

Supervisor's Report on the MA Thesis *Mass Culture in the Novels of Nathanael West* by Jan Hrubín

The thesis is a valuable attempt to analyze major fictional works of Nathanael West in the context of mass culture as well as the avant-garde art (Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Warhol). The author makes a good use of a wide range of secondary literature, both of works on the avant-garde and mass culture, and of West criticism. Especially valuable are passages discussing West's relationship to kitsch, refuting (with the help of Lisa Otty's analyses) Clement Greenberg's theory and showing the productive nature of West's ambivalent attitude to kitsch. Discussions of West's works are thorough, focusing on characters, imagery and style.

There are only a few critical comments to be made:

Sometimes the author's preoccupation with details seems to blur the overall structure of chapters and the main line of his interpretive argument. More focused treatment would be good especially in *The Day of the Locust*, whose apocalyptic structure and imagery could be compared to other works about Los Angeles and Hollywood.

Also, the role of different arts and their representations of reality (literature, theatre, painting, architecture and film) in *The Day of the Locust* would deserve more systematic treatment. For instance, West's novel could be seen as a subversion of the romantic idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a moment, when all concepts of "high" art lose their meaning in the society shaped by the manipulation of the masses. Another possibility would be to trace more systematically the role of technology in all the analyzed works, starting with the newspaper and ending with film technologies. A useful point of departure would be Walter Benjamin's famous essay "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction".

Finally, objections may be raised against the insufficient exploration of West's affinities with surrealism. In the thesis, this movement is mostly treated together with dada, which may sometimes be productive (as in the reading of *Miss Lonelyhearts*). At other times (in the interpretation of *The Day of the Locust*), surrealist affinities of West's work (e.g., analogies with and differences from Dalí's paintings, or the use of architecture and art objects in de Chirico's work) would deserve closer attention.

Nonetheless, these remarks do not imply any substantial problems, let alone serious faults. Hrubín's thesis is a stimulating, complex treatment of West's fiction in the context of the avant-garde between the wars as well as mass culture. It exceeds the standard of MA theses at the department by its independent and knowledgeable approach to West, which outlines new interpretation possibilities. Therefore I propose to grade it "výborně".

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