Ragtime and the Movies

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One of the most important structuring devices in E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* is the presence of references, both explicit and implicit, to still photography, motion pictures, and the burgeoning film industry. In a sense, *Ragtime* is *about* the movies, for one of its major characters, Tateh, becomes an early pioneer of the movie industry, and Tateh's metamorphosis into the "Baron Ashkenazy" represents film's potential for movement and transformation in both political and aesthetic terms. In addition, photography and motion pictures illustrate one of the most important philosophical themes of *Ragtime,* the human need to preserve and replicate experience so that it can be analyzed and understood; film becomes a means for characters bewildered by the seeming mutability and formlessness of reality to subject time to rational control. This discussion will explore both the political and aesthetic implications of photography in the novel.

Doctorow's choice of the new film industry as a political analogue to the social background of *Ragtime* is apt, for the early history of the cinema illustrates in a variety of ways the situation of the working classes and the increasing industrialization of the United States at the turn of the century. In *A History of Narrative Film,* David Cook notes that the age of the robber barons coincided with the wrecking of the equipment of rival production companies by Thomas Edison's "goon squads" during the same years that witnessed "bloody strikebreaking by police, National Guardsmen, and Pinkertons all over the country as well as race riots and lynchings"—events which are essential elements in *Ragtime* and form an important backdrop to the political radicalization and growing aesthetic vision of Tateh.[1] Even more important, however, was the existence of a new art form which emerged in the ghettos of New York and Chicago and appealed to a mass audience for the first time, a phenomenon which blurred distinctions between "art" and "entertainment" and thrived, according to Robert Sklar, because it fused technology on the one hand and the urban working-class districts on the other."[2]

The growing popularity of nickelodeons in the United States—and the fact that in 1911 a Russell Sage survey revealed that 78 percent of the New York audience was working class[3]—testifies to the fact that the lower classes had indeed discovered a pastime which would eventually pose a threat, both social and aesthetic, to traditional culture. It is estimated that by 1907 between 8,000 and 10,000 storefront theatres existed across the country,[4] and that by 1908 daily attendance in New York City alone was between 300,000 and 400,000 persons.[5] By 1910 nickelodeons, called "democracy's theatre" by the popular press, were attracting 26 million Americans every week, or a little less than twenty percent of the country's entire population; in New York City more than 25 percent of the city's population went to the movies weekly, while in Chicago it is estimated that the figure was closer to 43 percent. The economic result of the 1910 attendance figures was that national gross receipts totaled $91 million.[6]

More significant, however, than the economic success of the cinema was the implied threat to traditional art and culture which it would soon pose. Walter Benjamin, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," would be one of the first theorists to acknowledge the power and potential of what Doctorow in *Ragtime* calls the "duplicated event." According to Benjamin, the end result of an art form which, because it lacks an "original" also lacks what he calls an "aura" or the concept of authenticity characteristic of non-reproducible art forms, was nothing less than "the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage," an outcome he saw as simultaneously destructive and cathartic.[7] Photography destroys the traditional elitist concept of art by replacing its "ritual" value with an exhibition value, substituting a plurality of copies for the single work of art's unique existence. And at the moment the concept of authenticity is destroyed and art is no longer based on ritual, says Benjamin, it "begins to be based on another practice—politics."[8]

Susan Sontag has also explored photography's political implications, noting that from its inception photography, unlike painting, "implied the capture of the largest number of subjects. . . . The subsequent industrialization of camera technology only carried out a promise inherent in photography from its very beginning: *to democratize all experiences by translating them into images*" (italics mine).[9] Sounding a great deal like Walter Benjamin, whose influence she acknowledges, Sontag says that the traditional fine arts, elitist because they are characterized by a single work produced by an individual, imply a hierarchy of subject matter; the media, on the other hand, weaken the role of the *auteur* by using easily-learned techniques based on chance and by making use of collaborative efforts. (The truth of Sontag's statement can be seen in the fact that in the early days of film-making credits did not exist, even for the film's "stars"; and film theorists, in their attempts to make cinema a more reputable art form, would have to "invent" *auteur* theory.) Unlike the traditional arts, which attempt to "rank" or "order" reality, the media regard the whole world as material; the photographer's approach, like that of the collector, is "antisystematic . . . an affirmation of the subject's thereness, its rightness."[10] When Tateh appears in *Ragtime* after his metamorphosis into

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the filmmaker Baron Ashkenazy, this concept of reality is a crucial aspect of his rejuvenation. His "simple delight" in his surroundings, the fact that "Life excited him. He dwelled on his own sensations and liked to talk about them: the taste of wine or the way the candle flames multiplied in the crystal chandeliers. . . .. it was enormously pleasurable to see the world as the Baron did, alive to every moment"—all this results from his new cinematic vision, symbolized by his constant use of the viewfinder.[11] As the narrator states, "He was a new man. He pointed a camera"; in his new role as a photographer he has discovered what Benjamin calls the "sense of the universal equality of things."[12]

The political ramifications of film would not become a major issue in Great Britain and Europe, where audiences were middle class from the very beginning; and middle-class America did not become concerned with the political and cultural implications of the cinema's popularity until well after it was firmly established as a mass entertainment for the working class. The political implications of the new art form were not, however, lost on Soviet Russia. Lenin's statement that "The cinema is for us the most important of the arts" was based on his realization that a country which spoke one hundred different languages would need a unifying force which could consolidate the nation and communicate effectively without necessitating a common language—or even literacy. The U.S.S.R. set up its state film school in 1919, and its young filmmakers would go on to make important filmic experiments and to articulate montage theory as a political and aesthetic doctrine for the first time. The kind of cultural diversity and need for cultural unity present in post-revolutionary Russia existed in the New York that Doctorow depicts in *Ragtime;* and what photojournalist Jacob Riis calls the "crazy quilt of humanity" in the novel, America's huge and diverse immigrant population, soon discovered that the entertainment offered by the storefront theatres required little money and even less knowledge of received culture. This phenomenon was soon perceived by many of the immigrant businessmen who, realizing the popularity of the nickelodeons in the ghettos, began to set themselves up as theatre managers.

As a result, Tateh's choice of film-making as a career allows him to remain philosophically entrenched in the working class—he still calls himself a "Jewish socialist from Latvia" at the novel's end—*and* provides him with the economic mobility to leave the ghetto. Tateh's Jewish immigrant background, frequently stressed in *Ragtime,* makes him accurately representative of the early entrepreneurs of the film industry, for many of the movies' early producers, as well as their audiences, emerged from the newly-arrived working-class immigrants. Although the film companies were controlled by American-born white Anglo-Saxon protestants before 1910, after the 1915 federal court break-up of the Motion Picture Patents Company, control of the industry shifted to the immigrant (and frequently Jewish) ethnic groups who had initially opened storefront theatres.[13] These men make an anonymous appearance in *Ragtime* as part of the audience at the trial of Harry K. Thaw and shrewdly watch cultural history being made.

Evelyn Nesbit's court appearance, described as creating "the first sex goddess in American history" and providing the "inspiration for the concept of the movie star system and the model for every sex goddess from Theda Bara to Marilyn Monroe," is especially important in terms of her supposed effect on the development of film history and its relationship to capitalism. The narrator mentions that two groups perceived the significance of her impact on the public, the business community and left-wing political agitators. The "business community" is characterized as "a group of accountants and cloak and suit manufacturers who also dabbled in the exhibition of moving pictures, or picture shows as they were called. Some of these men saw the way Evelyn's face on the front page of a newspaper sold out the edition. They realized that there was a process of magnification by which news events established certain individuals in the public consciousness as larger than life. These were the individuals who represented one desirable human characteristic to the exclusion of all others. The businessmen wondered if they could create such individuals not from the accidents of news events but from the deliberate manufactures of their own medium" (pp. 70–71). The "businessman" Doctorow actually has in mind is Carl Laemmle, the German-born Jewish immigrant who, like many other Eastern European Jews who had immigrated to the United States around the turn of the century, initially went into the clothing business and later opened and supplied the nickel theatres. (Hungarian Jewish immigrants William Fox and Adolph Zukor would later follow in Laemmle's footsteps, radically transforming the film industry and founding Twentieth Century-Fox and Paramount Studios, respectively.) Laemmle, a leader of the independent producers who helped defeat the monopoly created by the Motion Picture Patents Company, can also be credited with the creation of the star system which Doctorow suggests that Evelyn Nesbit may have inspired. Laemmle, who suspected the media's potential to create myths out of the individual personalities of film actors and actresses, decided to break with tradition and allow the public access to an actress's name. In 1910 he hired Florence Lawrence, known only up to that time as "The Biograph Girl," for his own international Motion Pictures Company and proceeded to stage one of the first media events. Laemmle planted reports of Lawrence's death in newspapers, in the process revealing her name to the public for the first time, and then angrily denounced the story as a lie spread by the Motion Picture Patents Company; later he had Lawrence appear publicly in St. Louis to prove his point, an appearance that created a near riot. As David Cook observers, "The star system was born," and the film industry would continue to exploit the economic benefits of Laemmle's discovery.

The second group who comprehends the importance of Nesbit's performance, the radical political leaders who "correctly prophesied that she would in the long run be a greater threat to the working man's interests than mine owners or steel manufacturers," realize from the beginning how the film industry in the United States, despite its proletarian origins, would become an active agent of capitalism. Emma Goldman, who frequently functions as a kind of Delphic Oracle in the novel, supplies the explanation for this paradox in her letter to Evelyn Nesbit: "I am often asked the question How can the masses permit themselves to be exploited by the few. The answer is By being persuaded to identify with them. Carrying his newspaper with your picture the laborer goes home to his wife, an exhausted workhorse with the veins standing out in her legs, and he dreams not of justice but of being rich" (p. 71). Walter Benjamin lamented what he called the "cult of the movie star," blaming the phenomenon on the fact that the studio must compensate for the disappearance of the film star's "aura" by promoting an artificial build-up of the star's personality outside the studio, a process which creates the "phony spell of a commodity." As long as the film industry's capital dictates the content of the cinema, says Benjamin, the only socially beneficial effect of the cinema is to promote a "revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art."[14]

Robert Sklar, who takes a more positive view of the political potential of film in his book, believes that the cinema from its beginning provided information that enabled the working classes to move outside the limitations of their social and cultural situation, facilitating social movement and gradually, at least in terms of the composition of film audiences, leveling social distinctions. The cinema has always, he believes, posed a threat to middle-class traditional culture, for many of the earliest films attempted to subvert authority and social control, and movies have continued to be a means of mirroring and criticizing the problems of society. Doctorow's position in *Ragtime,* particularly as it is reflected in his characterization of Tateh, combines these diverse political attitudes to cinema, and Tateh himself embodies the political dichotomy present in the early founders of the movie industry. As Sklar has observed, despite the feelings of distrust they engendered in the middle-class guardians of traditional culture, the early film-makers, although working-class immigrants, were men "deeply committed to the capitalist values, attitudes and ambitions that were part of the dominant social order."[15] Doctorow's rag ship filled with immigrants which inspires such "weird despair" in Father illustrates the same principle, for the narrator ironically observes that "aboard her were only more customers . . . the immigrant population set great store by the American flag" (p. 12). And although Tateh maintains his earlier political ideals, he finds it necessary to "conceive of his life as separate from the fate of the working class" before he can "point his life along the lines of flow of American energy"—a decision which culminates in the naming of his own film company after the most capitalistic of symbols, the buffalo nickel (pp. 108–111). In spite of all this, however, and the fact that in order to become the dynamic and extroverted Baron Ashkenazy Tateh must adopt a faked "nobility," his final filmic vision in the novel is an inclusive, democratic fusion of children of all races and creeds. Unlike Coalhouse Walker and Mother's Younger Brother, whose political radicalism ends in death and destruction, Tateh uses the aesthetic form most available to him, film, to overcome class consciousness by means of creative synthesis rather than destructive fragmentation.

Although clearly interested by the political and social ramifications of the new art form, Doctorow is equally intrigued by its philosophical and aesthetic dimension. The various still photographs taken in the novel, as well as the continual references to motion pictures, illustrate one of its major thematic concerns, the difficulty of comprehending and analyzing the world of ceaseless flux and mutability that perplexes many of the major characters. Theodore Dreiser's search for the "proper alignment" of a chair and Admiral Peary's effort to determine the exact location of the North Pole are equally unsuccessful because both men inhabit a world which is intrinsically unmeasurable, chaotic, and fluid; the narrator observes, while describing Peary's vain attempts to find a "center," that "On this watery planet the sliding sea refused to be fixed" (p. 68). Like the Little Boy, J. P. Morgan seeks a system which can reveal "universal patterns of order and repetition," a philosophy to palliate the ceaseless flux which surrounds him. Both the Little Boy's fascination with the duplicated event and Morgan's obsession with reincarnation are reactions to a world perceived as resisting rational analysis; the Little Boy desires a replication of reality in order to comprehend the mutability of his surroundings, while Morgan accepts a philosophy which combines the concepts of change and repetition—*and* insures a final victory over mortality.

In *Ragtime,* the duplicated event receives the most attention as a way of overcoming—and, paradoxically, exemplifying—the fluidity of reality. The Little Boy goes so far as to attempt a self-duplication which accomplishes the negation of his own distinct personality. Benjamin's essay may help explain the relationship between the Little Boy's experiment with self-duplication at the mirror in Chapter Fifteen and his interest in reproducible events such as photography and aural recording. Speaking of Pirandello's novel *Si Gira,* Benjamin quotes the playwright's observation that "The film actor . . . feels as if in exile—exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice . . . in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence" and then observes that the "feeling of strangeness" is basically the same kind of estrangement that we feel before our image in the mirror.[16] The Little Boy's interest in duplication leads him to test the principle, finally, upon himself; he experiments with destroying his own aura by using the mirror as a camera and in the process, like the film actor, undergoes an almost mystical experience: "He would gaze at himself until there were two selves facing one another, neither of which could claim to be the real one. The sensation was of being disembodied. He was no longer anything exact as a person. He had the dizzying feeling of separating from himself endlessly" (p. 98). The Little Boy, who carries the principle of replication to its final extreme, discovers his own personality to be as mutable and reproducible as the other objects in the physical universe.

The duplicated event of photography provides one means to "fix" the flux of time, a way, in Sontag's words, "of imprisoning reality . . . of making it stand still."[17] Several of the still photographs taken in *Ragtime,* among them Riis' photograph of the poor, Peary's photograph at the Pole, and Morgan's photograph of the robber barons, are pseudo-scientific attempts to use the camera to verify and analyze reality by duplicating a fragment of it. The ability of still photography to "stop" time and subject it to analysis is also true of motion pictures, a characteristic which Tateh claims is one reason for their popularity: "People want to know what is happening to them. For a few pennies they sit and see their selves in movement, running, racing in motorcars. . . . This is most important today, in this country where everybody is so new. There is such a need to understand" (p. 215). However, although photography can furnish us with the sense of manipulating time in order to understand experience, it also, paradoxically, underscores our helplessness before the passage of time. According to Benjamin, the image seen by the "unarmed eye," that is, unmediated, unreproduced reality, has uniqueness and permanence, while still and moving pictures combine the fact of their reproducibility with the sense of their transitoriness. Chapter Fifteen of *Ragtime,* one of the novel's most puzzling chapters, becomes more understandable in light of this statement, in particular the narrator's discussion of the Little Boy's obsession with mutability and instability which is suddenly interrupted by what may at first appear to be a *non sequitur,* the statement that "He liked to go to the moving picture shows downtown at the New Rochelle Theatre on Main Street" (p. 97). The Little Boy's interest in motion pictures results from the fact that they both contradict and reinforce his belief that the universe is eternally evolving into new forms, that it "composed and recomposed itself constantly in an endless process of dissatisfaction," for film simultaneously captures the object in time, thereby preserving it from the mutations of time, while also testifying to time's passage (p. 99). André Bazin, who believes the plastic arts emerged from man's desire to triumph over the ultimate result of time, death, says that still photography gives us "the disturbing presence of lives halted in a set moment in their duration, freed from their destiny . . . it embalms time, rescuing it from its proper corruption."[18] However, this very process, according to Sontag, creates an awareness of the "mortality, vulnerability, mutability" of all things, for "All photographs are *memento mori.*"[19]

It is important to realize that both Sontag and Bazin are talking about still photography here; motion pictures differ from still photographs in that they both freeze time *and* actually show movement in time. In Bazin's words, the cinema is "objectivity in time," capable of capturing the very passage of time and the resulting physical changes. The movies' embodiment of the principles of movement and metamorphosis makes them a particularly appropriate medium for Tateh, who discovers that in order to survive he must transform himself physically and psychically. Significantly, Tateh's film career does not begin with an interest in still photography; rather, his early artworks, called "movie books" in his first contract, create the illusion of movement. In fact, Tateh's first moment of happiness in America comes about when he rides on a train whose ever-increasing speed causes him to smile and then laugh: "for the first time since coming to America he thought it might be possible to live here" (p. 79). After his metamorphosis, he is characterized by constant movement, and the important scene on the beach in which he, Mother, and the children are united culminates in an explosion of motion as he begins to run, somersault, cartwheel, and walk on his hands. In this he contrasts sharply with Father, whose static nature becomes more pronounced as the novel progresses; the fact that he sleeps through the scene on the beach testifies to his growing inability to adapt to—or even be aware of—circumstances. As Mother realizes, "more and more he only demonstrated his limits, that he had reached them, and that he would never move beyond them" (p. 210). Father, who is predictably ignorant and disapproving of Tateh's profession, evinces an almost Jamesian distaste for its economic details, while Tateh, unconstrained by psychological or social boundaries, chooses to work in an art form whose essence is movement and transformation. Tateh bears an interesting resemblance to another Jewish immigrant, Charlie Chaplin, whose portrayal of "The Tramp" embodied both the themes of poverty in the New World—one of his films is entitled *The Immigrant* (1917)—and the possibilities of gaining wealth through magical metamorphoses. Sklar, who describes Chaplin in terms which are equally applicable to Tateh, says that "The Tramp was a masquerader. He possessed mysterious pasts and unknown futures. He could pose as anyone: could he be, or become, that person too?" and believes that Chaplin's recognition of social extremes led him to "subvert the social order and put in its place . . . a powerful new imaginative order founded on the creative possibilities of magical transformations."[20] Like Chaplin, who also impersonates a baron in *Caught in a Cabaret,* Tateh uses the power of his imagination to transmute reality and to enlarge his personal boundaries. Tateh provides a sharp contrast with Houdini, who, as the narrator observes, "To the end . . . would be almost totally unaware of the design of his career, the great map of revolution laid out by his life" (p. 29). In one sense the statement is political, for although Houdini is another immigrant in the novel whose life illustrates the possibilities for acquiring fame and wealth in America, he remains awed and intimidated by those born into a higher social class. More important, however, is Houdini's failure to realize what his audiences pay to see: their fascination with his ability magically to transform—and escape from—a reality previously perceived as static and impervious to manipulation. In this sense Houdini appeals to the same need in the public that motion pictures would later satisfy; not coincidentally it was another professional magician, Georges Méliès, who from the earliest days of the cinema began to make films which violated the viewers' conception of the physical world by exploiting the illusionist potential of the medium.

Ragtime posits a world which is ultimately mysterious, beyond a final rational explanation which can bring together all the threads of the narrative. Of all the characters in the novel, Emma Goldman, who has accepted what she calls the "mystical rule of all experience," is least concerned with an insistence on rational analysis and causality. "Who can say," she says to Evelyn Nesbit, "who are the instrumentalities and who are the people? Which of us causes, and lives in others to cause, and which of us is meant thereby to live?" (p. 50). In this she illustrates what Susan Sontag believes is a typically American approach to reality; Sontag suggests that Americans have always felt their national experience to be "so stupendous, and mutable, that it would be the rankest presumption to approach it in a classifying, scientific way." As a result, reality, particularly in its American version, must be got at indirectly, by "subterfuge—breaking it off into strange fragments that could somehow, by synecdoche, be taken for the whole."[21] Photography becomes a uniquely American way of dealing with experience, for photographers abandon attempts to comprehend reality and instead begin to "collect" fragments of it. Significantly, the Little Boy's interest in the concept of duplication is combined with a passion for collecting discarded items whose worth are proved by their neglect (in this he resembles another collector, Walter Benjamin, who perceived an object's significance to be in inverse ratio to its size). Photography can be described as an unscientific effort to collect pieces of a world which is unclassifiable and incomprehensible; and photography, still or moving, becomes a statement about the fundamental mysteriousness of experience by providing a wealth of visual information while denying any kind of attitude or explanation; in Roland Barthes' words, the photograph is a "message without a code."[22] Diane Arbus has observed that "A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know," and photography, which gives us objective statements about our surroundings by preserving events in time, can also function to mystify further our conception of reality. Doctorow's prose style, with its almost hypnotic repetition of short, standard English sentences which rarely make use of metaphorical or figurative language, is an attempt to approximate the mysterious opacity of the photographed image. The novel's simplistic prose and plethora of "facts" create the very impenetrability of the narrative; it is as if the narrator presents the reader with an interminable series of photographs and challenges him to decipher them.

Doctorow also seeks other characteristics—and privileges—of photography and cinema for his novel. America's appropriation of European art forms, seen as "vulgar" by an appalled Sigmund Freud and dismissed as "picking the garbage pails of Europe" by a contemptuous Henry Ford, is accurately understood by immigrant Jacob Riis as "the birth of a *new aesthetic* in European art" (p. 36, italics mine). The cinema is an important dimension of this "new aesthetic," a uniquely American art which unabashedly combines business, technology, and aesthetics and subsumes the traditional arts—literature, music, painting, and history itself—while creating a new mass medium which shatters conventional distinctions between high art and popular culture. Doctorow, who has stated that he wants *Ragtime* to be read by working-class people, desires the same audience which created the early film industry and tacitly claims one of the cinema's privileges for the novel form: the right, in the words of John Fowles' Daniel Martin, to "gut" other arts for its material, even if this may mean making use of the works of other novelists such as Dos Passos and Kleist. As a result, critics who believe *Ragtime* to be derivative have simply missed the point, for Doctorow attempts to make the novel, like film, part of a "new aesthetic" which irreverently appropriates all of art and experience for its material without compromising its artistic independence.

Notes

1. David Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1981), p. 34.
2. Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 123.
3. Russell Merritt, "Nickelodeon Theaters 1905–1914: Building an Audience for the Movies," in *The American Film Industry,* ed. Tino Balio (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1976), p. 63.
4. Cook, p. 28.
5. Sklar, p. 16.
6. Merritt, p. 63.
7. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations,* trans. Harry Zohn and ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968), p. 223.
8. Benjamin, p. 226.
9. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977), p. 7.
10. Sontag, p. 77.
11. E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 217. Subsequent page references to *Ragtime* will be given parenthetically.
12. Benjamin, p. 225.
13. Sklar, p. 14.
14. Benjamin, p. 233.
15. Sklar, pp. 90–91. Sklar describes the reaction of many Americans to the newly-acquired wealth and power of the theatre managers as a "mixture of awe and amusement" and mentions that the term "movie mogul" came into American English around 1915, "nicely describing the immigrant producers in the eyes of the public—part splendid emperors, part barbarian invaders" (p. 47).
16. Benjamin, pp. 231–232.

17. Sontag, p. 163.

18. André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What Is Cinema?* Vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1967), p. 14.

19. Sontag, p. 15.

20. Sklar, pp. 110–111.

21. Sontag, p. 66.

22. Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *Image-Music-Text,* trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 17.

E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* and the Dialectics of Change

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The epigraph for E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* is, appropriately, a quotation from Scott Joplin: "Do not play this piece fast. It is never right to play Ragtime fast." This epigraph suggests the conflict that seems to hold together Doctorow's odd mixture of fictional and historical characters and events: the struggle between change and stability.[1] Like Joplin's caution for restraint in the face of an impulse for speed, most of the characters and events reflect the dialectical struggle between time's inexorable force toward change and the human desire for stability. Generally, the characters who recognize the nature of the conflict fare much better than those who resist change. Both the content and the form of *Ragtime* support this theme.

The time the book covers, roughly 1900–1917, the Ragtime Era, was a time of great social, political, scientific, and industrial change in America, reflected as well in the age's other name—the Progressive Era. The population of America rose significantly during the period, influenced greatly by the flood of immigrants who washed over Ellis Island onto America's shore. Most settled in the cities as America became an urban rather than a rural nation. Some languished in a poverty they did not expect to find; others found jobs in sweatshops; still others manned posts in Henry Ford's assembly line. Both the assembly line and the automobile greatly affected the course of American history. The growth of labor unions, begun in the late nineteenth century, continued. Political leaders resisted the unions, but most Americans were confident that humankind was moving toward perfection. Women, likewise, believed in and worked for positive change. The nature of leisure altered as well: the magic lantern turned into the motion picture; musical tastes turned toward ragtime music.

Doctorow uses ragtime music as a metaphor for the struggle between stability and change. The basis for ragtime music is the tension between a restrained, ordered rhythm played by the left hand and free-flowing syncopation by the right (Blesh and Janis 7). Doctorow acknowledges this dual aspect when Coalhouse Walker plays ragtime for the family: "The pianist sat stiffly

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