

# The Recurring Resonance Of Philip Roth's The Plot Against America: Adaptations Across Streaming, Novel, And The American Political Landscape

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## Abstract

The Plot Against America is considered to be Philip Roth's take on the Jewish uncertainty and the looming restlessness and fear that pertained Jewish families during the times of the holocaust set in an alternate universe where Charles A. Lindberg, supposedly a Nazi sympathizer gets elected as the president of the United States. Roth situates the Jewish experience as one riddled with uncertainty and a 'perpetual fear', as the title of the last chapter in the novel indicates. The novel functions as a treatise on the constant trepidation of the Jewish experience. Written in 2004, as a historical alternative fiction, the novel received critical acclaim keeping in tradition with most of Roth's writings. Roth's impeccable artistry takes us into experiencing a large and varied set of perceptions through several characters poised at different ends of the Jewish spectrum. However, when this novel was adapted into an HBO limited series during 2020 by the creator duo David Simon and Ed Burns, the inherent subtext of the story extended its relevance and opprobrium to that of the then contemporary American political landscape. The paper explores an intermedial study of how the text was seen in a new light, as the Jewish fear could now be drawn as an allusion to that of the recent concerns that perpetrated within the minorities of the

country, the liberals, immigrants, especially the Arabs and Muslims within Trump's America.

Keywords: Adaptation, intermediality, Popular Culture, Political Polemics.

### **Introduction**

Roth, one among the infamous 'Jewish trio', the most celebrated writers of the twentieth century American novel, has often been charged with being regarded as one of the premier 'voices' of America, who had championed Jewishness into the 'mainstream'. Mike Palindrome, in a podcast episode on the writer on *The History of Literature*, sums up this contention:

"I think, in the hindsight of 50 years, we will have a real appreciation for him having made Jewishness mainstream."

(Palindrome, 2021)

The HBO series was an effective adaptation of the book in terms of its recreating of the uneasiness in the Jewish neighborhood, and its brilliance in conveying fear and paranoia through its nuanced characters. The medium of the web-series, born as a result of the widespread adoption of streaming services after the proliferation of high-speed internet, is one that is not limited by the conventions of film and television. While film adaptations had the burden of condensing a huge text into a two-to-three-hour movie that made sense to viewers who are not acquainted with the original text, television adaptations needed to be made into episodes that have to be made with prefixed runtimes that suit the broadcaster and many other stakeholders. This, coupled with the strict norms of censorship, have made adaptations to be a challenging prospect to many filmmakers over the decades. As a consequence, it has been historically true that the average film or TV adaptation, was almost decidedly inferior to the original text in terms of its nuances and overall artistic quality. However, the format of web series in general, one that is not burdened by strict censorship and runtime limitations, is more poised to provide the creators with a greater sense of freedom to explore and perhaps do justice to the original text.

The very fabric of a country like the United States, marked by two distinct ideologies that have morphed and changed persistently through decades as two distinct political dispositions, creates unique communal experiences that led to a certain a pattern of social behavior within the nation. The sense of insecurity, living in a country whose best interests lie in a perceived 'opposition' to the best interests of one's community based on faith, race, lineage, or a combination of the three, is indeed a behavioral pattern that resonates across time and location.

It is this resonance that surfaced in 2020, as HBO's show resurfaced the sense of restlessness and the perpetual fear and the feeling of being the 'other' in America within the immigrant populations. The HBO shows' creators David Simon and Ed Burns have managed to capture the sense of insecurity and fear of being a Jew in the forties depicted masterfully by Roth and perhaps even amplify it. The resonance that the show reached, especially with the immigrant communities within America, more than the Jews showcases perhaps an exchange of place. The early 21st century American Muslim doubling for the Jew in the 40's. This, along with the ongoing Covid 19 pandemic when the show was aired, added to the sense of looming fear that was already perpetrating in the American society.

To live in a state where the popular narrative is apathetic to one's cause is a concern that resonates within the families in marginalized communities. The question of what 'home' means to the families and individuals in these communities is always a point of contention. To pledge themselves to a nation, and then to suffer uncertainty about their place in the nation is an integral predisposition of the postmodern and post-colonial way of life. This crisis in identity of in these individuals is one that is fragile. These lines by Philip Roth in the novel serve as a direct testimony of this fragility. "I pledged allegiance to the flag of our homeland every morning at school. I sang of its marvels with my classmates at assembly programs. I eagerly observed its national holidays, and without giving a second thought to my affinity for the Fourth of July fireworks or the

Thanksgiving turkey or the Decoration Day double-header. Our homeland was America.

Then the Republicans nominated Lindbergh, and everything changed.”

(The Plot Against America, 2004)

The consequences of Lindbergh’s overt antisemitism presented exhaustively in the novel and to an extent, downright horrifically in the web-series has several parallels to that of Trump’s far right views and his overt remarks on immigrations and Muslims. The looming fear resonated with the audience as HBO’s programming in a sense, was essentially mocking the then contemporary state of American democracy. It was the Jewish sense of insecurity in the 1940’s that acutely mirrored the condition of the ‘scared’ and insecure immigrant Muslim in the US.

Sixteen years prior to the web-series, when the book was initially published by Roth, a somewhat similar accusation was made by the press claiming the book to be an allegory on the presidency of George Bush. This was refuted by Roth quite convincingly. However, certain choices by the writer, especially one of using the date of September eleventh, to be that of the date in which Lindbergh delivers a speech criticizing American Jews in 1941 within the world of the novel, can be seen as enough evidence to warrant a reading of the novel as a protest against the post 9/11 war in Iraq. However, this is not entirely the case as Dan Schiffman, in his essay in Philip Roth Studies titled *The Plot Against America and History Post-9/11* says,

“While it does not make sense to read *The Plot Against America* as a protest of the war in Iraq—President Bush’s foreign policy was the opposite of Lindbergh’s—the novel is very much a post-9/11 text that dramatizes the impossibility of isolationism and of living in an invulnerable America. At the same time, *The Plot Against America* offers civic virtues, critical—sometimes obnoxious—patriotism, and familial compassion as ultimately ineffectual responses to the dangerous convulsions of history.”

(Schiffman, 2009)

The series of events that took place towards the end of the Trump administration are quite similar to that in the novel. Just as Lindbergh leaves the office putting

the Jewish fears to a rest, as does trump's reign come to an end. Although not as unceremoniously as is in the novel, the ousting of trump from the office was also quite a somber affair. The parallels, a surprising number of them, between the story of the plot against America and contemporary 2020 American society have elicited a lot of attention from mainstream media and news outlets. Almost all initial reviews of the largely critically acclaimed show from HBO had in part, mentioned these parallels, some even to the point of accusing HBO for intentionally designing the show in such a way that it captures and provokes this looming fear.

The primal reason for the novel to gather such a resonance that spans across the ages in which it is consumed, is the idea of overt patriotism (one that is characterized by a passionate group of individuals disposed against a certain community, usually a minority) could lead to the creation of an environment filled with the proliferation of these dangerous ideologies, which, if history has taught us, would be eventually lead to dangerous convulsions in the not so distant future. There is, indeed, an inherent duality in the fabric of any nation and any time, at any historical turn of events, we usually tend to forget the prevalent narratives of the time before.

The 'plot' that Roth creates in the novel isn't simply a fictional account of how things could have been but can be read a 'real' history that could have been likely to happen had the turn of events have swung in the other direction. This 'juncture', where in key decisions are taken as one side of history is going to be written, usually overshadows the other narrative that was prevalent. Roth manages to bring out this forgotten side of history, one where in a different turn of events could lead an antisemite to the accession of the presidency. This flip side of history captures an escalating sense of trauma that was very much prevalent in the Jewish households of 1940's America.

Roth is completely aware about the provocative nature of his novel. Risking generalization, one could argue that the novel is Roth voicing this Jewish Trauma, his role as the Jewish Voice was pretty much established by the end of the twentieth century. Timothy Parrish, in his *Roth and Ethnicity*, published in *The Cambridge*

Companion to Philip Roth, explains the author's role as a 'Jewish son', claiming the novel to be the fitting end for his discussion:

"The Plot Against America is a fitting place to end a discussion of Roth as an ethnic writer because it suggests that the best way to understand Roth's orientation as a Jewish-American writer is, finally, as a Jewish son."

(Parrish, 2007)

The choice of using Roth's own name and creating an alternative historical fiction in which the story is told through the lens of his own family, creates a sense of personal connection and an authenticity of Jewish experience that cannot be fabricated with wholly artificial characters. In his essay, "The Story Behind The Plot Against America," published in the New York Times, he says

"To tell the story of Lindbergh's presidency from the point of view of my own family was a spontaneous choice. To alter the historical reality by making Lindbergh America's 33rd president while keeping everything else as close to factual truth as I could -- that was the job as I saw it. I wanted to make the atmosphere of the times genuine, to present a reality as authentically American as the reality in Schlesinger's book, even if, unlike him, I was giving to history a turn it had not taken."

(Roth, 2004)

Although alternative history, by definition, is historical, Roth's painstakingly detailed depiction of Lindbergh's accession to the Presidency provides for the creation of a world where the fear transcends far beyond the page and the screen. However, the world created in the novel has taken the highest level of literary liberty perhaps outside of Sci-Fi and fantasy writings. In reality, Lindbergh, although rightly accused of being a Nazi sympathizer, never showed interest in running for presidency, let alone any position in the office. And Roosevelt's decision to run for the third time was received with so little opposition that the fact that he broke a 150-year-old tradition wasn't even the subject of debate in the elections that ensued. He was a man in no place to lose. Adding to this, Roosevelt's position on Jews is quite literally the anti-thesis of what was portrayed in the novel. For instance, in the 1930's, as many as 800,000

refugees were denied entry into the United States during his term.

However, it is also impossible to argue against the idea that there is indeed a significant presence of Jewish uncertainty and a preceding looming fear in every Jewish neighborhood across the world during the span of the second world war as the world was beginning to uncover the horror of the holocaust in Europe. This fear of persecution was one commonality that minority communities who migrate into America escaping a war could resonate with. The Jewish streets represented in the novel serve as a platform through which any marginalized community in America could resonate with the Jewish experience.

As it is established that both the novel and the web series adaptation provide insightful commentary on the socio-political climate of the time. It would be easier to consider the novel and the web series as one singular element. Taking this into context, we find that the depiction of Charles A. Lindbergh was not always a fitting take on the contemporary president of America. The difference in the ideology of Lindbergh and Bush when the novel was released was pointed out by Steven G. Kellman in his *The Plot Against America and its Political Moment*:

“Furthermore, what was most notable about the historical Lindbergh’s position on international relations and what serves as the engine driving the plot of *The Plot Against America* is his isolationism. Lindbergh spoke out forcefully against American involvement in European conflicts, and, in an inflammatory speech before an America First rally in Des Moines on 11 September 1941 ... Outraged by Roosevelt’s internationalism, Lindbergh would not likely have cherished Bush’s.”

(Kellman, 2008)

If we extend this idea to that of the web series and Donald Trump, we find that Trump is in a way, much more of an isolationist. His parallels with Lindbergh, as depicted in the novel and web series are quite stark. The idea of ‘America first’ when stripped of from its ornamental language, can easily be understood as one that is ‘America only’. Therefore, it can be argued that Trump, as a point of comparison with the fictional

Lindbergh, makes a much better case than Bush did back in 2004.

Ed Burns and David Simon were quite successful in capturing the soul of Jewish trauma and the escalating fear of impending disaster in the Jewish streets and suburbs of America in that particular period of time. Nick Allen from *The Vulture* explains about the web series adaptation, speaking about the translation of living room arguments from the book onto the screen,

“The adaptation includes many of the book’s fiery living-room arguments that provide a microcosm for a traumatized nation of people tearing itself apart, keeping Roth at the forefront.”

(Allen, 2020)

The sense of impending doom that Roth depicts to be interwoven in every Jewish neighborhood is translated brilliantly in the adaptation. Apart from casting choices that respect the descriptions in the book, the intricacies that Roth infuses in each character are complimented with nuanced performances that stay true to the original text. As Roth’s prose effectively creates a sense of unease, we find that the adaptation mirrors this atmosphere through deliberate choices in its cinematography and sound design.

A closer study of particular elements that have been translated from the book to the screen could help throw a light on how an of audio-visual medium could transcend the text to create an experience might be much more effective and resonating. Although there are several choices, I have limited this study to two particular elements in the events in the beginning of the novel and in the first episode of the HBO adaptation.

The scene in the closer study is one that happens early in the novel on the dining table where Roth’s family is having breakfast, while a visitor comes to collect money for the cause in Europe. This sparks a conversation among the family about the idea of a ‘homeland’. What was written in the book can be constituted as a verbose account of Philip’s understanding of the world around him. The nature of the narrative to the most part is a perspective driven personal account,

“When a stranger who did wear a beard and who never once was seen hatless appeared every few months after



dark to ask in broken English for a contribution toward the establishment of a Jewish national homeland in Palestine, I, who wasn't an ignorant child, didn't quite know what he was doing on our landing. My parents would give me or Sandy a couple of coins to drop into his collection box, largess, I always thought, dispensed out of kindness so as not to hurt the feelings of a poor old man who, from one year to the next, seemed unable to get it through his head that we'd already had a homeland for three generations."

(The Plot Against America, 2004)

On the opposite spectrum, the same scene in the web-series is rather direct in terms of its treatment and provides for a dialogue that conveys more in expression and nonverbal cues than in the dialogue itself:

[As the family gets to have lunch at the living room, a Rabbi enters the home as Philip opens the door and is greeted profusely. After observing a conversation with the rabbi and his father contributing to the old rabbi, Philip brings up the matter on the dining table.]

Philip: Dad

Isn't this your homeland?

Herman: huh?

Philip: Man asking for money.

Sandy: No, its for Palestine

It's to settle Jews in Europe who are running from Hitler

Philip: Well, we don't need another homeland, right?

Herman: No.

Episode 1: The Plot Against America (2020), HBO

While the scene in the web-series constitutes of a small exchange between Philip Roth (and Levin in the series) and his father about a donation he makes when a rabbi walked in earlier, the text in the book, it is not 'one' scene, but rather a longer sequence of repetitive events that captures Philip's views on the matter, especially his belief of America being his homeland. On the other hand, the sequence in the web-series is rather short, and one gets to understand that Philip is not entirely sure about the certainty of America being his homeland. The dialogue used is efficient and what is not said in turn, is communicated by the audio visual as the cinematography and the choices of the costumes and the recreation of the dining table in the web series

deliberately set up an atmosphere of uncertainty and uneasiness through the choice of dull and muted colors as seen in Fig 1 and Fig 2.



Fig. 1. The Plot Against America, Episode 1, HBO, 16 Mar, 2020.



Fig. 2. The Plot Against America, Episode 1, HBO, 16 Mar, 2020.

This translation from the paper to the screen provides for a plethora of themes and symbols. Yet, it captures and perhaps amplifies the Jewish trauma that was caricatured by Roth in the book.

Here, the idea of the 'homeland' is a concern with the uncertain Jewish identity that has been a staple in the Jewish experience since ages. As Max I Dimont in his *Jews, God and History* states,

"They (Jews) have had a continuous living history for four thousand years and have been an intellectual and spiritual force for three thousand years. They survived three thousand years without a country of their own yet preserved their ethnic identity among alien cultures. They have expressed their ideas not only in their own language, but in practically all the major languages of the world."

(Dimont, 2004)

This capability of existing as an 'alien' community who is capable of preserving its own culture through generations without having a piece of land to call their own until the formation of Israel is an indication of the remarkable ability of the Jewish people to survive. This can be seen as an inspiration to almost any culture that fears extinction due to its decreasing numbers and one which suffers from the lack of a legitimate 'homeland'.

Speaking of this aspect of identity in the novel, Roth himself states in the book chapter *Allegories of Facism*:

"What is America, who is American, who gets to decide who is American and who is a traitor or un-American—including the possibility that Canadians in 1940 are the true Americans — these are some of the emotionally charged questions that fuel the drama of this novel."

(Roth, 2004)

Although the novel and the web series at large can be seen as narratives that perhaps work as a commentary of the state of America and the state of the immigrant populous among their various themes and nuances, the very idea of the novel is to warn the reader. Roth specifically creates characters who try their best to 'attach themselves to the dominant culture' and thereby be vulnerable to conservative leaders who could be detrimental to their survival in the long run. One such

example is the Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf and Sanford Roth, who become victims and the perpetrators of the propaganda that the dominant culture projects. Dan Schiffman, in his *The Plot Against America and History Post 9/11*, speaks of this phenomenon:

“But perhaps more dangerous and ultimately isolating for Jewish Americans is to attempt to attach themselves superficially to the dominant culture, a move which blinds them to leaders like Lindbergh who are undermining democratic values.”

(Schiffman, 2009)

This perhaps, can be seen as the central idea behind the very conception of *The Plot Against America*, both the novel and its adaptation. Roth warns the immigrant, minority populous of America to be wary of the nation, to be skeptical and not be blinded by the narratives that its dominant culture spews. The effect is achieved through the creation of a sense of panic. The adaptation is perhaps more successful in creating this paranoia as it is able to translate the deliberate literary devices used in the novel into visual and auditory forms, creating a multi-sensory experience for the audience that is more impactful.

One of the key aspects of why the adaptation works so well is the level of attention to detail it incorporates in its faithfulness to the original text. However, in spite of the web-series' ability to utilize a much greater runtime than that of a conventional film adaptation, the level of detail in describing the certain key elements like the stamps cannot be given as much of a priority when contrasted with the main text. Especially the usage of stamps, which plays a key role in adding to the historical background, is one element that any adaptation should be keen on depicting well.

The role of stamps in the novel and in the adaptation is quite significant, they paint a picture of the contemporary political state of America apart from being the primary source of Philip (Roth and Levin) to understand the outside world. Joshua Kotzin, in her *The Pilot against America: Stamps, Airmail, and History in The Plot Against America* speaks the significance of the description of a specific blue stamp that appears in the novel:

“The emphasis in the description of the stamp falls on the text, and the relationship established between “Lindbergh” and “air mail.” If we use the Arbor Day stamp analogy, here we see Lindbergh’s transatlantic solo flight (like the children planting the tree) leading inexorably to national declarations of power, to the viability of the national airmail system.”

(Kotzin, 2013)

This blue stamp is seen when Sandy gives his stamp collection to Roth in the novel. In the novel, this blue stamp with the Spirit of St. Louis is described in painstaking detail:

“It was a blue stamp, about twice as long as it was high, whose central design, a picture of the Spirit of St. Louis flying eastward over the ocean, had provided Sandy with the model for the plane in the drawing celebrating his conception. Adjacent to the white border at the left of the stamp is the coastline of North America, with the words “New York” jutting out into the Atlantic, and adjacent to the border at the right the coastlines of Ireland, Great Britain, and France, with the word “Paris” at the end of a dotted arc that charts the flight path between the two cities. At the top of the stamp, directly beneath the white letters that boldly spell out UNITED STATES POSTAGE are the words LINDBERGH–AIR MAIL in slightly smaller type but large enough certainly to be read by a seven-year-old with perfect vision.”

(The Plot Against America, 2004)

When contrasted with this detailed description, the runtime in the web series allows for a brief snapshot of the said stamp within the overarching conversation between Sandy and Philip (Levin in the series). The brief snapshot of the stamps is a mere two seconds in the screen as Sandy hands over the collection to Philip, as seen in the following figure:



Fig. 3. The Plot Against America, Episode 1, HBO, 16 Mar, 2020.

This rather simple sequence proves the argument that, irrespective of the indefinite runtime that can be allotted to the web series adaptation, there are some nuances that are in the novel that cannot be replicated in the same effect on screen. Having said that, one can greatly observe a great amount of attention to detail in the recreation of 1940's America in the adaptation.

The web-series adaptation should be credited for the recreation of the atmosphere of fear and paranoia, more than its treatment of dialogue and characters. Although the creators were quite faithful to the original text in terms of the story and dialogues to an extent, the use of cinematic techniques like the music and cinematography are deliberately designed to recreate the sense of unease and fear. The distinctly warm color palettes and the decidedly dark look for the series creates for a sense of seriousness and uncertainty that is unmistakable. Although there is essentially no legitimately disastrous action that takes place within the story, the novel maintains a sense of intrigue and makes for a compelling narrative with the reader subconsciously expecting a disaster towards the end. This compelling narrative is amplified in the adaptation

to create an atmosphere that is downright tension-filled and suspenseful.

This amplification brings us to the idea of the inherent benefits of the web series. As the audio and visual elements and a much greater degree of immersion, consuming a story becomes much more visceral in this format. Although the book engages with the mind at a much deeper level, the web series engages with the mind through multiple senses, amplifying and subconsciously communicating this sense of fear and paranoia at a larger degree of effectiveness.

### **Conclusion**

Having made the distinction that the novel and the web-series have distinct set of political polemics attached to them, we could state that there is but one key aspect that these works, and the constituent imaginary and real political scenarios have in common. This aspect is the idea of how when a leader with a strong misguided feeling on a particular community is given power, it would affect that community mentally, irrespective of whether the threat is justified. The mindset of early settlers in America, be it Jews in the quasi-fictional 1940's in Roth's novel or be it Muslims in post 9/11 America or be it any one of the hundreds of countries' intelligentsia that move to America for better pay and livelihood, is one that is riddled with a looming sense of fear and insecurity. This insecurity for what we can understand is inevitable. Perhaps it stems from the very fabric of America, a country built on the skulls and bones of native Americans, or perhaps it stems from the nature of its inherently racist policies that have not yet changed, or perhaps it's because of the wild south that hasn't been tamed, this insecurity remains to exist.

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