from, in her own term, mysterious Illnesses, Bruce surveys parallels between Zelig's and Gregor's predicaments, which include their belonging to a lower-middle class and holding similar occupations: Leonard – a clerk, Gregor – a travelling salesman; both being victims of their circumstance: Leonard – an outcast of a dysfunctional Jewish family with proclivity to violence, while Gregor – a sole supporter of family's dwindling finances after father's business bankruptcy, which serves the cause – relentless overwork – for his sudden sickness. Importantly, there are references and allusions to anti-Semitic and racial stereotypes conflating Jew with a lizard, reptile, Oriental, vermin, present both in *The Metamorphosis* (Bruce 1998: 185), and in *Zelig*, which supply the transformation of Gregor and Leonard its allegoric weight and embed in the historical context of the early twentieth century. For Bruce, anti-Semitism is just one cause of their illnesses, the rise of unfettered capitalist commodification and commercialization being another and no less prominent, ultimately rendering Gregor's and Leonard's metamorphoses intelligible for their historical period, a period in which

myths and stereotypes are re-produced, multiplied and fragmented through mass media, marketing and advertising channels, oscillating between iconoclasm and religious, civic, social idolatry, between the reign of individual freedom and the disappearance of the self in the mass society amidst the looming tendencies of fascism. As such, mid-late capitalist milieu makes the discrepancy of appearance and identity all the more resonant in the reading of Kafka's novel and Woody Allen's film, although the timespan separating the publishing of *the Metamorphosis* and the release of the film – 1915 and 1983, allows for a genealogical inquiry, which is the chief aim of the following analysis.

Comparing *The Metamorphosis* with *Zelig* in terms of how they depict the society on its path towards commodification and commercialization at the turn of the century, one can discern the key difference between the two. *The Metamorphosis* backgrounds Gregor's miserable situation as a travelling salesman, figuring as an alienating force emanating from the outside world to the interior of Gregor's room. In *Zelig*, quite on the opposite, it is fleshed out explicitly, in full vitality and American splendour of the Jazz age, which Bruce quite aptly contrasts with Kafka's "Europeanness" (186). While this contrast is merely hinted in Bruce's study, I would like to advance this thesis building on her reading of the mystery of Gregor's and Leonard's illnesses and the urge to cure them as symptomatic disguise for deeper causes residing in the society itself (197) and propose a renewed reading as for the 2020, the ensuing racial and social tensions, global pandemic and the prospect of economic downturn, all of which rings compliment to Irving Howe's closing note in *Zelig*, doubting whether anything has changed in America at all (Z 1082).

Assuming we are familiar with *The Metamorphosis* protagonist, Gregor Samsa, who one morning wakes up turned into a verminous insect, let us now acquaint with Leonard Zelig, who may be said to embody a catalyst of Gregor's lonely metamorphosis. Narrated in Transatlantic accent, an 'objectifying' broadcast tonality, the story commences in a Long Island party of socialites, where F. S. Fitzgerald takes note of a curious little man by the name "Leon Selwyn or Zelman" (Z 31). He appears as an aristocrat extolling "the very rich [and speaking] adoringly of Coolidge and the Republican Party" (Z 33-4). To Fitzgerald's astonishment, an hour later he is conversing in coarse accent with the kitchen help and claiming to be a Democrat (Z 37-8). Such events recur across the States until a "strange-looking oriental" (Z 80), fitting the description of a missing clerk Leonard Zelig, is traced to Chinatown and is taken to Manhattan Hospital, where he

suddenly turns Caucasian and is mistaken for a doctor by an on-duty psychiatrist Dr. Eudora Fletcher. The proceeding storyline revolves around public fascination of the human chameleon, “the changing man” (Z 194), adopting personalities—appearances and behaviours—of the people surrounding him, arousing bafflement and speculation by scientific community of “what could be the scientific medical phenomenon of the age, and possibly of all time” (Z 147-8), undergoing outlandish experiments with no betterment other than anomalous side-effects, and gradually suturing into an idol, “the Zelig phenomenon” (Z136), to be mimicked, danced to his songs, marketed into toys, clocks and dolls (Z 341-2), portrayed in Hollywood and exploited for profit as “a performing freak” (Z 404) by relatives of his own delinquent family; lastly, turned into the scapegoat by mass political movements amidst the depths of the great depression, proclaiming Zelig the capitalist man: “A creature who takes many forms to achieve ends, the exploitation of the workers by deception” (Z 269), or even worse, “a triple threat” (Z 274) to the Ku Klux Klan by his ability to transform into a Negro or Indian, all the while being Jewish (Z 272-4).

Eudora’s attempts to cure him of his “unique malady” (Z 476), mostly unsuccessful at first, slowly progress through hypnosis sessions compelling Leonard to confront the underlying causes of his urge “to fit in” (Z 405), as does their relationship of doctor and patient evolve into romance and eventual marriage, serving as a conventional backbone for film’s otherwise convoluted plot, fraught with scandals, disappearances and comebacks of Leonard as per his shifting—deteriorating and alleviating—condition. His culminating, most heroic conversion occurs when Zelig, assimilated into the mass crowd of Nazi Germany, heeds Eudora’s gestures during Hitler’s speech, ruining his “good joke about Poland” (Z 1029), and is subsequently chased off by SS squad. Leonard and Eudora manage to escape, but only by Leonard’s transformation into a pilot during their flight, which to top it off, sets a record for “flying nonstop across the Atlantic upside down” (Z 1052), a remarkable achievement given Leonard had never flown before in his life (Z 1068). This double conversion: returning to his true yet fragile—unstable and mundane—self due to powers of mutual love, and transforming again into the other in order to save himself and Eudora, is what eventually redeems Leonard’s fame after a rupture of preceding scandals, widespread claims of Leonard’s paternity and condemnations for various misdeeds he allegedly perpetrated under his different personalities. These accusations emanate from mass public

and flood news and courts each day, making it impossible to distinguish genuine claims from seemingly opportunistic ones, such those of Leonard smashing a brand-new car (Z 904) and painting a house disgusting colour (Z 907). Due to Leonard's dis-ability, which he cannot deny, he has no other recourse but to publicly accept responsibility for the misdeeds and endure a never-ending legislative limbo, allusive to Kafka's Trial, which consequently motivates his disappearance in search of solace that he temporarily finds in the fascist society, just to escape from it and return back triumphantly. Such oscillation, encapsulated in Saul Bellow's observation that "his sickness was also at the root of his salvation" (Z 1073), is more a reflection of shifting and clashing societal norms externalized onto Leonard, than a phenomenon to be ascribed to an individual as such.

Bruce traces the "mysterious" (Bruce 1998: 176) illness of Leonard to Susan Sontag's thesis against interpretation, wherein she notes that "diseases thought to be multi-determined (that is, mysterious) [...] have the widest possibilities as metaphors for what is felt to be socially or morally wrong" (Sontag in Bruce, 1998: 176). It is, thus, the mystery of his illness that turns Leonard Zelig into an enigmatic subject compelling the public urge to categorize, pre-define and ultimately make sense of him, as a way to secure its own sense of collective consciousness or identity of the time that is being mirrored onto itself through the spectacle of mass-media propelled by Leonard Zelig's phenomenon. Yet this urge, unlike in the case of Gregor, who is eventually explained away through a sudden, absurd and grotesque transformation into an insect, cannot be satisfied in the case of Zelig, who by his very mysterious nature resists and evades definition. Embodying an excess of societal equilibrium, Leonard cannot be integrated into present societal, material or symbolic configuration and thus manifests as an illness in need of remedy, despite both his commercial and heroic nation- as well as worldwide success. Leonard is hailed as the national pride and denounced as a convenient scapegoat, a source and an outcome of social discontents all at once, motivating his assimilation into others and his comebacks.

It is only tendentious then that the crude medical and scientific attempts to cure Leonard mask the true source of his malady, which remains invisible precisely due to its social origin, coinciding with his lack of individuality and calling for a personal and intimate engagement provided by Dr Eudora. Leonard, much like Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*, finds himself pressured by his family into unbearable societal conditions, which in turn feed back into and reinforce

dysfunctional familial relationships: “As a boy, Leonard is frequently bullied by anti-Semites. His parents, who never take his part and blame him for everything, side with the anti-Semites. They punish him often by locking him in a dark closet. When they are really angry, they get into the closet with him” (Z 123-7). In Gregor’s case, societal pressure immobilizes his being. Gregor laments the high-pace of salesman’s life and the constant change of human relationship which he condemns before attempting to scratch an itch and change his body position: “worries about train connections, irregular bad food, temporary and constantly changing human relationships which never come from the heart. To hell with it all!” (Kafka, 1915: 4).

Bruce’s reading of Gregor’s transformation as a turn from an ambiguous signifier into a subhuman signified (1998: 180), a dirty Jew (183), a vermin (182), whose death coincides with the eventual loss of ambiguity and signification (180, 185), i.e. he becomes it – “common anti-Jewish stereotype of the day” (185), serves an insight into the transition from Gregor’s pathology depicted in grotesque humour and gloomy interior of the novel to Woody Allen’s portrayal of American culture in its full vibrancy of the 20s and the heyday of multiculturalism around the release of the film in 1983. Whereas Gregor’s “turn” is a sudden, invisible and irreversible transformation into an anti-Semitic stereotype, that of vermin, Leonard’s transformations are continual, multiple and marketable, thus both the source of his national and worldwide fame as well as his misfortune. In other words, Leonard Zelig, unlike Gregor Samsa, stands for an ever-shifting signifier exceeding, rather than receding – perhaps the reason why *The Metamorphosis* is grotesque and bizarre – in signification. The lack of agreement on the meaning of Leonard Zelig (Z 835), results from the excess of significance, not from its recession into an insignificant insect. Leonard’s social self, alluding to William James’ notion, is excessively social to the point of undermining the self, resembling a type of a peculiarly American character of an “other-directed person”, a “new kind of man”, emerging, according to David Riesman,

in the upper middle class of our larger cities: more prominently in New York than in Boston, in Los Angeles than in Spokane, in Cincinnati than in Chillicothe. Yet in some respects this type is strikingly similar to the American, whom Tocqueville and other curious and astonished visitors from Europe, even before the Revolution, thought to be a new kind of man. Indeed, travellers’ reports on America impress us with their unanimity. [...] It all adds up to a pattern which, without stretching matters too far,

resembles the kind of character that a number of social scientists have seen as developing in contemporary, highly industrialized, and bureaucratic America: Fromm's "marketer", Mills's "fixer", Arnold Green's "middle class male child" (Riesman, 1962: 19).

The other-directed person, vis-a-vis tradition- and inner-directed personality types, shares in common dependence on others, "either those known to him or those with whom he is indirectly acquainted, through friends and through the mass media", a capacity that is internalized for guidance in life early on (21). In his landmark study, Riesman identifies this type with that of the American and in turn with a contemporary man (19), the grounds of which he seeks not in certain essentialist features of American culture or "character-forming peculiarities" (20), but rather in its historically contingent breakaway from Europe, evading feudalism and co-opting globally emerging trends of capitalism, industrialism and urbanization (20). Having come out in the 50s, roughly half-way *The Metamorphosis* and *Zelig*, it serves a cue of a genealogical shift from the inner subjectivity broadly construed as European to the outer, or other directed one, that makes for a compelling transition between Kafka's "European alienation" and "Allen's Americanization" identified by Bruce (1998: 186). In this regard, Leonard's and Eudora's flight from Europe back to the United States is a particularly telling highpoint of the story, for it marks America's final breakaway from the continent, the beginning of its golden age, and simultaneously encapsulates a riff, a counter-story or a radical twist to Kafka's depiction of an estranged, alienating and grim time-space preceding roaring twenties and anticipating looming tendencies of totalitarianism and holocaust in continental Europe after them.

Prominent stylistic differences separating Kafka's grotesque from Woody Allen's playful postmodern transgressionism can be traced in the development of the characters, rendering *Zelig* and *The Metamorphosis* very different pieces of fiction despite their similarities. Unlike Gregor, whose escape is an ultimate transformation into an antisemitic stereotype, Leonard "appears to have adjusted to life. Somehow, he seems to have coped, and then, increasingly strange behaviour" (Z 133-135). Inquired under hypnosis about the very first signs of his malady, Leonard confesses that he had lied to his classmates out of shame of not having read *Moby Dick* (Z 280-3). The lack of taste that still defines Leonard's later remedied self is a telling feature in *Zelig*, not only because it follows logically from the fragility of Leonard's identity, but also in that it illuminates the cause of

it: Inability to situate himself firmly in the cultural landscape, accustom with a sign and ground it in a signified, but instead become the very cultural catalyst that spurred roaring twenties to re-produce cultural artefacts, including its own sources of cultural reference, not the least by assimilation and mimicry fortified by the rising art of mass media and marketing. Hence, Leonard's lack of taste is true to its historical milieu, but by failing to mask it under the pretence of taste and displaying it openly once cured instead, Leonard remains too much alike the mass to relieve him of controversy, as observed by John Morton Blum:

Oh, his taste was terrible. He was the kind of man who preferred watching baseball to reading Moby Dick. And that got him off on the wrong foot, or so the legend goes. It was much more a matter of symbolism. To the Marxists, he was one thing. The Catholic Church never forgave him for the Vatican incident. The American people, in the throes of the Depression as they were, found in him a symbol of possibility, of self-improvement and self-fulfilment. And of course, the Freudians had a ball. They could interpret him in any way they pleased. It was all symbolism, but there were no two intellectuals who agreed about what it meant (Z 825-35).

In view of such heterogeneity of the self that is embodied in Leonard's personae, the more apt precursor to Leonard may be traced to the crossbreed creature the cat-lamb in Kafka's short story *A Hybrid* (also known as *A Crossbreed*), rather than Gregor Samsa after all. If Gregor's deteriorating condition may be said to entail the waning of his identity, however miniscule, until the eventual death alluding to the death of Christ (Bruce 1998: 186), Leonard Zelig is more adequately thought of as a master of sustaining and internalizing or naturalizing transformation itself. He inheres, in line with Riesman's point on early internalization of other-directedness (Riesman 1962: 21), his transformation in-and-through his being, emerging in history and quickly fading away, leaving but a mere remnant of "this curious quirk, this strange characteristic" (Z 1077), which is to say, a remnant of his identity reduced to his mere capacity, a character trait. While little to nothing of Leonard Zelig's birth and early life is known other than few discovered clues, his death coincides with having just started reading Moby Dick (Z 826), prompting an ironic cause of it and suggesting that his life as a mythical character, a cultural artefact, Leonard Zelig, entailed a temporal gap between an innocent lie, a pretence of taste, to daring develop it. This parallels the opening of Kafka's story *A Hybrid*, narrated in first person. The first thing we learn about the cat-lamb is that

although inherited from narrator's father, it has only begun to develop in his own (narrator's) lifetime, acquiring more of cat's characteristics so as to level out its previously prominent features of a lamb (Kafka 2014: 603). Kafka notes subtle proclivities – likes and dislikes – of cat and lamb present in varying degrees in the cat-lamb, yet not fully developed, somewhat recessed and controlled, e.g. the cat-lamb lurks for hours near hen-coop without attempting to kill (603). During Sunday visit time children pry adoringly and bring cats and lambs along expecting a “recognition scene” (603), which does not take place as animals “obviously [accept] the other's existence as a God-given fact” (603). And yet, the story closes with an admission that the cat-lamb “not content that it is a cat and a lamb, [...] almost wants to be a dog as well. [...] It has the restlessness of both creatures in itself, that of the cat and that of the lamb, however different they are. But this is why it is uncomfortable in its own skin” (604). The recognition scene that does not take place encapsulates precisely the moment of Zelig. Leonard's recognition of himself in others is naturalized to the extent of making up his very own yet fragile identity, the ambivalence of which disturbs American society of the roaring twenties writ large. Important to notice here is the shift from the discomfort of the cat-lamb to that of the society disturbed by Zelig, “who [himself] seems to have coped” (Z 133), attesting to the reversal of roles between the inside of the character and the social forces outside it in these two respective pieces of fiction. Whether Woody Allen actually drew inspiration from the cat-lamb is not so pertinent to our appreciation of the underlying continuity and evolution of the transformations theme, offering a reading of Leonard Zelig as a likely derivative, as well as Americanisation and alteration of the cat-lamb for the postmodernity of the 80s and onwards.

In *Kafka and the Universal*, Anna Glazova reads *A Hybrid* as a representation of a mix of natural and cultural history wherein the cat-lamb stands for an unfinished phylogenesis, which in virtue of remaining unfinished secures a succession of generations endowing it its specificity (2016: 199). Leonard Zelig may likewise be read as a phenomenon of the twenties ensuring continuity of the collective American conscience, not the least through its own forgetfulness. In contrast to the cat-lamb, Leonard Zelig is a simulacrum. Rather than preserving, Leonard effaces differences through on-going assimilation, accumulating the very constancy of change of human relationships alluded to by Gregor (Kafka 1915: 4), and transforming them into symbolism, an image of false change that cannot be ultimately resolved, but merely lent to marketing and advertising. The

accompanying sense of nostalgia and superfluity of humour helps to tie this symbolism to a historical memory of the period, a history that can be remembered not through its reference to identities of those who came before, but the semblance with the existing symbolic attachments and arrangements now. In other words, *Zelig* renders the 20s familiar by annulling differences between now and then, by mythicizing the forgetfulness entrenched in the transformations of Leonard and the hectic change of the society itself.

The irritation elicited by Leonard's phenomenon is particularly telling in view of a society defined by American exceptionalism and the cult of individualism. Read against the famous denial of society—by reducing it to individuals and families—by Margaret Thatcher roughly around the release of the film, *Zelig* may be conceived as a structuring-absence revealing fiction, that of a non-existent society. If a myth sustaining the symbolic ontological structure of a society proclaims its absence, its reduction to an individual, it takes fiction of a non-individual, such as *Zelig*, to demystify or expose the myth in the eyes of the society members themselves. *Zelig* does this by recasting the lack or omnipresence of the self into its constitutive outside – the different roles that make up the social fabric and its symbolic structure. Juxtaposed to Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, this marks a genealogical shift from the disappearance of the self in the crowd to the disappearance of the crowd by reaffirming the individual. While the former is to be associated with totalitarianism and the latter with the individualistic ethos of classical liberal paradigm, it is the capacity of fiction and the prowess of fiction writers to deconstruct this ideological distance as itself deceptively short, an outcome of the convoluted history of modernity, a bifurcation or a supposed opposition, in the words of its chief critic, Alasdair MacIntyre, of "individualism and collectivism, each appearing in a variety of doctrinal forms" (1984).

Re-reading Kafka alongside Woody Allen's *Zelig* may thus prove a worthwhile exercise in light of the present social frictions in the United States, unabated populism's march in Europe and the contentiousness of cultural politics across the western World more generally. The apparent fact that we still laugh-out-loud of the trivial awkwardness and peculiarity of the historical situation portrayed in *Zelig*, failing to recognize him as the predecessor of our mythical superheroes such as X-men, Wolverine and other occupants of the infinity-alluding symbols at the edge of the alphabet, is telling of *Zelig* as still before its time even if it is already forgotten. This leaves us to concur with Howe's affirmation of the doubt whether America

has really changed much - "I don't think so" (Z 1082). Perhaps neither have we.

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