"This is a riot you’re in": Hollywood and American Mass Culture in Nathanael West’s The Day of the Locust

It is an obvious understatement to say that Hollywood has played an important role in twentieth-century American culture. As much as the films which it produced, Hollywood itself has been a central component of our national mythology; a site, both real and symbolic, for the collision of conflicting energies and agendas: business and art, work and leisure, success and failure, sex and death. Hollywood possesses a contradictory cultural identity as both the “promised land” and the “wasteland,” a redemptive paradise built upon an ethos of leisure and consumption or the epicenter of cultural crisis and moral decay. It has often evoked the sense of an ending: not just the terminal point in the historical process of Western expansion but the conclusion of a journey toward national identity, either the fulfillment or the betrayal of the American dream. For some Hollywood has been an embodiment of our national character while for others it has been the center of cultural influences which are essentially “foreign,” a contaminating presence which needs to be censored and contained. Above all Hollywood has been America’s dream factory, both the center and the source of collective fantasies in the movies, and as such its image has been tied to an ongoing set of arguments over the character of American mass culture.

Of course it was Hollywood’s films of the twenties and thirties which comprised its most direct contribution to American culture. But Hollywood was always more than just a place where movies were made. During its “Golden Age,” Hollywood was a highly charged, symbolic site in the American landscape, a focal point of mass expectations and desires, by turns both envied and reviled. On the one hand it offered a remarkably appealing set of images and values to the rest of the country based upon an ambiance of opportunity and affluence, an exaggerated version of the American myth of success. At the same time Hollywood was linked to an image of sexual excess and moral lassitude which made it a frequently evoked symbol of crumbling social values and cultural decline. Here, unique geographic, technological, and economic circumstances combined to produce a social milieu
rife with metaphorical possibilities for the interpretation of American culture, making it a microcosm of the best and worst in American life. As Katherine Fullerton Gerould observed, “Hollywood, you see, is not simply a suburb of Los Angeles; it is a suburb of every town in the country” (157), and it is precisely this larger, symbolic purview which Nathanael West evoked in his 1939 novel *The Day of the Locust*.

One of the most important discursive sites in which arguments about Hollywood have been presented is prose fiction, particularly that genre of American writing known as the Hollywood novel. Fictional treatments of Hollywood have generally functioned, with varying degrees of purpose and insight, as commentaries on mass culture, and the tenor of this commentary has been largely critical. Hollywood fictions of this period often reveal what Warren Susman referred to as “the great fear” which runs through much of the writing of the twenties and thirties: a pervasive cultural anxiety about “whether any great industrial and democratic mass society can maintain a significant level of civilization, and whether mass education and mass communication will allow any civilization to survive” (107). While much postmodern cultural theory sets out to reclaim the products of mass culture through deconstructive or resistant readings aimed at uncovering oppositional elements at work there, fiction about Hollywood has most often embraced an analysis of mass culture which sees in it a mechanism of control based on manipulation and deceit. For most writers who approached it, the Hollywood “culture industry” was synonymous with vulgarity, sham, and deception and it often served as a convenient symbol for the moral and aesthetic emptiness of ersatz American culture. Writing out of implicitly modernist cultural assumptions, their works frequently presented Hollywood as an emblem of cultural decline, a totalized and demonic figure for a system of cultural production which they saw as undermining established aesthetic forms and values through the mass market formulas of popular entertainment. West’s fiction is exemplary in this regard.

The extent to which Hollywood’s image was shaped and defined by literary representations suggests the degree of interest and importance attached to Hollywood in American culture and provides a set of texts which permit a unique analysis of Hollywood as a cultural idea. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Last Tycoon*, Budd Schulberg’s *What Makes Sammy Run?* and West’s *The Day of the Locust* are perhaps the best known Hollywood novels, yet there are important differences between these texts. Fitzgerald and Schulberg center their examinations of Hollywood on the personality of a representative central figure: Monroe Stahr represents the studio executive as a romantic, tragic hero; Sammy Glick exemplifies the pathology of rampant individualism. While Fitzgerald’s and Schulberg’s works gesture toward a conception of Hollywood as “an embodiment of larger forces in American society” (Sklar 242), their analyses are limited by a psychologizing approach toward their central characters. *The Day of the Locust*, on the other hand, is a markedly decentered narrative, with Tod Hackett providing only a tenuous, connecting presence around which the other characters revolve. Indeed, West’s major concern is not an emblematic central figure at all, but rather Hollywood itself: a unique social and material landscape dominated by a single occupation—moviemaking—whose excesses and illusions give rise to monstrous expectations and desires, and produce a pervasive sense of unreality. Moreover, to a greater extent than Fitzgerald or Schulberg, West sets out to expose the contradictions at the center of the Hollywood myth, exploring the symbolic dimensions of Hollywood as a cultural idea.

For West, Hollywood became the symbol of a mass culture which functioned as both a source of collective dreams and an instrument of deception and control. In all of his novels West explored how human hopes and aspirations, as well as the narrative and aesthetic forms through which we impose a semblance of meaning on the contingencies of experience, were increasingly derived from a mass culture which offered mere escape and illusion—the false optimism of the happy ending. As he wrote in *Miss Lonelyhearts*,

Men have always fought their misery with dreams. Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio, and newspapers. Among many betrayals, this one is the worst. (*Collected Works* 242)
The “movies, radio, and newspapers,” the dominant mass media of the first half of the century, were the primary instruments of the “business of dreams” which he attacked in his fiction. His works persistently expose the tissue of lies and false expectations fostered by mass culture which infect his character’s lives. Yet he also recognized the necessity of dreams in the face of a world filled with suffering. As he wrote in *The Day of the Locust*, “any dream was better than no dream and beggars couldn’t be choosers” (61). In all of West’s novels it is the discrepancy between people’s lives and the threadbare and fragmentary collective dreams to which they cling which is the source of the bitterness and violence of his fiction.

It comes as no surprise then that West’s focus in *The Day of the Locust* is not on the glamorous aspects of the Hollywood myth, those images of affluence and luxury which made it such an alluring idea in the popular imagination of the thirties. Nor is he interested in those who hold power in the movie business—the Monroe Stahrs and Sammy Glicks who interest Fitzgerald and Schulberg. Rather, he examines the marginal figures who exist on the fringes of the film industry—Faye and Harry Greener, Earl Shoop, Adore Loomis, subalterns in the Hollywood scheme—as well as the looming collective subject of the novel, the mob of movie fans, health faddists, and retired shopkeepers “who had come to California to die,” bringing with them their unfulfilled longings for success and happiness. Through them, and their chief representative Homer Simpson, West explored the fate of those who, throughout the 1930s, were drawn by the golden promises of life in southern California and ended up in Hollywood hoping to find some meaning to existence in the fleeting glimpse of a film star entering an elegant restaurant or the procession of celebrities at a movie premiere. The underlying social fact uncovered by West’s novel is that at a time when Hollywood was promoting an ethos of optimism and social fantasy—reshaping the American dream in its own glamorous image through an aura of luxury and romance—the conditions of life for most Americans permitted only a vicarious encounter with Hollywood’s affluence and fame. The idea of Hollywood as a kind of “leisure utopia” (May 167), in which the lifestyles of the stars served as models of social and economic behavior for society at large, is a notion that West goes to considerable lengths to explode, focusing instead on the experience of those who watched the Hollywood party from outside the gates. Beneath the desire for vicarious experience in the lives of the stars, fuelled by fan magazines and a diet of cinematic confections, West sensed the rumblings of envy and bitterness. For in Hollywood the whole apparatus of mass fantasy, the strings and wires which animated the dream life of the nation, were most visible, and therefore most open to the contempt of those who had been seduced by them. Hollywood, in *The Day of the Locust*, was fashioned by West into a hyperbolic cultural symbol, a metaphorical landscape of American life littered with the unkept promises of mass culture.

Los Angeles in the late thirties provided West with a perfect symbol for this culture. He conceived of the sprawling metropolis as a vast, urban extension of the studio back lots, a place where the harsh realities of the Depression could be forgotten in the psychic jungle of cult religions, or concealed behind a deceptive facade of architectural fantasy. In fact the intermingling of illusion and reality in Hollywood is one of the book’s central ideas: we see it on the opening page with the description of a Napoleonic army which slowly dissolves into a procession of extras on their way to a sound stage. The movie studios and back lots represent for West a zone of shifting and indeterminate realities, where the presumably stable categories of fact and fantasy soften and melt into one another. And the artifice that Tod Hackett observes there finds a parallel in the larger social environment, in the homes and the dress of the people whom he sees on the street with their “Tyrolean” hats and “miniature Rhine Castle” houses. In Hollywood, the business of illusion-making is not confined by the factory walls of the studios; it spills out into “real” life where it is taken up as masquerade and facade. Thus it is on a cognitive level that West mounts his subversive vision of American mass culture. It is a vision which suggests more than just an unsettling of the familiar and the conventional; it implies an erosion, an undermining of the capacity to make any meaningful distinction between the real and the unreal. In *The Day of the Locust*,...
442/The Day of the Locust

West ushers us into a cultural funhouse where what seems real is illusory; yet it is the illusions which are, in some sense, the true reality of Hollywood.

As well as embodying a breakdown of cognitive functions, West’s Hollywood also signals a crisis of historical identity. In West’s Hollywood, as David Fine has remarked, “the past is elsewhere; history is in the East” (196). The rapid growth of Los Angeles in the first decades of this century produced an urban environment cut off from a clear sense of the past. As a correspondent for the Saturday Evening Post observed in 1930, Los Angeles was seen as a city “without a history”: “A city with no past, ephemeral, each day new again, existing only in the present like a man without a shadow, unable to demonstrate his own reality” (Garrett 134). Thus Los Angeles made a virtue not of tradition but of newness and novelty. For instance, in the melange of architectural styles which West describes, it sought to fill the cultural vacuum produced by an absence of history with a sense of romance and fantasy derived from the movies. As historian Charles Lockwood has noted, “architectural purity was not an important consideration in Los Angeles at the time. Nor has it ever been”; instead what mattered was “to achieve a romantic, faraway look, and most architects freely mixed different national, historic, and aesthetic styles on the same house to picturesque, often baffling effect” (152). The fantasy architecture West shows us becomes a symptom of Hollywood’s isolation from history and its distance from established cultural traditions—the outward sign of people in flight from reality and cut off from the past. And like the studio sets, these houses are essentially stage illusions created from “plaster, lath, and paper.” In this pattern of architectural imagery, West is fashioning a metaphor which, like Hollywood itself, represents at once the need to dream and the spurious forms which the dreams are made to assume.

In this respect the studios are only the most acute examples of a more pervasive cultural phenomenon—the impulse to make our dreams our reality by substituting a romanticized and fantastic imitation of the past for the hard realities of the present. It is significant that the films in production on the National lot (West’s fictional studio) have titles which imply big budget historical epics such as Manifest Destiny, The Great Divide, and Waterloo, for they come to suggest Hollywood’s confusion of history and fantasy. In one of the most compelling episodes, Tod wanders through the studio back lot which comes to represent a recapitulation of human history. Here only fragments of the past are preserved in empty facades and half-constructed buildings; like L.A.’s architectural landscape, the back lot is a hodgepodge of historical periods and styles. It is an ironic vision of history, part museum, part junkyard, and completely in the service of illusion, as the occasional film work which he observes reminds us. And it is also a commentary on the fragile nature of historical experience. As one of the central elements in the Hollywood metaphor, the studio back lot is a symbolic space; it represents a crisis of historical identity and the failure to separate myth from reality within American culture, which is itself a kind of repository of cultural models. The uncertainty and instability at the core of American historical identity reveals a profound anxiety about the past and our relationship to it; an anxiety which has often led to the conflation of history and myth in the mass dreams of the movies.

But more importantly, the back lot suggests the way in which our relationship to both the past and present is mediated by mass culture. It is not authentic historical artifacts which Tod stumbles over on the back lot—genuine, physical connections to a real, historical past—but the discarded props and flimsy sets of the movie business. The back lot is the “final dumping ground” of American culture, the “dream dump” of a culture industry which offers its audiences an escape from history and the oppression of the real through fantasies and illusions capable of producing only mediated and inauthentic versions of self and world.

The Day of the Locust presents an extremely dark, apocalyptic vision of American mass culture, a vision which finds its purest expression in Tod’s painting. “The Burning of Los Angeles” is an allegory of cultural crisis, a portrait of mob violence which materializes at the end of the book in the riot which occurs, significantly, at a Hollywood premiere. Yet it is anticipated earlier in the novel in another Hollywood setting: the huge set of Mount St. Jean on which the studio is recreating the battle of Waterloo. Here again West points to the
collapse of boundaries between reality and illusion, describing the scene as if it were a real battle with only occasional reminders—such as an assistant director who repeatedly rehearse the death of an extra—as signals of the episode’s profilmic context. And when the huge set, which is unfinished, collapses under the weight of the actors, the event takes on symbolic significance. “It was the classic mistake, Tod realized, the same one Napoleon had made. . . . The result had been disaster for the French; the beginning of the end” (95). West parallels the disaster on the Hollywood movie set with the historical disaster of Waterloo, suggesting a larger historical context for the events of the novel. And underlying this enlarged frame of reference is a notion of Hollywood as a symbol of American mass culture. In the novel, Hollywood becomes our Waterloo, “the beginning of the end” for American civilization (to recall Susman’s term). It is this idea which is most dramatically proposed by the book’s conclusion.

The eruption of mob violence at a Hollywood premiere in The Day of the Locust is one of the great set pieces of twentieth century American literature. The scene ultimately goes beyond the crises of individual characters to explore the larger social and cultural contexts for violence with which the novel is concerned. Once more West confronts us with the collective subject of the novel: “the cheated and betrayed,” who await the arrival of the stars outside of Kahn’s Persian Palace, the novel’s ultimate example of fantasy architecture. West presents a grim portrait of the “starers” who have come to Hollywood in search of their dreams, only to find that it cannot support the weight of their inflated expectations and desires. Disillusioned in life they are bitter and restless; disillusioned in the dreams which have sustained them, they become savage and brutal, and their disappointment finally finds release in violence. Yet a grotesque, carnival atmosphere spreads through the crush of bodies. Two stout women exchange sexual banter with the men who are pressed lasciviously against them by the crowd. Trapped within the swells and currents of the mob, Tod Hackett overhears one of the women say, “there was a rush and I was in the middle.”

“Yeah. Somebody hollered. ‘Here comes Gary Cooper.’ and then wham!”

“That ain’t it,” said a little man wearing a cloth cap and pullover sweater. “This is a riot you’re in.” (151)

At this moment the spectacle of mass entertainment offered by the premiere is upstaged by the specter of mass violence and social upheaval. West’s apocalyptic vision of Hollywood erupts in this scene of mayhem and terror; a scene which reveals his own anxieties about mass culture and its effects upon American civilization. The “little man” in “cloth cap and pullover sweater” is a fitting emblem of Hollywood’s mass audience, made “savage and bitter” by “boredom and disappointment” (145). In Hollywood, the capital of illusion, the apotheosis of the American dream, West discovered a potent metaphor for what he saw as the empty promises of mass culture. Indeed, the scene suggests a culmination of the concerns which pervade all of his novels; it is in the Hollywood riot that Broad-shoulders, Sick-of-it-all, and Desperate throw down their burdens and seek revenge. The critique of Hollywood which West presents in this novel suggests a deep insight into the tensions which underlay American life and the mass culture of the 1930s. Writing about Hollywood near the end of its “Golden Age,” on the brink of legal and technological changes which would restructure the film industry and redefine Hollywood’s role in American life, West fashioned the film capital into a symbol of crisis and upheaval, an emblem of the failure of mass culture and the danger of that betrayal.

John Springer
University of Oklahoma

Works Cited


