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Mass Culture in the Novels of Nathanael West

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Prague, date:

Děkuji vedoucímu této diplomové práce, panu profesorovi Martinovi Procházkovi, za mé dobré nasměrování a cenné rady. A také za jeho trpělivost.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením magisterské práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the MA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

Anotace: Práce pojednává o pohledu na masovou kulturu v posledních třech románech amerického spisovatele Nathanaela Westa (tj. *Miss Lonelyhearts*, *A Cool Million* a *The Day of the Locust*). Hlavní teze je, že tyto romány nemají čistě negativní pohled na masovou kulturu, i přesto, že ji kritizují. První dvě kapitoly popisují kulturní prostředí v době, kdy West tvořil, včetně modernismu, masové výroby a názorů na masovou kulturu, které byly typické v 30. letech minulého století. Následující dvě kapitoly na tomto základě detailně rozebírají Westův přístup k masové kultuře ve všech třech jeho románech.

Annotation: The thesis deals with the views on mass culture in the last three novels of the American writer Nathanael West (i.e. *Miss Lonelyhearts*, *A Cool Million* and *The Day of the Locust*). The main argument is that while these novels often criticize mass culture, their views of it are rather ambivalent than purely negative. The first two chapters describe the cultural context that informed the novels and their view of mass culture, including modernism, the rise of mass production, and opinions of mass culture that were typical in the 1930s. The next two chapters then proceed to examine in detail the many uses of mass culture in the novels.

Klíčová slova: Nathanael West, masová kultura, umění, dada, modernismus, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Andy Warhol, Horatio Alger, chaotický-exotický sloh, velkovýroba, Hollywood, klišé, anomie, křesťanství, tradice, komiks, dehierarchizace, sociokulturní změna, média, násilí, dehumanizace, herectví, filmový průmysl.

Key words: Nathanael West, mass culture, art, Dada, modernism, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Andy Warhol, Horatio Alger, the chaotic-exotic style, mass production, Hollywood, clichés, anomie, Christianity, tradition, comic strip, dehierarchization, sociocultural change, media, violence, dehumanization, acting, film industry.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The last three novels of Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, *A Cool Million*, and *The Day of the Locust*, are often read as attacks on mass culture, but West's attitude may be interpreted as actually being more complex and ambivalent. In this essay, I use the term "mass culture" in the wider and more basic sense of the term, which refers to entertainment products like Hollywood movies, burlesque, vaudeville, popular music, newspapers, comic strips, and other such items that are seen as distinct from high culture (such as avant-garde art, canonized traditional art, or art that is seen as likely to appeal to an educated and sophisticated audience). I will make no distinction between the terms "mass culture" and "popular culture" here, using both of them to refer to these entertainment products.

The basic situation is as follows. It is perhaps easy to see the three novels as being against mass culture when they contain a few parts that overtly speak out against it (e.g. the statement in *Miss Lonelyhearts* about mass culture being "puerile"¹, *The Day of the Locust's* statement about the kitschy buildings in Los Angeles being "truly monstrous"², the makers of mass culture products in all three of the novels being ruthlessly interested in making a profit without a regard for moral considerations, the "starers" in *The Day of the Locust* being emotionally numbed by their repeated exposure to sexuality and violence in mass culture). The novels also connect mass culture to various social ills, including poverty, street violence, prostitution and fascism. Furthermore, some parts of these books may (or may not) be interpreted as making fun of and correspondingly attacking mass culture. It is also possible that the theories and ideas that some West commentators use to analyze West's works might

¹ Nathanael West, "Miss Lonelyhearts," *The Complete Works of Nathanael West* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1957) 115. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

² Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983) 24. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

be more anti-mass-culture than the novels themselves and cause the commentators to attribute ideas to the novels that the novels might not necessarily contain in themselves. The commentators could also assume that since West was a modernist writer, he shared modernism's idea that mass culture should be rejected for its vacuousness while high, canonized or avant garde art should be preserved and appreciated. On the other hand, though, the novels contain many allusions to mass culture, and even their forms are at least partially derived from it. West demonstrates a great knowledge of mass culture - perhaps even the knowledge of a hardcore fan - which implies that he spent a lot of time reading, watching, and listening to it. Jay Martin's biography of West even contains at least a few mentions of West enjoying popular culture (mainly comic strips, Hollywood movies and vaudeville)³. As I will explain later, it could be argued that the allusions to mass culture in West are used to signify and/or give form to various relatively sophisticated ideas or that a mass culture product sometimes acts as a found object in West's work (i.e. the reader can have a new view of an object when it is placed into an unconventional context). Plus, there are even some moments in the novels that could be read as praising some mass culture product.

Thus, my thesis is that West's last three novels should not be read as completely privileging art and rejecting mass culture. Rather, their view of mass culture is actually ambivalent in the sense that they depict products of both art and mass culture as texts that can have many different qualities and that should followingly be subject to scrutiny and criticism before being judged. Such a view corresponds to the conditions of the U.S. in the early 20th century, in which mass culture and mass-produced commodities were a relatively new phenomenon that saturated daily life while traditional standards for art (as well as norms in general) were in decline. Also, in all three of the novels, West depicts people who suffer for various reasons while being surrounded by popular entertainments that might make them feel mildly better psychologically, even though this escapism is insufficient as a solution to

³ Jay Martin, *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970) 64, 108, 141, 143, 203.

people's suffering. In fact, it could be argued that West is generally more concerned with cruelty and suffering in the context of American culture than with mass culture itself. Thus, mass culture is perceived by West as a set of mediums that need not be purely negative in themselves but that are often abused by their corrupt producers in various ways.

The first chapter places West into the context of three subgroups of American modernists that did not have a purely negative view of mass culture: the Dadaists, the modernists who valued at least some forms of mass culture, and the modernists who had an interest in mass culture because of their left wing politics and corresponding interest in working class people. Afterwards, it draws some analogies between West's uses of mass culture and those of James Joyce and T. S. Eliot. Finally, it also applies Lisa Otty's ideas about some works by Andy Warhol to West's uses of mass culture.

The second chapter basically provides the background for the two chapters that follow. It briefly describes the rise of mass produced commodities and entertainments of the late 19th and early 20th century and the simultaneous decline of various traditional norms, as this sociocultural situation is a major theme in all three of the novels under discussion here. This chapter also summarizes the criticism of the Hollywood film industry by the conservative business magazine *Fortune* from 1932, which helps us to see some of the typical arguments against this sociocultural change and some of the issues related to the Hollywood film industry that are dealt with in *The Day of the Locust*.

The third chapter examines the depictions of mass culture in both *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *A Cool Million*. In my discussion of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, I initially focus mainly on the theme of how the novel depicts an anomic world where mass culture is used to mollify its users' suffering through dreams in the early 20th century, and where art and Christianity are discussed as possibly superior sources of soothing dreams against suffering. However, this also entails discussions of Shrike's Dadaist parodies of mass culture, the novel's criticisms of the inanity and untruthfulness of mass culture, and the novel's apparent conclusion that art,

Christianity and mass culture are all mere pleasant (if doubtful) diversions in an anomic world where people are doomed to suffer and die, and where nothing is revered.

Afterwards, I turn to explaining how *Miss Lonelyhearts* is like a comic strip (as West himself stated that he used comic strip-like devices when writing it), the possible rationale behind this strategy, and the effects of this strategy. Oddly, this use of elements of comic strips points to a somewhat affirmative view of mass culture (in contrast to the novel's content), in which comic strips or mass culture could be perceived as a source of devices that could be used to make literature more modern and innovative. However, this view is tempered by the fact that the "comic strip form" also corresponds to the novel's matter-of-fact depictions of violence as well as its depiction of art and mass culture as being equally inconsequential.

The following subchapter turns to examining West's uses of mass culture citations in *A Cool Million*. The first matter that is discussed is the novel's Horatio Alger-like form, which I mainly interpret as showing that West saw Alger's depictions of how one could succeed in America as inaccurate. Next, I explain and interpret the few explicit mentions of mass culture in the novel, mainly by connecting them with some arguments and events of the 1930s. Here, I find that *A Cool Million* depicts mass culture as giving inaccurate messages about American history while hiding the human suffering that goes into the production of entertainment products. It also emphasizes that depictions of history are always strongly influenced by the motives of their creators. However, I also find that *A Cool Million* shows that mass culture could still be used to give truthful messages about the world in spite of how mass culture is often abused by its corrupt producers.

The fourth chapter deals with the many different uses of mass culture in *The Day of the Locust*. In its first subchapter, I explain the "chaotic-exotic style" of Hollywood as it is depicted in this novel, pointing to Tod's ambivalent view of it and to the theme of the poor suffering people of Hollywood being surrounded by entertaining objects that appeal to their

fantasies. The second subchapter examines the characters Harry and Faye Greener. Both of these characters are actors who internalized the roles they repeatedly play. I explain the various allusions involved in this plot device, including allusions to how stars are "discovered" and/or created in Hollywood; differences between stage and film acting; method acting; the problem of bodily movements being an unreliable index for what a person thinks and feels; and the idea that people become machine-like when performing dull, repetitive tasks under capitalism.

The third subchapter makes the argument that art is not privileged over mass culture in *The Day of the Locust*, but that art and mass culture are basically sets of texts that surround the characters and influence their thinking. Furthermore, the novel shows that art is often informed by mass culture just as mass culture is often informed by art. These points are demonstrated mainly through Tod's many thoughts related to art and mass culture. In the fourth subchapter, the examined topic is how the *Day of the Locust* characters actually use mass culture and/or what effects mass culture has upon them. The novel proves to be ambivalent in this respect as well, since it depicts mass culture as encouraging violence and as giving dubious messages to the characters, but it also shows how mass culture consoles the characters, entertains them, gives them hope, and helps to organize their thoughts. This subchapter also correspondingly discusses the possible implied meanings of the scene at the Cinderella bar and Faye's imagined movie plots. The fifth subchapter is the chapter's conclusion, which basically summarizes its findings.

The conclusion attempts to answer the question of what exactly is West's attitude to mass culture in his novels (on the basis of what was stated in the preceding chapters). West really does criticize mass culture for several different reasons. However, when we subject his mass culture citations to a close reading, we find places where he depicts mass culture in a positive light and also places where he depicts a work of mass culture as having both positive and negative qualities. The implied meaning seems to be that he sees both art and mass culture as

multifaceted texts that should be subject to scrutiny before being judged. His work also seems to hint at mass culture being more positive when it does not have the corrupt interests of big business behind it. Finally, as West uses mass culture citations in the forms of his novels, this could imply that mass culture could have a positive value by contributing to making art progressive and modern.

2. NATHANAEL WEST AND MASS CULTURE: AN AMBIGUOUS RELATIONSHIP

The preceding introduction posed the main problem of this essay: how can one account for the contradiction of West using so many mass culture citations in his work while often writing against it? This chapter will attempt to at least partially explain this apparent contradiction by placing West in the context of some of the intellectual trends of his time (roughly from the 1910s until the 1930s). The chapter will also include a brief application of Lisa Otty's ideas about Andy Warhol's art to West's work.

2.1. American Modernism and Mass Culture

One explanation of the novels' mass culture citations can be discovered in certain streams of American modernism. It is true that modernism often praised high, canonized or avant garde art for its complexity, its allusiveness, its self-reference, the "real" emotions it causes, and even its morality⁴. Mass culture was assumed to lack these qualities and was also seen as being formulaic, as provoking "cheap, mechanical" emotional responses and as encouraging immorality and "social, national, and herd prejudices"⁵. However, R. Brandon Kershner points out that there were several minority movements within modernism that defended mass culture at least to some extent:

1. Marinetti's pro-technology stream of modernism;
2. Dada, which was against traditional genteel standards in art;

⁴ R. Brandon Kershner, "Modernity, Postmodernity and Popular Culture in Joyce and Eliot," *Modernism: Volume 2*, eds. Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007) 608.

⁵ Kershner 608.

3. Those members of the 1920s intelligentsia who had an enthusiasm for African-American culture (including jazz), the movies and/or some other kind of popular culture;
4. The leftist modernists who became interested in mass culture and used elements of it in their work out of a solidarity with "working class culture" and also because a "mandarin" modernist aesthetic stance was increasingly untenable in the context of left-wing ideology.⁶

Out of this list, it is the second, third and fourth movement that are particularly relevant to West. It should also be mentioned that these three movements were not completely separate, as some modernists fell under more than one of the categories (for example, Gilbert Seldes fell under all three), and as the movements even shared common or similar ideas at times.

In regard to Kershner's second movement, it is known that West did have an interest in Surrealism and Dada (as Surrealism grew out of Dada, it is difficult to neatly separate these two art movements). Since his work contains absurd situations and bizarre juxtapositions, which are a major part of surreal or Dadaist humor⁷, and also elements of mass culture, West could also be seen as a Surrealist or Dadaist writer. Also, Jonathan Veitch argues that the images in West's books are obviously surreal in the sense of being dream-like: "In his fiction doorknobs bleed, flower, speak; horses languish at the bottom of swimming pools; can openers turn into hairbrushes and flowerpots into victrolas, while revolvers dispense candy that turn out to be buttons."⁸ Furthermore, Jay Martin explicitly points out that West especially appreciated the Dadaist art of Max Ernst, George Grosz and Otto Dix, practiced

⁶ Kershner 609.

⁷ Wapedia, "Surreal humour," *Wapedia*, 16 Oct. 2008 http://wapedia.mobi/en/Surreal_humour.

⁸ Jonathan Veitch, *American Superrealism: Nathanael West and the Politics of Representation in the 1930s* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997) 16.

Breton's *humour noir* in the U.S., and shared the Dadaists' feeling that the contemporary world was absurd and that the artist should thus rebel against its traditions.⁹

An explanation of American Dadaism is in order here. In the 1920s, there was a tendency among both American and European intellectuals to see their societies as absurd, largely due to the grand scale tragedy of World War I (and, in the U.S., the failure of Wilson's New Freedom), and the irreverent and anti-traditional art of Dada and Surrealism became a way for them to protest against and laugh at their traditional-minded societies.¹⁰ Correspondingly, Dada and Surrealism mocked society's traditions, including the genteel tradition in art. Martin states that "the creative power of the twenties would rise from the ethics of rebellion, the urge to affront the bourgeois, commitment to the irrational, and an attitude of contempt - in short, the urge to destroy", which were a part of but not limited to Dada.¹¹

Dada attempted to create an innovative new type of art by using elements of mass culture, technology, everyday speech, and everyday life. One quality of technology and mass culture that was attractive to the Dadaists was that they were considered to be "anathema to conservative leaders in the arts" and therefore had a "shock value".¹² However, the Dadaists also used technology and mass culture in their works in an attempt to "overthrow established forms in order to open a new realm for creation".¹³ Matthew Josephson, the editor of the American Surrealist/modernist magazine *Broom* (and West's friend), described the aims of American Dadaism as follows (paraphrasing Apollinaire in the process): "the poet is to stop at nothing in his quest for novelty of shape and material; he is to take advantage of the possibilities for infinite combinations, the new equipment afforded by the cinema, phonograph, dictaphone, airplane, wireless".¹⁴ In other words, beyond its shock value,

⁹ Martin 82-83.

¹⁰ Martin 46-47.

¹¹ Martin 47.

¹² Paul R. Gorman, *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 70.

¹³ Gorman 70.

¹⁴ Gorman 71.

American Dadaist art was intended to be genuinely progressive - not just in utilizing elements of pop culture and new technology, but also in combining them in new ways (including combining them in the bizarre juxtapositions mentioned above). According to Josephson, American Dada was also supposed to depict the full "cacophany" of American urban life of the early 20th century by including depictions of popular culture (such as advertisements, newspapers, sports and movies).¹⁵ Hence, to sum it up, Dadaism utilized elements of mass culture to make its art novel or modern and also because mass culture was a major part of the contemporary urban world. After all, it was the age of new (or relatively new) technologies (radio, film, and sound recordings being the obvious examples), new ideas and the growth of urban populations, so it makes sense that art sought new ways to depict this new world.

It is uncertain whether West would fall under Kershner's third type of pro-mass culture modernism (the 1920s intellectuals with an enthusiasm for mass culture). He was known to at least sometimes consume mass culture in his personal life, but he was not a public defender of it the way Gilbert Seldes was. Nevertheless, this type of modernism is relevant to a discussion of West and mass culture because as Paul R. Gorman describes it, it shows that a typical attitude of modernists and intellectuals toward mass culture in the 1920s and 1930s involved praising some specific forms of mass culture while still rejecting the rest and utilizing elements of mass culture in "serious" works for the sake of depicting the contemporary urban world (a concept shared with Surrealism and Dada, although the works did not necessarily have to be Dadaistic or Surrealistic per se).¹⁶

Gorman connects this view especially to the modernist critics who wrote for small intellectual magazines like the *Dial*, *Seven Arts* and *Broom*.¹⁷ It is not surprising to mention *Broom* again in this context because these critics shared not only Dada's desire to use popular or everyday materials in art, but also Dada's disdain for traditional genteel standards. More

¹⁵ Gorman 71.

¹⁶ Gorman 53-54.

¹⁷ Gorman 53-54.

specifically, they shared the belief that "older, established ways of thinking had become outmoded and oppressive in a world turning so dramatically modern" and correspondingly saw the genteel opposition between high art and popular culture as something outmoded that new ways of thinking should get rid of.¹⁸ In opposition to the high art / popular culture dichotomy, they shared a "determination to reintroduce the concerns and experiences of everyday life to the arts and literature and make these forms relevant to modern America" and "to bring vernacular energies to expressive culture".¹⁹

This meant that at least sometimes, it became desirable to quote mass culture in serious works of art, since this was believed to contribute to creating a non-genteel art that would reflect the life experiences and "vernacular energies" of ordinary Americans.²⁰ In criticism, it also meant that some products of mass culture (such as Chaplin films, D. W. Griffith films, the comic strip *Krazy Kat* or even organized sports) were examined and evaluated as serious works of art.²¹ However, this criticism was limited in the sense that it basically praised a few artists who excelled in working in popular forms while still making the then common argument that most mass culture is hackneyed, uniform, sentimental, overly simple, lowbrow, of a low aesthetic quality, and/or emotionally exciting rather than intellectually stimulating.²² It was also limited in the sense that it focused on the isolated qualities of the popular work itself and on highbrow or esoteric topics like "Chaplin's rectangular movements" and "how watching sports is itself a sport", while ignoring the reactions of more typical members of the audience.²³

Getting back to West, though, this type of thinking almost certainly had an influence on him, and he might have had a similarly ambivalent view of mass culture. Also, it might have

¹⁸ Gorman 54.

¹⁹ Gorman 54, 74.

²⁰ Gorman 59-60, 70-71.

²¹ Gorman 74-75.

²² Gorman 59, 74-75.

²³ Gorman 74-75. However, as *The Day of the Locust* itself shows, even the reactions of "typical" or uneducated audience members to the popular work can be unconventional or idiosyncratic.

been one of the reasons for why he used so much of the vernacular and the popular in his work. Not only did he use vernacular language in his novels, but when he co-edited the small literary magazine *Contact* with William Carlos Williams in 1932, their explicit aim was to publish in it works of literature that would be surrealistic and brutal (in the sense of depicting the harsher realities of American life) while utilizing vernacular language.²⁴ Furthermore, the idea of some mass culture being worthy of study also brings up the important point that genres of mass culture could be seen as mediums through which both high quality and low quality work can be created and that mass culture does not have to be specifically good or bad in itself. In fact, I will argue that this is a major point in West in the following chapters, as can be seen by his depictions of works of mass culture as having both negative and positive qualities.

Kershner's fourth type of pro-mass culture modernism is relevant to West not because his last three books show any particular or overt solidarity with the working class, but because as Jay Martin points out, this change in intellectual trends had an influence on West and his interests while he was working on the novels. During West's years as a college student in the early 1920s, he and his friends were heavily under the influence of the thought of H. L. Mencken. They were especially influenced by Mencken's cynicism and his idea that the writer should be mainly concerned about his or her writing style and not about politics and social problems.²⁵ As George Jean Nathan, a critic with similar ideas, put it, "I am constitutionally given to enthusiasm about nothing. The great problems of the world - social, political, economic, and theological - do not concern me in the slightest... My sole interest is in writing."²⁶ This went along with the early 1920s trend for "sophisticated" young Americans to

²⁴ Martin 146.

²⁵ Martin 100.

²⁶ Martin 100.

cynically laugh at attempts to rectify world problems and at earnestness in general and to have little interest in Russia and communism.²⁷

However, as the 1930s approached, communist, socially conscious or left-wing thought became increasingly fashionable among intellectuals.²⁸ Martin demonstrates this pattern through the example of Malcolm Cowley, Josephson, Seldes and John Dos Passos. In 1924, these writers were seen as Dadaist aestheticists under Mencken's influence, and they despaired of American civilization, including its lower classes. By the late 1920s, though, they grew to idealize and support the worker, the American masses and reform movements.²⁹ Martin rationalizes their apparent change of heart by pointing to Daniel Aaron's idea that these writers and many writers similar to them were never really as politically indifferent as they claimed to be during the 1920s, but that their professed indifference was only an "act of protest" associated with Dadaism.³⁰ Nevertheless, going along with the intellectuals' newfound support of the masses, they grew to celebrate mass culture as the anti-elite culture of ordinary American people, even though they had previously often seen mass culture as "evidence of the lack of culture in America".³¹

In the context of this pattern, West himself became associated with the American Communist Party in the early 1930s, although he was never actually a member of the Party, only agreed with some of its ideas and did not do everything that it demanded of him.³² However, what is probably more important for a discussion of West's treatment of mass culture is that at about the same time, like many other then contemporary writers and artists, West became very interested in the lives of ordinary people and mass life.³³

²⁷ Martin 100-101; it should be mentioned that in West, the characters Shrike, Claude Estee and Joan Schwartz seem to be followers of this type of thought.

²⁸ Martin 101.

²⁹ Martin 102.

³⁰ Martin 102.

³¹ Martin 102.

³² Martin 257.

³³ Martin 164.

The early 1930s were marked by the Great Depression, and unemployment and poverty were correspondingly high. As the masses of people suffered in various ways, they read, watched or listened to products of mass culture to provide them with an escape from their problems and/or to give them the feeling that there is an order to life.³⁴ As Garry Leonard puts it, "popular culture operates as a compensatory system offering solace, encouragement, or illusion to people who feel they lack something".³⁵ It was also common for the masses to take part in contests and lotteries of various sorts (another form of mass culture) in the hopes that they would win money when they could not earn it.³⁶ Martin points out that while similar types of misery led to revolutions in Europe, the American poor were confused by what was going on and usually did not think that they could carry out a revolution of any sort.³⁷ If people tend to define themselves through their society, many Depression era Americans felt lost because their society was then perceived to be in a state of disorder, incomprehensible, "drifting" and "undefined", and they correspondingly appreciated the attempts of mass culture to depict or find an order in life, even if these attempts might have been wrong, dishonest or questionable at times.³⁸

As West worked in a relatively inexpensive hotel in the early 1930s, he directly witnessed the situation described above in the lives of the struggling people who stayed there.³⁹ In fact, not only did he witness the situation, but he went as far as to spy on the guests and secretly read their mail to learn more about it, even though he did feel a compassion for the guests at the same time.⁴⁰ In a letter, West wrote that it was common for him to see, in his own words, "shabby, lonely men and women reading pulp magazines in the lobby, and inventing elaborate

³⁴ Martin 162-164.

³⁵ Garry Martin Leonard, *Advertising and Commodity Culture in Joyce* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1998) 14.

³⁶ Martin 162.

³⁷ Martin 161.

³⁸ Martin 165.

³⁹ Martin 158-161.

⁴⁰ Martin 166.

daydreams as a result of their vicarious thrills derived from the reading".⁴¹ In addition to the people's Depression-related problems, he also saw their emotional problems, such as their loneliness and "broken hearts", which may or may not have been related to the Depression.⁴² West wanted to depict the situation of these people in his fiction, including his last three novels, even if the result was more like an examination of the lives of unfortunate Americans rather than an overt examination of the Depression.⁴³ In relation to this interest, West also "interested himself in entertainments in which the masses were interested, and now reassessed movies, cartoons, popular culture, and jazz as expressions of collective yearning".⁴⁴ Indeed, the theme of suffering people turning to mass culture to mentally escape from their troubles is a major theme in both *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*. It is also relevant to mention here that West based the letters in *Miss Lonelyhearts* on real letters by lower class readers to the "Susan Chester" advice column of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, which he came across by chance in 1929 when he met the columnist through their mutual friend S.J. Perelman.⁴⁵ As with the hotel guests, West felt both a fascination and an intense pity for the writers of the letters.⁴⁶

The above three types of modernism, then, inform us about some neutral or even positive functions that mass culture can serve in West's work or in many other modernist works. First, in the early 20th century, using mass culture in one's work was both a rebellion against traditional or genteel standards for art and a way to create an innovative new type of art. Second, an artist could depict mass culture in his or her work as a part of an attempt to honestly depict the contemporary world and everyday life of the U.S. and Europe. Third, mass culture could be quoted in art and literature for the sake of depicting the sociopolitical situation of the lower class consumers of mass culture. Fourth, mass culture could be seen as a

⁴¹ Martin 160.

⁴² Martin 160, 165.

⁴³ Martin 165.

⁴⁴ Martin 165.

⁴⁵ Martin 109-110.

⁴⁶ Martin 110.

set of mediums which do not have to be positive or negative in themselves. Fifth, mass culture could be used and examined in modernist novels as "expressions of collective yearning". Finally, it could also be inferred that if the modernists could see mass culture as at least sometimes positive in itself, its positive features could be seen as positive in their own novels as well.

2.2. Analogies with Joyce and Eliot

The above mentioned neutral or positive functions that mass culture could have in West's work are not the only ones. For more, we could turn to a couple of relatively recent examinations of how James Joyce and T.S. Eliot, two modernist writers who were traditionally seen as being against mass culture, used its elements in their work, as some of the findings could be analogously applied to West's own novels.

To begin with, Kershner claims that the modernists in general "were characteristically ambivalent in most of their statements about art" rather than constantly insisting on privileging high culture and dismissing mass culture.⁴⁷ Kershner's two main examples for supporting this argument are Eliot and Joyce. In regard to biographical information about the two writers, he emphasizes that while both Eliot and Joyce made statements professing their aestheticism and elitism as well as statements against popular culture, they sometimes also made statements professing their affection for at least some forms of it.⁴⁸ Kershner states that the work of Eliot, Joyce and other modernist writers was traditionally read as necessarily being more or less unambivalently against mass culture mainly through the influence of New Criticism:

⁴⁷ Kershner 615.

⁴⁸ Kershner 615.

The American 'New Criticism' as it developed during the 1940s and 1950s, taking its cue from some comments of Pound's and Eliot's and some early pronouncements of Joyce and his character Stephen Dedalus, solidified the notion that 'high' modernist art was in fact the antithesis of popular art. The attributes of 'true' art, especially complexity, allusiveness, ambiguity, irony, self-reference and self-enclosure, were more or less by definition pronounced to be what was lacking in popular art.⁴⁹

However, Kershner maintains that this type of thinking is too simple. In regard to the writers as human beings, it denies their complexity as individuals (as in that their views could have changed over time, their public statements did not have to necessarily be consistent with each other, their generalizations about art did not have to apply to every single work, etc.).⁵⁰ In regard to their work, it seems to claim that using mass culture in the literary work was done merely to increase the realism of the work or to "write off" mass culture, and not because the citations of mass culture could have been entertaining, aesthetically interesting, or intellectually stimulating in the context of the work. But Kershner, using the example of Joyce, claims that this was usually not the case in modernist writing: "Joyce's invocation of a work of popular fiction is virtually never simple citation or quotation, and the relationship between the two fictions is seldom simply ironic. ... [The] relationship between Modernist art and instances of popular culture is *dialogical* - that is, that it involves a dialogue and dialectics..."⁵¹ In other words, modernist literature depicted different languages or systems of thought (including mass culture) reacting to each other just as modernism and popular culture reacted to each other in life in spite of some modernist efforts to keep them separated, and it did not mean that popular culture necessarily had to be "written off" in the modernist

⁴⁹ Kershner 608.

⁵⁰ Kershner 615.

⁵¹ Kershner 612.

literature. To cite but one example of mass culture not being "written off" in a modernist work, in Joyce's fiction, it is often the case that the mass culture texts Joyce alludes to are interpreted as opposing the dominant British culture in colonized Ireland.⁵²

From this, we could state that it is possible that even if West's last three novels contained overt statements against mass culture, these could possibly be interpreted as voices in dialogue with other voices in the novels, including various voices associated with mass culture. It also follows that West could have been similarly ambivalent about mass culture as Joyce and Eliot were (although, to repeat, West's ambivalence was also connected to the American pro-mass culture modernisms outlined above) and that his own work could have been seen as more anti-mass culture than it actually was because of the traditional belief that modernists in general necessarily and unambivalently wrote against mass culture. However, Kershner and Garry M. Leonard point out several modernist strategies that Eliot and Joyce used when citing mass culture in their work, and it turns out that some of them are strategies that West himself used.

To begin with, Eliot, West, Joyce, and other modernist writers often cite mass culture in their work by making the mass culture text appear humorous or bizarre. An example of this in Eliot could be the citations of vulgar speech and popular songs in *The Waste Land*. Kershner argues that such uses of mass culture in the poem are frequently read as attacks on mass culture, but that they need not be read in this way. As an example, he states that the "Shakespearean Rag" section of *The Waste Land* has an "energy" that possibly even Eliot himself was "warmly amused and pleased by".⁵³

In regard to Eliot, one could also mention his unfinished verse play *Sweeney Agonistes*, which is so filled with elements of mass culture that it is difficult to interpret as a rejection of it. Anthony Burgess is one of those critics who interpret the "Shakespearean Rag" as an attack on mass culture, but it does not keep him from seeing *Sweeney* as an example of how

⁵² Kershner 612.

⁵³ Kershner 615.

great art could be made mainly out of citations of mass culture.⁵⁴ More explicitly, *Sweeney* contains dialogue in verse that strongly resembles the lyrics of popular songs from the 1920s, has a rhythm that resembles the rhythm of jazz, and is even accompanied by a snare drum when performed.⁵⁵ Burgess points out that the rhythm of jazz was an innovation that modernist poetry in general could not afford to neglect.⁵⁶ However, he sees the elements of jazz as not just a new rhythm for modernist works, but as something that is crucial for *Sweeney* to achieve its effect: "To present not only a theology but a vision of hell and a rejection of redemption in the rhythms of jazz is a large literary achievement, and yet nowhere, except in the title, subtitles and epigraphs, is there an evocation of literature. The materials are commonplace and the speech crude but the effect is devastating."⁵⁷

From this, one could infer that in West, mentions and uses of the forms of mass culture do not have to be read as attacks on it. Also, through the example of *Sweeney Agonistes*, it could be repeated that a modernist work could be constructed out of "building blocks" of mass culture citations without necessarily being against mass culture. In fact, mass culture could be used in the work to make it more innovative and aesthetically interesting.

Kershner also states that a common strategy for Eliot, Joyce and other modernists was to place modernist themes in places where one would not conventionally expect to find them. These "places" could include made up popular works or citations of mass culture within the modernist work.⁵⁸ *Sweeney Agonistes* is obviously an example of this practice. Kershner names two other examples of it from Joyce's *Ulysses*. First, there is the instance of *The Count of Monte Christo* reminding Stephen Dedalus of some strange and terrible things that he heard about in his childhood and also of the alienation of the modernist artist.⁵⁹ Second, the idea of the "transmigration of souls" is introduced in the novel when Molly Bloom reads about it in a

⁵⁴ Anthony Burgess, *This Man and Music* (New York: Applause Books, 2001) 100-103.

⁵⁵ Burgess 102-103.

⁵⁶ Burgess 102.

⁵⁷ Burgess 103.

⁵⁸ Kershner 613.

⁵⁹ Kershner 613.

racy circus novel.⁶⁰ In West's novels, works of mass culture do not necessarily always contain or inspire modernist ideas per se, but they are often symbolic of something that one would not expect to find in the popular work (especially as West often uses metaphors, double entendres and hidden meanings), and they also sometimes cause the characters to think about something else in their lives. An example of the former practice could be Faye Greener's plot ideas for films, which are not only examples of conventional Hollywood plots, but also symbolize what she herself wants (88-92). An example of the latter practice could be the moments when Tod Hackett's trek through the studio lot reminds him of paintings that he has seen, a children's novel, and pictures of soldiers from his childhood, giving him ideas about dreams in general in the process (125-131).

Another modernist practice that overlaps with the one just mentioned is that in which a popular text provides a character with a form with which to organize his or her thoughts. Garry Leonard's example of this practice in Joyce is the beginning of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: When Stephen Dedalus is a toddler, his father reads him a story about "baby tuckoo", and Stephen relates to the story to such an extent that he identifies "baby tuckoo" with himself and the street in the story with his own street, on which Betty Byrne sells lemon platt.⁶¹ Leonard's interpretation of the passage maintains that "the young Stephen Dedalus had not made any connection among such things as roads, traveling, and stopping off for a treat until the story helped him organize these apparently random events into both a pleasant memory and an anticipation of future consumption".⁶² Joyce's original text actually does not state that little Stephen could not connect these things before hearing the story⁶³, but the point remains that in both Joyce and West, mass culture texts can provide narratives through which characters organize their thoughts. In West, examples of this could include, again, Faye's imagined movie plots, but also Tod's last rape fantasy, which has the style and cliches of

⁶⁰ Kershner 613.

⁶¹ Leonard 17.

⁶² Leonard 18.

⁶³ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (England: Penguin Books, 1996) 7.

conventional crime fiction (187), or even the Algeresque form of *A Cool Million* being used to bring together ideas about the sociopolitical conditions of the U.S. of the 1930s.

Furthermore, Leonard points out that in *Ulysses*, advertising is similar to Christianity (in the sense that ads tell their audience how to achieve peace and spiritual fulfilment and that the advertised products are perceived to be "sacred objects") and Christianity is similar to advertising (in the sense that Christianity gains much of its appeal from slogans - e.g. quotes from Jesus - and from churches using some common practices of advertising and business).⁶⁴ *Miss Lonelyhearts* contains a parallel to this idea in that the advice column of the newspaper is seen as similar to Christianity in the sense that it should ideally give its readers advice, guidance, hope and the ability to psychologically cope with their problems the way Christianity should, and it is even connected with Christianity in the sense that Miss Lonelyhearts sometimes tries to give his readers explicitly Christian advice. Furthermore, *Miss Lonelyhearts* deals with the theme of mass culture becoming a soothing source of dreams of a better life for people when Christianity, which traditionally had this role, is in decline.

To be sure, it is not my intention to do a full comparison of West with Eliot and Joyce. My intention is rather to simply use the texts by Kershner and Leonard to isolate some modernist uses of mass culture which are not specifically against it in West's last three novels. Still, it should be pointed out that there obviously are differences in the three writers' approaches to mass culture. West's last three novels take place in the context of the United States of the 1930s, while Joyce writes about Ireland, and Eliot usually sets his poems in England. Correspondingly, it is debatable whether Eliot and Joyce fit into the three predominantly American pro-mass culture streams of modernism discussed above, but West (at least partially) fit into them more obviously than the other two writers. All three of the writers make multiple allusions to both high culture and mass culture, but while Joyce and

⁶⁴ Leonard 11, 17, 30.

Eliot only occasionally mention or quote mass culture in their work (the vernacular-filled surviving fragments of *Sweeney Agonistes* being the exception for Eliot), West mentions or quotes it almost constantly in his last three novels, especially in *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*. In fact, the central plots of these two novels are strongly connected to mass culture since *Miss Lonelyhearts* takes place against the backdrop of a newspaper and its advice column, and *The Day of the Locust* takes place against the backdrop of the Hollywood film industry. Correspondingly, even if works by both Joyce and Eliot contain passages that are critical of mass culture, a theme in West's last three novels is that the institutions that produce mass culture are often corrupt and cruel, a topic that the other two writers do not really focus on.

Another major difference between the writers is in the complexity of the styles they write in. There is some complexity in the meaning of West's sentences (in the sense of what they allude to and what their hidden meanings are), but on a superficial level, they are mostly short, lucid and direct (almost resembling the hardboiled style of writing in this respect). In contrast, Eliot's poetry and Joyce's various shifting styles in *Ulysses*, with their many obscure allusions and occasional nonstandard syntax, are often opaque even on the most superficial level and are much more complex than West's writings. It could also be added that West frequently utilizes characters that are grotesque in the sense of inducing both disgust and empathy⁶⁵ while Eliot and Joyce only rarely utilize such characters. Last but not least, while West shows some psychology and depth of characterization in his characters, some commentators still say that the characterization is so superficial that the characters are rather like caricatures. In contrast, Joyce, especially in *Ulysses*, goes to great lengths to show the complexity of his characters' thoughts and inner lives.

⁶⁵ Wikipedia, "Grotesque," *Wikipedia*, 8 Feb. 2010 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grotesque>.

2.3. Analogies with Warhol and Otty

To this discussion, one could also add that mass culture itself or citations of it in "serious" art do not have to have the qualities that are usually attributed to mass culture. Lisa Otty demonstrates this point on a few works by Andy Warhol. To begin with, Warhol's works often cite mass culture in such a matter-of-fact way that it is difficult to tell whether the works criticize mass culture, affirm it, or treat it with ambivalence.⁶⁶ However, Otty argues that Warhol's art is an examination of the effects and properties of relatively untraditional media, including mass culture, just as Dadaist art attempted to do something similar a few decades earlier (as was briefly discussed above).⁶⁷ Thus, Warhol's work does not necessarily have to specifically affirm or attack mass culture.⁶⁸

Clement Greenberg (being a modernist critic who was very critical of mass culture) argued that kitsch (a category which is usually interpreted as including many works of mass culture) gets an instant emotional reaction from its audience because of its explicit, pre-programmed and emotionally charged message or meaning (i.e. because of what the work depicts) rather than from its simple, uninteresting and conventional form.⁶⁹ Two projects of Warhol, the "Death and Disaster" sequences and *a; a novel*, show that this idea is problematic, though. A photograph of a popular deceased celebrity would conventionally be expected to inspire emotional connotations in the minds of some of its viewers. However, the "Death and Disaster" sequences show that such pictures do not have to provoke that kind of reaction because the garish colors and the repetition of the image tend to have a rather "numbing" effect instead.⁷⁰ *a; a novel* is a transcription of a tape recording of 24 hours in the life of Warhol's friend by several anonymous typists, containing both conversations and various

⁶⁶ Lisa Otty, "Avant-Garde Aesthetics: Kitsch, Intensity and the Work of Art," *Litteraria Pragensia* 13.62, 2006: 36.

⁶⁷ Otty 41-42, 56.

⁶⁸ Otty 56.

⁶⁹ Otty 41.

⁷⁰ Otty 42.

everyday sounds.⁷¹ One would then conventionally expect *a* to be similar to kitsch as defined by Greenberg in the sense that a reader would focus on what is transcribed (i.e. the meaning or message) rather than on the text's phonic, plastic, formal or aesthetic qualities, which would be uninteresting and conventional. However, Otty argues that the opposite is the case. As the work was written by several anonymous typists, it contains many noticeable variations in things like spelling, punctuation, the size of the type, and layout.⁷² Also, while transcribing a conversation verbatim leaves relatively little room for arbitrariness in regard to content (although *a* does supposedly contain places where what is written differs substantially from what was on the tape), the typists had to show some creativity in deciding how to convey any sounds which were not the sounds of spoken language.⁷³ *a* thus shows that art or even mass culture can never be reduced to mere content (whose form is mostly ignored) because no matter how transparent, conventional or uncreative the work may seem to be, every detail in it makes a difference in the meaning of the work and in what its audience perceives. It also shows the limitations of prose in trying to capture what is not prose (i.e. heard language, sounds, reality itself).

Otty's account shows that when products of mass culture or their citations are placed in a new artistic context, they do not necessarily have to possess the qualities that are usually attributed to them. Thus, if *A Cool Million* is written in the form of a Horatio Alger novel, the conventional reader reacts differently to *A Cool Million* than to an Alger novel, and the same could be said about *Miss Lonelyhearts* and its "comic strip form". Furthermore, as was stated above, a mass culture citation in West (such as a joke or an instance of slapstick) is usually not mere entertainment or a "realistic" depiction of the genre (and it is only sometimes an attack on the genre), but it is used to reveal deeper symbolic meanings. In this context, every detail of a seemingly banal citation of mass culture is especially potentially important, but as

⁷¹ Otty 38.

⁷² Otty 38, 43.

⁷³ Otty 38, 43.

a shows, every detail in a work is potentially important to some degree even without hidden metaphors because the detail makes a difference in the content and/or because the viewer's or reader's attention can be drawn to the detail. Also, especially in the case of the "comic strip form" of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, West's uses of mass culture citations could be interpreted to be experiments in seeing how elements of visual/pictorial mass culture could be adapted to prose (i.e. again, how prose could capture what is not prose). Plus, as Warhol "thrived on mixing the effects of different media"⁷⁴, West's novels can similarly be interpreted as creating an interesting aesthetic effect by putting citations of mass culture media (comic strips, Horatio Alger novels, nongrammatical letters, films) into the medium of a modernist novel.

To sum up, then, West used mass culture in his work for various reasons. Going along with Dadaists and other modernists who showed some appreciation for mass culture, he used mass culture in his novels to make them innovative, rebellious against traditional standards in literature, and adequate to representing the then contemporary situation in America. He also used mass culture in the context of writing about lower class people who often made up its audience. Furthermore, by placing mass culture into modernist novels, he placed it in a new context as a "building block" of a modernist, non-popular work. In his novels, mass culture also serves the functions of providing metaphors and similes, organizing characters' thoughts and giving ideas to characters. Finally, West's last three novels could also be read as an attempt to examine the properties of mass culture media and how these media could be cited in modernist prose.

⁷⁴ Otty 42.

3. THE RISE OF MASS PRODUCED FANTASIES AND THE DECLINE OF NORMS

In order to understand the three novels by West under discussion here and the role of mass culture in them, it is necessary to keep in mind that the relatively new introduction of mass produced objects which consumers associated with their fantasies and the decline of binding norms and traditions in the West made the world a very different place from what it was before the middle of the 19th century. This is a theme that is conspicuously present in all three of the novels, but before we can turn to the novels themselves, this topic should be at least briefly explained here.

To begin with, as the middle of the 19th century saw great advancements in production technologies, more products were available in stores than ever before, and ordinary buyers correspondingly bought more products than they ever dreamed of owning previously⁷⁵. As "[m]achine made goods could be made more quickly than and in much greater volume than goods produced by hand", medium grade products were now sold with a markup that was previously only appropriate for objects of a poor quality⁷⁶. Thus, this led to, for example, people owning several sets of clothes (as they previously usually had only one set) or a larger variety of pots and pans with specialized purposes (as they previously usually only had an all-purpose stewpot and skillet).⁷⁷

This led to another important 19th century innovation: as store owners tried to encourage the sales of their products, they tried to make a "spectacle" out of them or make them

⁷⁵ Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge, London and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 142-143.

⁷⁶ Sennett 142, 144.

⁷⁷ Sennett 143.

"stimulating".⁷⁸ A common way of doing this was to display a large variety of objects side by side, which had the effect of estranging individual objects and of the products mutually "supporting" each other.⁷⁹ This process was then pushed even further as store owners displayed and sold products that were quite strange in themselves (such as exotic products from foreign countries), emphasized the products that were the most unusual, and elaborately decorated the store.⁸⁰ Richard Sennett describes the situation as follows: "The use character of the object was temporarily suspended. It became 'stimulating,' one wanted to buy it, because it became temporarily an unexpected thing; it became strange."⁸¹ In other words, consumers now bought products because of the way the products made them feel or the personal meanings that the products had for them rather than because of the product's practical use value.⁸² The consumers felt that the right product could be a sign of their "personal character, of private feeling, and of individuality".⁸³ The products even allowed the consumers to indulge their fantasies and play pretend in a sense as "they believed that wearing a ten-franc dress worn by the Duchesse de X made one a little more 'aristocratic,' or believed that a new cast-iron pot had a personal meaning to the buyer in terms of his fantasies of Moorish pleasure."⁸⁴

Going along with this trend in the second half of the 19th century was the rise of the style that Rosalind Williams calls "the chaotic-exotic" and, correspondingly, the rise of various representations and simulations designed to appeal to consumers' fantasies.⁸⁵ The chaotic-exotic style was basically the style of the stores with varied products mentioned above, but Williams also connects it with fair-like "educational" expositions of the second half of the

⁷⁸ Sennett 144.

⁷⁹ Sennett 144.

⁸⁰ Sennett 144-145.

⁸¹ Sennett 144.

⁸² Sennett 145.

⁸³ Sennett 146.

⁸⁴ Sennett 146.

⁸⁵ Rosalind Williams, "The Dream World of Mass Consumption," *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, eds. Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1991) 206.

19th century and early films.⁸⁶ This style "represents an attempt to express visions of distant places in concrete terms".⁸⁷ For example, the 1900 Trocadero exhibit in Paris (one of the "educational" exhibits mentioned above) contained reproductions and simulations of various exotic settings, often incongruously side by side and without depicting any of the unpleasant realities associated with the represented entities as the exhibit was intended to pleasantly entertain and to serve the ends of business (for example, as various products were sold and advertised during the exhibit) rather than to educate.⁸⁸ The chaotic-exotic style thus advertises products by appealing to the fantasies of the consumers and also passes off fantasies as reality (since exhibits like the Trocadero exhibit claim to represent the exotic places as they actually are).⁸⁹ Thus, some stylistic features that are typical for the chaotic-exotic style are "syncretism, anachronism, illogicality, flamboyance, [and] childishness".⁹⁰ At the same time, like the store products mentioned above, the chaotic-exotic style appeals to consumers by giving them feelings of glamor, romance, lavishness, and foreignness as well as by giving them feelings of "numbed fascination" with the "sheer variety" of the many different strange or interesting objects.⁹¹

There is a major reason for this rise in products that appeal to fantasies. Williams states that "[f]rom earliest history we find indications that the human mind has transcended concerns of physical survival to imagine a finer, richer, more satisfying life."⁹² It was usually art and religion that provided the means to express these desires for a better life.⁹³ However, with the technological advances of the mid-to-late 19th century, such dreams could be approximated in daily life as never before through commodities, simulations, representations, reproductions,

⁸⁶ Williams 198-206, 212.

⁸⁷ Williams 206.

⁸⁸ Williams 200-202.

⁸⁹ Williams 203.

⁹⁰ Williams 206.

⁹¹ Williams 206-207.

⁹² Williams 203.

⁹³ Williams 203.

and mass culture.⁹⁴ As these were relatively inexpensive and produced in great quantities, all people could indulge their dreams through them very frequently, and "[c]onsumer goods, rather than other facets of culture, became focal points for desire".⁹⁵

The late 19th and the 20th century were also marked by a decline in not only the authority of Christianity in the West, but even in the authority of formerly binding moral norms and traditions, as these now became questionable.⁹⁶ The rise of the popularity of commodities and entertainments and the decline of Christianity meant that Christianity no longer met the human need for dreams of a better life to the extent that it once did. But more than this was lost. As Richard Sennett points out, an inherited culture (which includes norms, traditions and religion) that a group of people live by and take seriously enables them to better cope with problems, terrors, suffering and the unknown.⁹⁷ It then follows that when they lose this inherited culture, they lose a sense of order and stability.⁹⁸ To partially compensate for this problem in the West, commodities, entertainments, and even clichés (both in and outside of mass culture) were used to both provide the world with a semblance of order and stability⁹⁹ and, as was mentioned in the last chapter, to provide pleasant diversions from painful truths (in addition to their already mentioned function of providing dreams of a better life). In other words, consumer goods, entertainments and clichés became something like a poor substitute for a religion or an inherited culture.

To this, one could object that "[t]raditions' which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented"¹⁰⁰, that these could fulfil people's need for order to some extent, and that both old and new traditions survive to some extent. Such new or

⁹⁴ Williams 203.

⁹⁵ Williams 203.

⁹⁶ Manochehr Dorraj, "The Secular Mirage: Modernity, The Postmodern Turn, and Religious Revivalism," *Journal of Globalization for the Common Good*, Spring 2007, 7 Nov. 2009 <http://lass.calumet.purdue.edu/cca/jgcg/2007/sp07/jgcg-sp07-dorraj.htm> .

⁹⁷ Sennett 141.

⁹⁸ Sennett 141.

⁹⁹ Anton C. Zijderveld, *On Clichés: the Supersedure of Meaning by Function in Modernity* (London, Oxon and Boston: Routledge, 1979) 46-47, 53.

¹⁰⁰ Eric J. Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Granger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 1.

invented traditions arose in an especially large number over the course of the last 200 years since invented traditions tend to arise whenever social patterns change so greatly that they cannot be adapted to old traditions.¹⁰¹ However, Eric Hobsbawm describes the situation in more specific terms when he states the following:

... new traditions have not filled more than a small part of the space left by the secular decline of both old tradition and custom; as might indeed be expected in societies in which the past becomes increasingly less relevant as a model or precedent for most forms of human behaviour. In the private lives of most people, and in the self-contained lives of small sub-cultural groups, even the invented traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries occupied or occupy a much smaller place than old traditions do in, say, old agrarian societies.¹⁰²

Mass culture could then contribute to invented traditions by perpetuating them, such as is the case with, for example, patriotic movies or folk songs that are revived in an altered form.

The trends discussed above continued into the 1920s and 1930s as new products, new technologies and new entertainments were constantly being created. It should be mentioned, though, that even as late as the 20s and 30s, there were various persons and groups in the U.S. who felt uncomfortable with the many simulations and fantasy products that seemed to be present everywhere and who correspondingly longed for "simpler" times. For example, on the left, there were communists like Mike Gold, who felt a dislike for the overabundance of commodities at this time (as they believed that more material possessions would mean a greater bondage to the capitalist system and also connected the products to decadent

¹⁰¹ Hobsbawm 4-5. In West, such new traditions are arguably represented by the cults in *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust* and also by the historical exhibits in *A Cool Million*.

¹⁰² Hobsbawm 11.

lifestyles) and responded to it by celebrating old fashioned values and expressing a "nostalgia for an age when things were plain and useful".¹⁰³

For a right wing example of this type of thinking, we could turn to Jonathan Veitch's account of the conservative business magazine *Fortune* in the 1930s, as this magazine constantly supported traditional values while snubbing most modern mass produced commodities.¹⁰⁴ Veitch states that *Fortune* contained articles and ads that "betray[ed] a hankering for English country life" and showed a preference for rather expensive goods like jewelry, watches and dress shoes that were depicted as "traditional", "handcrafted", "pure", "original", and "rare".¹⁰⁵ To be sure, these products could have been mass produced or connected to their users' fantasies. However, Veitch argues that because *Fortune's* writers, editors and readers valued things and activities that they perceived to be traditional, rare and luxurious, they had a distaste for mass culture and highly affordable commodities because mass culture and highly affordable commodities were novel, nontraditional, reproducible, inexpensive, easily available, and generic.¹⁰⁶ *Fortune*, as traditionalists and supporters of industrial capitalism, also tended to glorify thrift, hard work, modern production technologies, discriminating tastes, and deferral of gratification as values in themselves while somewhat oddly ignoring the goods produced in the process.¹⁰⁷

Veitch then goes on to summarize *Fortune's* scathing 1932 article on MGM studios and concludes that the Hollywood film industry represented the opposite of most of the values of *Fortune* and its readers. As *Fortune* believed in conventional traditional moral values and the deferral of gratification, they strongly disapproved of the decadent lifestyles of many people in the film industry, as these often involved illicit sex, heavy drinking, and/or surrounding

¹⁰³ Rita Barnard, *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance: Kenneth Fearing, Nathanael West, and Mass Culture in the 1930s* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 31-33.

¹⁰⁴ Jonathan Veitch, "Reading Hollywood," Spring 2000: n.pag. Retrieved from the Proquest database on 27 Apr. 2007.

¹⁰⁵ Veitch "Reading" n.pag.

¹⁰⁶ Veitch "Reading" n.pag.

¹⁰⁷ Veitch "Reading" n.pag.

oneself with excessive amounts of consumer goods.¹⁰⁸ As *Fortune* emphasized quality, their writer was disappointed to find that much of the studio was made out of "beaverboard and canvas".¹⁰⁹ He also saw an absurdity in the many different objects and people that were incongruously combined together on MGM's back lot (i.e. the chaotic-exotic style again), in that both people and props were made to appear as something they were not, and in that people working in Hollywood often did things that defied conventional expectations (such as an Oklahoma cowboy playing polo).¹¹⁰ Plus, as *Fortune* mainly focused on production, its writer was surprised that there was a greater emphasis in MGM on the surface qualities, appearances, packaging and salability of the films than on their production or even their actual overall quality.¹¹¹ These objections can all be summarized by the phrases (in Veitch's words) "Nothing is quite what it seems." and, more specifically, "Nothing is quite what it 'should be.'"¹¹²

What *Fortune's* creators and readers thought "should be" was probably a world where people and businesses follow binding traditions and conventions to the point that the world seems more ordered, stable and predictable than it actually is or could be. However, MGM and Hollywood showed that many of their cherished norms, traditions and conventions were in decline at least in some parts of the U.S. The decline of the norms, traditions and conventions meant not only a decline in traditional morality and rules of behavior, though, but the recognition of the fact that the conclusions we often reach from the information we are given (including appearances) are often based on nothing but norms, traditions and conventions as well (e.g. there is really no objective reason for why an Oklahoma cowboy could not play polo, or to cite an example of this from West himself, if a woman wears tennis clothes, it does not necessarily mean that she plays tennis). Plus, even the rise of Hollywood

¹⁰⁸ Veitch "Reading" n.pag.

¹⁰⁹ Veitch "Reading" n.pag.

¹¹⁰ Veitch "Reading" n.pag.

¹¹¹ Veitch "Reading" n.pag.

¹¹² Veitch "Reading" n.pag.

movies, mass culture and mass produced commodities itself went against the old norms and traditions since these were different from traditional products for leisure. In any event, such declines of norms, traditions and conventions certainly made the world appear chaotic, unstable and bizarre, especially in the eyes of someone who believed in the old standards.

Nathanael West's last three novels take place precisely against the background of this framework. *Miss Lonelyhearts* deals with the problem of finding a way to cope with suffering when the religion and the inherited culture that once made it easier to cope with suffering are in decline and briefly deals with how mass culture is a very imperfect way of trying to solve this problem. *A Cool Million* points to the modern disbelief in traditional values while also emphasizing how the modern world is filled with commodities and also with mass culture that romanticizes or idealizes the past. *The Day of the Locust* points to how the 1930s Hollywood film industry is decadent, how it is full of objects that appeal to consumers' fantasies, how appearances do not mean what one would conventionally expect them to in Hollywood, and especially how Hollywood's fantastic surface appearances are in stark contrast to the many poor and/or suffering people there. A major point in West's novels seems to be that with the decline of the traditional culture, the rise of new products and technologies, and the human evil that existed as long as humanity itself, the world is chaotic, bizarre, unstable, and difficult to explain or cope with.

4. MISS LONELYHEARTS AND A COOL MILLION: ATTEMPTS TO RETRIEVE THE PAST

In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Nathanael West depicts a world in which mass culture and clichés take on the role of providing dreams of a better life and a sense of order, as this role was previously held by religion. In turn, *A Cool Million* emphasizes that depictions of history (including those in mass culture) are never wholly objective but always strongly influenced by the views of the people who create the depictions. These two novels present a mostly negative view of mass culture since in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, mass culture is filled with empty and manipulative clichés and in *A Cool Million*, mass culture is used to spread false or questionable messages about the past and, especially in the case of the vaudeville show, also encourages sadistic violence. However, the two books' views of mass culture are still somewhat ambivalent due to the innovative comic strip-like features of *Miss Lonelyhearts* and other details that will be elaborated below.

4.1. Miss Lonelyhearts

It was already mentioned in the last chapter that as Christianity and various traditional norms were in decline in the late 19th and early 20th century, mass culture and mass produced commodities became one of the main sources of dreams of a better life for people. In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the newspaper advice columnist of the title sometimes tries to give his readers secular advice which is also escapist (i.e. advising them to focus on something pleasant instead of their problems) and at other times tries to give them specifically Christian advice. A reader of the novel might wonder why Miss Lonelyhearts does not at least try to give his readers advice that would be aimed towards specifically solving their problems. However,

when the novel is read against the background of mass culture giving people the pleasant dreams and sense of order that Christianity once did, it is evident that at least sometimes, Miss Lonelyhearts believes that Christianity provides more powerful dreams and thoughts against misery than mass culture ever could, and this is the reason for why he at least sometimes tries to (or thinks about trying to) propagate it in his column and in his dealings with other people.

This is made explicit when Miss Lonelyhearts sees the people in the city enjoying mass culture in spite of their severe suffering and thinks the following: "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." (115) Arguments about mass culture being "puerile" could be connected to many common early 20th century opinions about mass culture being of a low intellectual value, appealing to emotions rather than reason, always using the same clichés or plot formulas, etc.

However, there are still grounds for stating that Miss Lonelyhearts actually has an ambivalent view of mass culture. One must keep in mind that a large part of the reasoning for why Miss Lonelyhearts sees mass culture as "puerile" is that he compares it to Christianity. Plus, Miss Lonelyhearts has a certain compassion for the users of mass culture, especially since he feels an empathy for their suffering and understands their need for dreams of a better life (Miss Lonelyhearts is like Tod from *The Day of the Locust* in this respect). In Miss Lonelyhearts' view, his own readers, the patrons of the Spanish-themed restaurant El Gaucho, and respondents to self help ads all fall under the category of suffering people who need dreams of some sort in order to offset their misery, including the dreams provided by mass culture (93-94). This has the added implication that ads and the advice column, both of which claim to offer solutions to problems, are perceived by Miss Lonelyhearts to actually have a greater value for the dreams they provide than for any practical solutions they might offer. Thus, this is another reason for why Miss Lonelyhearts writes advice that propagates Christianity or escapism rather than a concrete solution to the reader's problem. Furthermore,

by trying to Christianize his column, Miss Lonelyhearts shows that he at least sometimes believes that mass culture could give his readers the superior dreams of Christianity.

However, Miss Lonelyhearts cannot create a convincing Christian advice column because in his world, as Christianity is no longer seen as binding by many people, it is easier to laugh at it and/or question it (as Shrike and Miss Lonelyhearts do), and many traditional Christian statements that would probably have great force for a devout Christian are reduced to the level of empty clichés. Anton C. Zijderfeld's definition of a cliché is particularly relevant here:

A cliché is a traditional form of human expression (in words, thoughts, emotions, gestures, acts) which - due to repetitive use in social life - has lost its original, often ingenious heuristic power. Although it thus fails positively to contribute meaning to social interactions and communication, it does function socially, since it manages to stimulate behaviour (cognition, emotion, volition, action) while it avoids reflection on meanings.¹¹³

It is probably for the reason that the traditional Christian advice about knowing Christ through one's suffering has lost its traditional heuristic power and became an empty cliché that Miss Lonelyhearts starts giving this advice in response to a letter and then stops in mid-sentence, unable to go on (116). Over the course of the book, Miss Lonelyhearts struggles precisely with how he can truly believe in Christianity and propagate it through his column when it is difficult for educated people of his time and place to believe in it and when it became a set of clichés rather than a weighty and binding ideology.

Miss Lonelyhearts also gives clichés as advice in instances of his secular escapist advice - e.g. his "Life *is* worthwhile" advice (66) and his advice that "the best things in life are free" (98). I do not know if such statements ever had a great heuristic power, but such phrases

¹¹³ Zijderfeld 10.

definitely can be pointed out as phrases that seem empty due to their overuse. With both of these pieces of advice, the same thing happens as with the advice about knowing Christ through suffering: Miss Lonelyhearts starts giving the advice to a letter writer, but then stops in mid-sentence, unable to go on. This probably also happens because the advice is an empty cliché (which Miss Lonelyhearts recognizes, unlike his uneducated readers), although it could also be argued that Miss Lonelyhearts cannot go on with the advice because advising someone to simply enjoy something pleasant like pine or satin is incongruous when that person is going through extreme suffering.

Miss Lonelyhearts cannot believe the clichés due to his own education and reflective thoughts. Zijderveld states that clichés lose their usual power to manipulate their recipients when they are reflected upon, and that clichés and cliché-filled kitsch call "for feeling, not thought".¹¹⁴ Miss Lonelyhearts' lower class readers generally believe that he gives good advice, though, and this can probably be explained by Zijderveld's argument that "kitsch generally appeals to those social classes and categories that do not rely on reflection in daily social life: lower-middle and working classes, and the non-working women of the upper and middle classes"¹¹⁵ (with Mary Shrike being an example of the latter group). One could also speculate that by being frequently used, well established, and mostly unchanging, clichés give their audience a sense (or a dream) of security and stability the way a religion should¹¹⁶ (even though this idea is never overtly mentioned in *Miss Lonelyhearts*). However, if the Doyles are representative of Miss Lonelyhearts' readers in general, it is likely that his readers want him to listen to their problems and to give them affection (possibly even a sexual affection) rather than to give them advice per se.

What increases Miss Lonelyhearts' inability to believe in clichés (both secular and religious) is the fact that his editor Willie Shrike constantly ridicules them. Zijderveld states

¹¹⁴ Zijderveld 99.

¹¹⁵ Zijderveld 99.

¹¹⁶ Zijderveld 16-17, 62-65.

that when a cliché is ridiculed, it (at least ideally) provokes reflection on the cliché and thus relativizes the cliché's power, making it questionable.¹¹⁷ Zijderveld also specifically connects this practice with Dadaists, who played with clichés in their art in order to criticize conventional ideas.¹¹⁸ Shrike ridicules mass culture, art and Christianity (and their corresponding clichés) equally as nothing is too "sacred" or privileged in his view for him to avoid joking about it. The serious argument contained in his jokes, though, seems to be that dreams of a better life are problematic at best and trivial at worst and that people are still doomed to suffer through an absurd life that ends in death.

The operations to which Shrike subjects clichés are very similar to Dada. First, he uses the melodramatic, gushing, histrionic, wordy, overly eloquent and clichéd language of advertisements and some other mass culture texts (like self help books and some movies) almost whenever he speaks, but he uses it ironically, exaggerates it, and places it in the incongruous context of everyday interactions (as opposed to the more congruous context of a mass culture text). These practices are likely to make his listeners see the difference between this type of language and ordinary everyday language and to recognize how insincere and affected the former actually is. There is irony, of course, in that when he dictates advice in this form for Miss Lonelyhearts to put into his column (as with his advice about art being a "Way Out" [69]), this initially clichéd advice, which is obviously a joke to him, will most likely be taken seriously and literally by readers of the column (and writing it into a mass culture text in which one would expect such language will keep the language from being estranged). Second, he uses the strategy of speaking about a relatively conventional topic in conventional terms (such as the greatness of art or farming) and then adding something obscene, obscure or bizarre to the discussion. A third strategy of Shrike's, which overlaps with the last one, is making Christianity and other topics that are commonly held in high reverence ridiculous by incongruously combining them with the everyday or the obscene. This strategy

¹¹⁷ Zijderveld 99-102.

¹¹⁸ Zijderveld 99.

is rooted in Dadaist texts that do the same thing, such as Alfred Jarry's short story "The Passion Considered as an Uphill Bicycle Race", as well as in some quotes from the character Buck Mulligan in Joyce's *Ulysses*. A major and obvious example of this is Shrike's repeated descriptions of Miss Lonelyhearts as a priest or a Christ figure, although these descriptions go along with the more serious idea that in a post-Christian world, an advice columnist gives his or her readers guidance, hope and/or a sense of security the way a religion is supposed to. Finally, Shrike uses many double entendres and parodies of frequently used Christian phrases. To this, we could add that Shrike problematizes a reverent view of Christianity not only by deflating clichés but even just by showing that Christianity is no longer held in reverence and thus could be made fun of and also by making arguments against it like when he points out that the Christianity of the Renaissance was marked by debauchery (71).

To get back to the topic of mass culture itself, the main way Shrike parodies it in most cases is by using his advertising-like language to offer a diversion as a solution to a problem (most frequently to Miss Lonelyhearts' troubled mind) the way a commercial, self help book or even an advice column would (it was common for 1930s advice columns to use the language of advertising, especially as their advice often shamelessly promoted brand name products¹¹⁹) even though he is being ironic and knows that such solutions are incongruous to the problem at hand (with his advertising-like language and his Dadaist strategies making the solutions sound even more ridiculous). Here it is also relevant to mention Shrike's South Seas fantasy, which ridicules western society's views of South Seas islands as a place where someone could live a "simpler and more satisfying life" by living in preindustrial conditions¹²⁰ and also as a "sexual paradise" where the women are attractive, sexually liberated and sexually submissive to European or American men.¹²¹ Shrike ridicules these conventional ideas by imitating 1930s popular song lyrics ("on the blue lagoon, under the

¹¹⁹ Barnard 188.

¹²⁰ Michael Sturma, *South Sea Maidens: Western Fantasy and Sexual Politics in the South Pacific* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002) 157.

¹²¹ Sturma 156.

silvery moon, to your love you croon in the soft sylabelew and vocabelew of her langorour tongorour" [108]) and saying that Miss Lonelyhearts, if he lived on the islands, would live out the clichés of a typical Hollywood movie about a white man living on an exotic island (a roguish but basically decent white American hero, the depiction of the island as a paradise, a romance between the white American hero and an islander, a "beautiful society girl" falling in love with the white American hero because she finds him exciting [107-108]). This scenario is obviously farfetched, ridiculous and unlikely, especially in the context of Miss Lonelyhearts' grim and hopeless world. Thus, the implication might be that mass culture itself is farfetched, ridiculous and unlikely. However, the South Seas passage also describes the islander girlfriend in the following way: "Her breasts are golden speckled pears, her belly a melon,..." (107) This is obviously an allusion to the South Seas paintings of Gauguin, Webber and Dampier as these sometimes compared women's body parts, especially their breasts, to fruit and flowers.¹²² Shrike also connects his fantasy with "imitating Gauguin" (108). Thus, the South Seas passage implies that art can be just as farfetched, ridiculous and unlikely as mass culture.

Shrike's following fantasy of hedonism also dehierarchizes art and mass culture, but this time by stating that art (Matisse, Picasso and Proust) is like mass culture (Philadelphia Jack O'Brien) in that both of them are among the many different sources of pleasure (including sports, sex, booze, and food) that could distract an individual's attention from life's troubles and the fact of death (108-109). His next fantasy then ironically makes the claim that art can make up for any need or desire not being met, including the need for food and the need for warmth (109). This statement ridicules any conception of art that would idealize it too much and give it powers that it does not have (and Miss Lonelyhearts' offer of art as a solution to problems in his column could be one such conception). It also goes along with Dadaism's

¹²² Sturma 89.

rejection of traditional art, traditional aesthetics and highly reverent views of art.¹²³ In fact, as *Miss Lonelyhearts* depicts a world in which traditional norms lost their force, art is just entertainment or a set of representations (like mass culture) rather than something that is revered.

Shrike, then, ridicules mass culture for being clichéd, untruthful and inane, but this goes along with his larger project of saying that life is absurd while both art and mass culture are only pleasant diversions from it at best (the case with Shrike's critique of Christianity is more complex, even if Shrike also ridicules Christianity and does not see it as a sufficient solution to suffering). If Shrike is right, any advice *Miss Lonelyhearts* gives to his readers about turning to art, something pleasant or Christianity is worthless as a solution to most of the readers' problems except for the fact that it might make them feel slightly better emotionally by giving them soothing dreams or a more optimistic world view on the basis of clichés. On one hand, Shrike might be telling the truth about the world, but on the other hand, he is depicted as evil and without empathy (in fact, as the "target of the author's scorn"¹²⁴) for telling his views to *Miss Lonelyhearts* and thus ruining the possibility of *Miss Lonelyhearts* convincing himself (and perhaps followingly his readers) that Christianity (or perhaps even an escapist solution like turning one's attention to art) is actually weighty and not just an empty cliché. *Miss Lonelyhearts* believes that "suffering could be ameliorated if only we could still take seriously the 'final vocabularies' that the Shrikes of the world render untenable."¹²⁵ Shrike and the cynical Dadaism / black humor he represents offer only nihilism and no hope or sympathy for other people (as is evident from Shrike's joking about the plight of the paralyzed boy), thus encouraging further dehumanization. Jonathan Greenberg actually argues that both *The Day of the Locust* and *Miss Lonelyhearts* subject both sentimentality (including the sentimentality of both Christianity and mass culture) and the "sophisticated" subcultures

¹²³ Wikipedia, "Dada," 25 Dec. 2009 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dada>.

¹²⁴ Jonathan Greenberg, "Nathanael West and the Mystery of Feeling," *Modern Fiction Studies* Fall 2006: n.pag. Retrieved from the Proquest database on 9 Nov. 2006.

¹²⁵ Greenberg n.pag.

that laugh at it (e.g. Dadaism, modernism, Hollywood's nouveaux riches) to satire and criticism, thus making West's work somewhat self-contradictory and difficult to interpret.¹²⁶

In keeping with this self-contradictory nature in West or his tendency to criticize or satirize all the sides in a conflict, art, Christianity and mass culture are all seen as potentially damaging in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Art and Christianity both lead to Miss Lonelyhearts (presumably) getting shot at the end of the novel. Miss Lonelyhearts' Christian hysteria, which is strongly influenced by his fever and which is already described as a dangerous force in the third chapter, leads him to misinterpret the intentions of Peter Doyle and try to embrace him in spite of Doyle's gun. As for art being a damaging force, Father Zossima's advice from *The Brothers Karamazov* to "[l]ove a man even his sin", "love everything" and "perceive the divine mystery in things" (75) arguably seems to be a part of Miss Lonelyhearts' thinking when he becomes hysterical and rushes out to embrace Peter. Granted, this is only one single instance of art having this effect, but it shows that the ideas contained even in highly regarded works of art like Dostoyevsky's novels are not necessarily perfect and should be open to question (as opposed to various older pro-art arguments like that art is the best that has been thought and said or that art necessarily makes people morally better). This goes along with Dada's refusal of an overly reverent view of art.

As for mass culture, West represents it as also being possibly detrimental to individuals. This is mainly evident in the chapter "Miss Lonelyhearts and the party dress". Here, Miss Lonelyhearts and Betty internalize the romantic clichés of mass culture, especially movies (such as a rather cute and playful fight between a couple who obviously still like each other, a tearful melodramatic moment between them, or Betty's stereotypical "little-girl-in-a-party-dress air" [136]). Even though Miss Lonelyhearts tries to tell Betty what she wants to hear (which is actually based upon mass culture clichés) and thus lie to her, both of the characters act out the clichés of mass culture without being aware of it ("she unconsciously exaggerated

¹²⁶ Greenberg n.pag.

her little-girl-in-a-party-dress air", "neither one of them conscious of being cute" [136]). As Miss Lonelyhearts' world is saturated with mass culture, it is to be expected that the characters would internalize its clichés. Zijderveld says the following about this topic:

Because of their repetitive use in social life, people will not think much about the precise meaning of a cliché, yet they will hear it and incorporate it into their ongoing interactions. It is my contention that clichés thus manage unobtrusively to penetrate into man's consciousness and to influence behaviour on the attitudinal level, while potential relativizations are being excluded because cognitive reflections are being avoided.¹²⁷

The harm of the clichés of romantic love that Miss Lonelyhearts and Betty enact, though, is that the clichés strengthen society's stereotypes of both courtships and marriages being happy, care free and romantic. This is a dubious message when almost all of the marriages and male-female relationships in *Miss Lonelyhearts* involve violence and/or pain for one or both of the partners. The fact that Miss Lonelyhearts previously subjects Betty to verbal abuse and mild physical abuse implies that their own marriage would be similarly violent. Furthermore, this also points to the following problem: as mass culture gives people visions of a better life (and, motivated by commercial interests, it gives the people visions of the better life that supposedly most of them want, although these desires are already partially motivated by their culture, including mass culture), these visions, through the manipulative influence of clichés, could cause people to confuse the blissful visions with a reality that contradicts those visions. And if Shrike is representative of the creators or producers of mass culture, they will create mass culture with the messages that the people want in order to sell the maximum amount of their product without regard for the messages' veracity. There is also

¹²⁷ Zijderveld 13.

the problem that as Miss Lonelyhearts repeatedly gives advice either in the clichéd, advertisement-like language of his column or in the ironic mode of Shrike, he cannot give advice in any other way, which is evident when Miss Lonelyhearts tries to give verbal advice to the Doyles in the chapter "Miss Lonelyhearts pays a visit". Although this is an exaggeration, it makes the statement that the clichés of mass culture, when used or consumed repeatedly, could be internalized to the point that one could not avoid them in his or her thoughts and/or actions.

To summarize, then, *Miss Lonelyhearts* represents mass culture (along with Christianity and art) as a source of pleasant dreams in a hopeless and absurd world. While these dreams can provide people with minor escapes from their suffering or moments of pleasure, mass culture's manipulative messages often contradict the grim reality of daily life and are sometimes even inane. As such, it is a rather negative view of mass culture, but at least with the provision that mass culture could be seen as a valuable source of dreams by its audience.

However, the novel seems to be less hostile to mass culture in the formal elements it takes from it. Like *The Day of the Locust*, it contains many references and allusions to both mass culture and art (or highbrow topics) and descriptions which consist of saying that someone or something looks like something that a typical 1930s reader would know, including products of mass culture. This implies a model reader who has a reasonable knowledge of and an interest in both art and mass culture rather than one who would reject mass culture with a mandarin disdain. Thomas Strychacz argues that the many references to both high and mass culture mainly emphasize how both are equally inconsequential when traditional high art is no longer as authoritative as it used to be.¹²⁸ This is possible considering the dehierarchization of art and mass culture depicted in the novel, but one could also argue that the many references to mass culture serve to maintain the novel's specifically modern feel, as they help to

¹²⁸ Thomas Strychacz, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and Professionalism* (New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 181-182.

emphasize that the action is taking place in 1930s New York (or 1930s urban America). If West's intention was to write a Dadaist novel or a novel influenced by Dada, his many uses of mass culture fit well with this aim, as Dada was supposed to use all the materials of everyday life to both affront the bourgeoisie and create an innovative new kind of art (viz. the first chapter).

A discussion of mass culture in *Miss Lonelyhearts* also needs to take into account the fact that West himself stated in his short article "Some Notes on Miss L." that he originally planned to write *Miss Lonelyhearts* as "a novel in the form of a comic strip" (with the chapters containing only one action each and being placed into squares, and dialogue being in word balloons), abandoned the idea, and then kept some of the "comic strip technique".¹²⁹ He explains this as follows: "Each chapter instead of going forward in time, also goes backward, forward, up and down in space like a picture. Violent images are used to illustrate commonplace events. Violent acts are left almost bald."¹³⁰

Miss Lonelyhearts is like a comic strip in several different ways. First, it is like a comic strip in that it emphasizes terseness. As it is a short novel made up of 15 brief chapters, it can be read quickly, just as a comic strip is conventionally read quickly. The sentences tend to be relatively short, lucid and easy to follow (provided that the reader does not try too hard to interpret West's many symbols and allusions). The descriptions of characters and objects are also kept brief, which perhaps corresponds to comic strip art usually containing a relatively small amount of details. In this respect, *Miss Lonelyhearts* is not just like a comic strip but like American mass culture in general, as Jeremy Tunstall states that American mass culture emphasizes pace, brevity, terseness and speed to create an exciting effect.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Nathanael West, *Novels & Other Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1997) 401.

¹³⁰ West *Novels* 401.

¹³¹ Jeremy Tunstall, "Stars, Status, Mobility," *American Media and Mass Culture: A Left Perspective*, ed. D. Lazere (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987) 119.

Second, the novel has a serialized and episodic structure as its chapters resemble the short episodes of a comic strip.¹³² While the novel does have a central plot and continuity, almost every chapter presents a single unified scene in which Miss Lonelyhearts has an experience with one or more of the supporting characters in one specific place (or in a set of locations that are close to each other). When one chapter ends and another chapter begins, it usually leads to Miss Lonelyhearts taking part in another unified scene with a different setting and a different set of supporting characters.

The individual chapters have titles in which the central character's name is combined with the context he is placed into in the chapter (e.g. "Miss Lonelyhearts in the dismal swamp", "Miss Lonelyhearts and the cripple"). Some serialized products of popular culture titled their episodes similarly (e.g. *Tarzan* novels, *Betty Boop* cartoons), and while I did not find a concrete example of this titling practice in the field of 1930s comic strips, it is likely that some comic strips with this kind of titling existed at the time.

Third, it has been repeatedly argued that whenever a character's physical appearance is described in West, it is so bizarre, exaggerated, grotesque, and made up of basic shapes that it resembles a caricature from a comic strip. At the same time, the character's personality is often also as simple, stereotyped and exaggerated as a caricature.¹³³

Fourth, if West stated that his chapters go in all directions of space "like a picture", he probably meant that they emphasize visual images the way a comic strip would. The novel does create many visual images (including Surrealistic images) in the mind of the viewer, but the problem with this idea is that every novel creates visual images of some sort. Plus, while a comic strip is usually a combination of pictures and written text, *Miss Lonelyhearts* is literally still a novel that is solely made up of written text, and the written text depicts both visual

¹³² Martin Hilský, "Westovo panoptikum amerických snů," *Od Poea k postmodernismu: proměny americké prózy*, eds. Martin Hilský and Jan Zelenka (Prague: Odeon, H & H, 1993) 163.

¹³³ Victor Comerchero, *Nathanael West: Ironic Prophet* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1964) 7-8; Strychacz 176-177; Barnard 171, 191; Randall Reid, *The Fiction of Nathanael West: No Redeemer, No Promised Land* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967) 86-87; Hilský 162.

images (such as descriptions of what people, objects and actions look like) and things that could hardly be depicted in a visual image (such as descriptions of feelings and mental states).

Finally, West's novel is like a comic strip in its blunt depictions of violence. Although not all early comic strips were violent, the American comic strip contained at least mild violence as its staple since its very beginnings, as the earliest humor strips often contained vulgar humor, physical humor, cruel pranks played by slum children, and disrespect for authority figures.¹³⁴ Early comic strips also contained instances of characters hitting and throwing projectiles at each other - sometimes to provide emphasis or a denouement for a joke, but at other times it appeared to be violence for the sake of violence.¹³⁵ Almost every chapter of *Miss Lonelyhearts* contains a violent act of some sort, even though these violent acts range from insults, threats and pinches to beatings, rapes and shootings. However, unlike in comic strips, the violence is not funny, and mostly it is not accompanied by any joke or gag. Rather, the violence in *Miss Lonelyhearts* is like the violence in a comic strip in that it is depicted matter-of-factly without being explained or described at great length.

West's decision to write *Miss Lonelyhearts* using comic strip techniques can largely be explained by his desire to write novels that would be very "modern" in their use of all of the materials of American daily life and go against traditional literary standards. Furthermore, Randall Reid speculates that West trying to write "a novel in the form of a comic strip" might have been an experimental reaction to Lynd Ward's wordless "novels" in woodcuts *God's Man* and *Madman's Drum* (with the latter being the story of a man suffering for trying to find happiness or meaning in various secular pursuits instead of Christianity).¹³⁶ Also, comic strips themselves, while being a popular form, were trendy and valued among intellectuals of West's

¹³⁴ Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998) 2.

¹³⁵ Strychacz 178; Gilbert Seldes, "The 'Vulgar' Comic Strip," *The Seven Lively Arts*, 1924, 16 May 2010 <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/seldes/ch14.html> 221, 226.

¹³⁶ Reid 85-86.

time, as was the case with the political cartoons of the *New Masses* (which actually utilized some techniques of Dada and modernism)¹³⁷, *Krazy Kat* and the cartoons in the *New Yorker*.

However, the comic strip elements in *Miss Lonelyhearts* can also be viewed as fitting to the story's content. Writing a novel to make it similar to a comic strip points to the dehierarchization of art and mass culture when the institution of art lost much of its traditional authority. Writing matter-of-factly about caricature-like characters hitting and abusing each other points to the idea that as Christianity and traditional moral norms lose much of their authority, people become somewhat dehumanized and have no qualms about hurting others or viewing them as mere things. In his article "Some Notes on Violence", West actually wrote that in the U.S., violence is so commonplace that Americans are not greatly shocked by accounts of violent acts (in both newspapers and literature), and that while a European writer needs 300 pages to "motivate one little murder", Americans would not condemn a "little book with eight or ten murders in it" as "melodramatic".¹³⁸

Similarly, in "Some Notes on Miss L.", West states that short novels are especially suited for the U.S. because Americans are "a hasty people" rather than a nationality that would appreciate or relate to the "slow growth" associated with classic European literature.¹³⁹ The comic strip technique of *Miss Lonelyhearts* is thus apt for capturing all of these ideas. Of course, this technique is still presented ambivalently since it can be viewed as positive for its innovations, experiments and aesthetic value, but at the same time, it does seem to imply that the frequent and matter-of-fact depictions of violence in comic strips encourage people to be more violent and dehumanized.

Thus, *Miss Lonelyhearts* is full of apparently contradictory impulses in regard to mass culture. It represents mass culture as inane, full of clichés, and manipulative, although it also concedes that it is seen as valuable by the people who use it and that art is no longer seen as

¹³⁷ Barnard 113.

¹³⁸ West *Novels* 399-400.

¹³⁹ West *Novels* 401.

clearly separate from and superior to it. The form, allusions and language style of the novel, however, could imply that mass culture elements could add to the creativity and aesthetic value of a literary text, even though they are also fitting to the novel's critical view of mass culture. In fact, *Miss Lonelyhearts* is a Dadaist work of literature with many elements derived from mass culture, but at the same time, it is critical of Dada, literature and mass culture. This goes along with the observation that West often ridiculed in his writings things that he was actually in favor of in his personal life, such as not only his favorite art and literary movements, but also left-wing political groups, probably mainly because he could not bring himself to treat anything reverently in his work.¹⁴⁰

4.2. A Cool Million

A Cool Million deals with mass culture to a lesser extent than *Miss Lonelyhearts*. *A Cool Million* is mainly related to mass culture in that its form is derived from Horatio Alger novels and in that it deals a few times with entertainments that are designed to represent a view of the American past.

To begin with, *A Cool Million* is very much a parody of Horatio Alger's novels. The standard plot of a Horatio Alger novel involves a poor small town boy suddenly having to seek his fortune in a corrupt big city. He originally gets victimized by confidence men and other villains, but through his virtues and luck, as well as through learning to see through the confidence men's tricks and winning the affection of influential authority figures, he manages to achieve upward mobility by the end of the novel.¹⁴¹

During the Great Depression, such "rags to riches" stories met with criticism and ridicule due to the difficulty of finding employment in the first place, the many low paying jobs that

¹⁴⁰ Greenberg n.pag.

¹⁴¹ Veitch *American* 95-96.

did not provide opportunities for advancement, and the many celebrities or public figures who were described in magazines as having achieved success overnight through their "lucky break" rather than through years of diligent work.¹⁴² *A Cool Million* is then basically an inversion of the classic Alger plot, since West's hero Lemuel Pitkin goes through the standard problems of an Alger hero only to suffer severe injuries, lose body parts, lose his property, get imprisoned, and finally get killed, even though his friend Shagpoke Whipple keeps telling him that he still has a chance to succeed the way an Alger hero would. Although Whipple tells Lem that John D. Rockefeller and Henry Ford were not thieves but men who were born poor and succeeded through "honesty and industry"¹⁴³, it seems that in their world, the opposite is the case as only those who trick and victimize others succeed in acquiring fortunes. Plus, Whipple uses the Algeresque narrative as well as other idealized accounts of America's past to propagate fascism by saying that America needs fascism to become the great land it used to be in the 18th and 19th century.

A Cool Million also satirizes the Alger novel formally as about one fifth of its sentences are actually plagiarized from Alger's novels¹⁴⁴ and as West imitates Alger's writing style (e.g. short and simple sentences; old fashioned expressions; a narrator who speaks of himself, comments on the depicted events and directly addresses the reader; a whimsical tone). The effect of these strategies is not just that West ridicules Alger and implicitly states that Alger's view of the world is inaccurate, but also that the novel claims that due to people's depravity, Alger's ideal of succeeding through virtue and hard work cannot be achieved and perhaps never was achieved. Furthermore, America's past itself comes to be questioned in the novel's plot through mass culture products that depict American history.

Before starting to discuss the mass culture citations in *A Cool Million*, it should be mentioned that as old traditions are in decline (viz. the second chapter), there are attempts to

¹⁴² Barnard 113-115.

¹⁴³ Nathanael West, "A Cool Million," *A Cool Million and the Dream Life of Balso Snell* (New York: Avon Books, 1965) 15. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

¹⁴⁴ Barnard 142.

create new traditions or restore a sense of historicity, even though such attempts usually do not restore tradition so much as create a romanticized and nostalgic vision of the past.¹⁴⁵ Zijderveld explicitly connects this practice to societies without meaningful and binding old traditions, as a "society firmly rooted in a meaningful tradition does not know a *temps perdu* for which it restlessly and nostalgically searches."¹⁴⁶ During the 1930s, Americans especially desired depictions of an idealized American past in order to make sense of the confusing contemporary events of the Depression or gain encouragement and a sense of stability in facing these events.¹⁴⁷ The rags-to-riches narrative or the Horatio Alger story were idealized depictions of this sort. In *A Cool Million*, other such depictions are the houses bought and displayed by Asa Goldstein, the interiors of Wu Fong's brothel, and the depictions of a great American past for white Anglo-Saxon Protestants in Whipple's speeches.

Mass culture that provides such idealized depictions of the past is criticized in *A Cool Million* for its inaccuracy. Jonathan Veitch states that Asa Goldstein collecting old houses for his store resembles Henry Ford's interest in travelling through the American countryside collecting various objects from the pre-automobile era for the sake of displaying them in his own museum.¹⁴⁸ While the Pitkins' house was built during the Revolutionary War era, it is still inhabited by Lem and his mother in the 1930s (9). Asa Goldstein and his employees see the house as a historical relic that could give people fantasies of an idealized colonial past, but its real history or its use value for the Pitkins is ignored by all but the Pitkins themselves. This becomes an image in *West* of a theme that was common in Depression era literature (especially that with left wing sympathies) - the theme of demystifying commodities by showing the real human suffering that went into their production (such as, in other, more typical, cases, the sufferings of the exploited workers who worked on the products).¹⁴⁹ Thus,

¹⁴⁵ Zijderveld 39.

¹⁴⁶ Zijderveld 39.

¹⁴⁷ Veitch *American* 89-91.

¹⁴⁸ Veitch *American* 91.

¹⁴⁹ Barnard 138-139.

the implicit message is that Ford (or perhaps any business that displays or sells antiques or relics) takes old objects away from people who could still use them and displays or sells them for the sake of making a profit, even if the specious stated purpose for such displays is to show the American past and establish a continuity with it. West also states that such displays are potentially inaccurate depictions of the past when Goldstein's clerk insists on placing "a patched old set of drawers" into the house when the Pitkins did not own it and would have kept it in the woodshed if they did (39). Thus, this is an instance of America's past being "prostituted".

The other instance of America's past being "prostituted" in *A Cool Million* is in the case of Wu Fong's brothel. West seemed to believe that creating depictions of history for the sake of making a profit is always a "prostitution" of history, especially as the title of his own planned theatrical revue, *American Chauve Souris*, could be interpreted to mean either "American Bat" or "American Prostitute", even though the revue was still supposedly planned to be an affectionate and unironic collection of American folklore depicted as authentically as possible.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, it was common for early 20th century American Marxists to associate consumerism with prostitution.¹⁵¹

As the clothes and room of each of Wu Fong's prostitutes are made to resemble a typical regional style from America's past (and as the rooms are decorated by Goldstein), West creates a situation in which the prostitution of America's past through historical spectacles is emphasized by being combined with literal prostitution. This has several effects. As with the Pitkins' house, the decorations create a vision of an idealized American past which helps to detract attention away from the circumstances of their production, i.e. the suffering of the women who were forced into prostitution. Wu Fong's decision to make his brothel "an hundred percentum American" (60) is a reference to (and a joke about) the Depression era trend of making designs specifically American and pressuring people to buy American-made

¹⁵⁰ Veitch *American* 88-89, 166.

¹⁵¹ Barnard 147-148.

products.¹⁵² Furthermore, Wu Fong's brothel points to the early 20th century trend of making just about every product appeal to consumers' fantasies. Even in real life, brothels were not immune to this trend as the famous Hollywood brothel "Mae's" offered prostitutes who were surgically enhanced to look just like specific female movie stars.¹⁵³

In Wu Fong's brothel, though, the women and depicted settings are, with a few exceptions, generally white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant (WASP). In turn, Wu Fong's customers are often non-white foreigners who "greatly desire the women of their superiors" (31) (as the narrator appears to share Whipple's fascist sympathies, perhaps implying that West associated Alger with some kind of fascism or racism). As traditional accounts of American history, as well as Alger novels, are dominated by emphases and glorifications of WASPs and their culture (a state of affairs which Whipple defends), the non-WASPs seek out fantasies of living in various settings of the glorified majority culture that is not their own, and desiring its women could be connected with a desire to take part in the majority culture.

As both Goldstein and Wu Fong use idealized images of America's WASP dominated past to make a profit, the communist Sylvanus Snodgrasse presents an alternative view of American history in his free historical exhibit "Chamber of American Horrors, Animate and Inanimate Hideosities". Instead of glorifying WASPs, the "animate" part of the exhibit depicts historical instances of minority groups being savagely abused. This implies that America was always based upon the stronger victimizing the weaker.

In the accompanying playlet, a grandmother and her three grandsons are forced into poverty and die of starvation because of being ripped off by a Wall Street confidence man, which is a similar situation to Lem's own struggles (being swindled by confidence men, living on the street). Thus, even though the exhibit is described as laughably predictable propaganda financed by a shady communist/Jewish organization, and though Snodgrasse wants a

¹⁵² Barnard 148-149.

¹⁵³ E. J. Fleming, *The Fixers: Eddie Mannix, Howard Strickling, and the MGM Publicity Machine* (McFarland and Company, 2004) 95.

revolution only as revenge on the public for not making him a literary success (91), it still does imply that popular culture could give a relatively truthful view of the world, even if such a view is still made suspect by the varying motives of the people who propagate the view.

The "inanimate" part of the exhibit then displays classical sculptures combined with a clock or bandages, a tasteless sculpture of a hemorrhoid, materials that are made to look like other materials, and novelty items which have more than one use or whose real use is disguised. The most interesting thing about these objects is that they could represent both modern art and mass produced commodities.¹⁵⁴ They could represent modern art in the following ways: the classical statues combined with clocks or bandages could represent Dadaist acts like Duchamp painting a moustache on the "Mona Lisa"; the same statues resemble Max Ernst's bizarre figures in harnesses; and the objects with unexpected purposes remind one of the bizarre juxtapositions of Surrealism.¹⁵⁵ At the same time, though, they resemble mass produced commodities simply because with the rise of commodities designed to appeal to consumers' fantasies, one probably could buy a clock that is made to resemble a classic work of art (as the aesthetic came to have an influence on the look of mass-produced commodities¹⁵⁶), or a toy or novelty item whose appearance hides its real purpose. Furthermore, one needs to look no further than Homer Simpson's house in *The Day of the Locust* or a home decorating guidebook in real life to find examples of materials being painted to resemble other materials. Thus, this passage in *A Cool Million* anticipates Tod's view that the simulacra of Hollywood resembles dream-like or fantastic paintings.

The objects are "horrors" in the eyes of Snodgrasse largely due to his communist sympathies (or, if he is not a true communist, he might only be pretending to see them as "horrors"). After all, American communists like Mike Gold rejected many types of modern art out of their preference for socialist realism while also rejecting the contemporary commodity

¹⁵⁴ Barnard 152-153.

¹⁵⁵ Barnard 152.

¹⁵⁶ Barnard 152.

culture out of a desire for an earlier, supposedly more "authentic" pre-industrial culture.¹⁵⁷ In this, the message of the exhibit agrees to some extent with that of Chief Israel Satinpenny, as he sees mass produced commodities and just about anything white people invented or brought to America as polluting what was once unspoiled nature. However, the exhibit could still be read as ridiculing American communism. In contrast to the complexities of Dadaism and Surrealism, the playlet, while more or less accurately describing the conditions of Lem's world, is so simplistic that it "highlight[s] its own predictability" and "treats the reader as if she were as mentally under-equipped as Lem himself"¹⁵⁸. Thus, West could be accusing communist propaganda or perhaps even socialist realism of a similar extreme simplicity, and it also follows that he could be accusing American communists of Philistinism. As West satirizes both left-wing and right-wing ideologies among many other things in *A Cool Million*, one might be baffled by his rejection of communism when he supported this cause in his own life, but as West himself admitted that he had problems writing about any weighty topic without joking about it due to his discomfort with professions of reverence or sentimentality, one could assume that West "flags the reader's attention" to the existence of arguments he might agree with in his fiction even though he still satirizes them and refuses to treat them reverently.¹⁵⁹

One other instance of *A Cool Million* making an allusion to mass culture is when Lem becomes the stooge in Riley and Robbins' vaudeville act. Like the vaudeville performance during which Harry suffers real injuries in *The Day of the Locust*, the vaudeville performance in *A Cool Million* shows that people's laughter when watching violent physical comedy is an instance of sadism and schadenfreude. It is even combined here with laughing at injuries, disabilities and deformities. However, the show also has a symbolic value since its basic

¹⁵⁷ Barnard 156-158.

¹⁵⁸ Greenberg n.pag.

¹⁵⁹ Barnard 155-156. Along similar lines, West "flags the reader's attention" to the struggles of the ethnic minorities in *A Cool Million* and the starers in *The Day of the Locust* while still depicting these groups as barbaric.

procedure is that Riley and Robbins insult each other but then oddly take their aggression out on Lem by hitting him instead of each other. This symbolizes how over the course of the novel, Lem repeatedly gets caught in the middle of violent two-sided conflicts which should not even involve him and then suffers injuries from both of the sides. Furthermore, the fact that he wears an ill-fitting Prince Albert while Riley and Robbins wear fashionable suits symbolizes how he is a poor boy who is constantly being harmed by the well-to-do.

Thus, in *A Cool Million*, mass culture is mainly criticized. It is depicted as representing the past untruthfully, drawing attention away from the human suffering that might have gone into its creation, exploiting history for the sake of making a profit, propagating the dubious views of its creators, and encouraging sadism. However, at the same time, it seems to say that these are but abuses of mass culture since the playlet and the vaudeville act truthfully depict the general conditions of Lem's world, even if the latter probably does so unintentionally.

5. THE DAY OF THE LOCUST: THINGS ARE NOT WHAT THEY SHOULD BE

In *The Day of the Locust*, West depicts Hollywood as a world that is filled with the chaotic-exotic style almost everywhere one turns, ranging from the props and costumes of film sets to the buildings and street clothes of everyday life. Everything is made to appear spectacular and appeal to spectators' fantasies, but the spectacles detract attention from the poverty, suffering, cheap materials, and insufficiencies of Hollywood¹⁶⁰. Correspondingly, West would agree with *Fortune* in his depiction of Hollywood as emphasizing surface appearances and also in claiming that when appearances do not represent what they conventionally "should", the effect is bizarre and confusing for the spectator. However, unlike *Fortune*, West states that Hollywood is the way it is because of its attempts to depict people's dreams and fantasies (even if these depictions are primarily motivated by the film studios' desire to make a profit) and that what an appearance "should" mean is merely a construct. At the same time, though, West depicts the cruelty of trying to succeed as an aspiring actor in the Hollywood film industry and also of being poor in Hollywood (which are, of course, two of the unpleasant realities that the spectacular surfaces stand in sharp contrast to). Then in regard to mass culture in general, the novel depicts characters' thoughts being influenced by mass culture and some unexpected ideas being found in mass culture (as was the practice in some modernist and Dadaist/Surrealist works). When all of these factors are considered, the novel's treatment of mass culture is shown to be ambivalent rather than purely negative.

¹⁶⁰ Veitch "Reading" n. pag.

5.1. Architecture, Clothing and Props

In *The Day of the Locust*, the buildings are constructed to resemble architecture from other countries: "Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages, and every possible combination of these styles..." (23-24) They may even resemble fictional or fantastic architecture, as "a highly colored shack with domes and minarets" looks like something out of *Arabian Nights* (24). The buildings' appearance is somewhat ruined by the cheap materials used to construct them: plaster, lath, paper and tarpaper (24). They are also definitely examples of the chaotic-exotic style as they not only imperfectly imitate or simulate foreign architectural styles, but they also lead to different architectural styles being incongruously placed side by side, sometimes even in the context of the same building, as is the case with the San Bernardino Arms (23-25). In the case of Homer Simpson's house, the chaotic-exotic style is even applied to the interior of the house. It contains both "New England" and "Spanish" styles of decoration and also a large variety of items that seem to be incongruously combined, many of which are painted or made to appear to be something they are not (such as the gumwood door painted to resemble fumed oak) (53-54).

The book generally presents a negative view of these buildings. In Tod's view, such buildings are "comic" and "truly monstrous", and "[o]nly dynamite would be of any use against" them (23, 24). The book's narrator refers to the San Bernardino Arms as "nondescript" (25), and the narrator and Homer both agree (in an instance of free indirect speech) that Homer's house looks "queer" (53). Even if the novel did not contain this commentary, its descriptions of the buildings would probably conventionally cause most readers to have a similar view of them.

On the other hand, though, Tod (along with West) is partially forgiving of the tastelessness of this architecture, since like Rosalind Williams, he sees that the buildings'

chaotic-exotic style is an attempt to awe their viewers or even give them dreams of a better life in a different time or place: "[The houses'] desire to startle was so eager and guileless. It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that are." (24) Furthermore, while Tod and the narrator criticize the chaotic-exotic buildings on the grounds that they do not meet traditional aesthetic standards, Williams would object that the chaotic-exotic style is not even intended to meet any standards of taste, but "to attract and to hold" the spectator's attention and "startle" him or her by giving him or her visions that are "lavish", "foreign" and "distant from the ordinary"¹⁶¹. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that what made the chaotic-exotic buildings possible was precisely a decline in traditional norms and standards for architecture accompanied by a rise in products designed to appeal to consumers' fantasies.

As the appearances of the buildings do not signify what the buildings actually are and where they are actually from, the Angelenos' clothing similarly does not necessarily signify what one would conventionally expect it to. In West's Los Angeles, upper middle class people wear sports clothes as fancy dress while clothes or items tied to specific sports (i.e. yachting caps, Norfolk jackets, and clothes for tennis) are worn in the context of everyday life without the wearer actually engaging in the sport (22). Similarly, Homer is later described as wearing an outfit so colorful that it would have only looked appropriate on a black man (144). The book gives only brief attention to these incidents and does not explain the people's reasons for wearing these clothes. However, Richard Sennett gives a general explanation for such phenomena when he states that while in the 18th century one's clothing expressed one's place in society, with the changes of the late 19th century a person could relatively freely choose one's clothes from many different mass produced models to express his or her personality or play to his or her fantasies¹⁶². Hollywood then provides an extreme form of this trend: when clothes do not have to necessarily signify one's place in society, one's activity at the moment,

¹⁶¹ Williams 207.

¹⁶² Sennett 147.

or anything else for that matter (they do not even have to signify the wearer's personality), one can wear almost anything at all during almost any activity (provided that there are no rules or binding norms that would prevent this). As with the buildings and Claude's house, Tod is once again in the role of the relatively conventional non-Angelino observer who thinks about how the surfaces and appearances of Los Angeles go against conventions by not matching the meanings one would conventionally ascribe to them. In contrast to the "masqueraders", who are presumably native Angelenos, the clothing of the lower middle class people who came to Los Angeles to retire (the starers) is "somber and badly cut, bought from mail-order houses" (23), thus implying that in contrast, the starers' clothing specifically denotes their place in society, especially when its low quality is an index for their low incomes.

As the Hollywood buildings are made to resemble foreign architecture and the locals dress without a regard for what their clothes would conventionally signify, the situation on the film sets turns out to be surprisingly similar. The studio back lot that Tod walks through contains reproductions of things and places from all over the world, from various moments in history, and even from the realm of fantasy (125-131). For example, these reproductions include a "skeleton of a Zeppelin, a bamboo stockade, an adobe fort, ... a Dutch windmill, the bones of a dinosaur, the upper half of the Merrimac, [and] a corner of a Mayan temple", all standing side by side (127). As the props are exotic and incongruously combined, they obviously fall under the category of the chaotic-exotic style (at least when they are seen on the back lot and not in a specific film) and thus are like the buildings in this respect. The props are also often made out of the same cheap materials as the buildings: "plaster, canvas, lath and paint" (128). More chaotic-exotic simulations are provided by actors wearing their costumes on the set. The actors in costumes are like the "masqueraders" in the street in the basic fact that their costumes signify something different than what is the case in reality (e.g. that the people in the costumes are soldiers when they are merely actors). However, ironically, in the context of the fictional story of the film the actors appear in, the signs of

their costumes are "truthful" and conventional (i.e. if an actor is dressed like a soldier, it means that the character he plays is a soldier), thereby making the fictional world of the movie more stable in its signs than the "real world" on the streets of Hollywood or in the back lot (which goes together with movies giving their viewers an artificial sense of order).

The fact that both the sets and the Hollywood streets contain so many chaotic-exotic simulations made out of cheap materials shows what is probably the main problem with Hollywood in the novel - the spectacular chaotic-exotic surface appearances of Hollywood (both on the streets and on the sets) and Hollywood's image as a "land of plenty" mask or draw attention away from Hollywood's "insufficiency"¹⁶³, which is found both in the cheapness of the materials used to construct the fantasy objects but, more importantly, also in the poverty of the lives of many of the people who live there. *The Day of the Locust* thus depicts a world that is similar to those of *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *A Cool Million* in the sense that all three of the novels depict worlds in which poor and/or suffering people are surrounded with various (often fantastic) products that might provide them with pleasant fantasies, but which cannot actually solve their problems.

Tod's trek through the Hollywood back lot thus shows the situation of mass culture and mass produced commodities as both records of people's fantasies and as objects with a spectacular surface appearance that hides an "insufficient" interior. On one hand, Tod sees that the many props on the back lot are basically "realistic" reproductions of the many dreams that people have and correspondingly also of western civilization's visions of its past (128). On the other hand, the objects on the back lot also resemble dreams in a different sense: as the objects are bizarrely combined and as they lose their original shapes through damage, the resulting images resemble the bizarre juxtapositions of dreams and fantasies. Tod overtly states that these images resemble the dream-like paintings of Salvator Rosa, Francesco Guardi and Monsu Desiderio (127), and by implication, the reader could also connect them with the

¹⁶³ Veitch "Reading" n.pag.

juxtapositions of Surrealist paintings. As people make dreams "photographic by plaster, canvas, lath and paint" (128), paintings that were once seen as visual depictions of fantasies now ironically have their "real life" counterparts, and further irony is provided by the fact that these art-like visions are created by materials that are conventionally used to create popular culture. In regard to this, Bodner states that Tod goes even farther, though, since as the artists he admires "glorify beauty in deformity", Tod "can see something sublime in artifice and bad taste" and use the chaotic-exotic images of Hollywood in his own grotesque painting (which in turn incorporates the influence of the artists Hollywood reminds him of)¹⁶⁴. In other words, Tod can create a grotesque painting of Hollywood with relative ease because Hollywood already resembles classic grotesque paintings. Correspondingly, then, Tod can grudgingly find a beauty in Faye's affected personality or "the ugly, hump-backed hills" of Los Angeles (80).

On the other hand, by being "behind the scenes", Tod sees that even though the props and costumes were made to reproduce historical images, increase the "realism" of their films, and startle the films' viewers, what they really are (i.e. cheap materials made to look like something they are not) shows that Hollywood's "moviemaking magic" is not so magical or awe inspiring after all, or, more specifically, that any awe or "magic" the viewer feels is only caused by the illusions of the film and his or her fantasies. During Tod's trek, what repeatedly occurs is the same thing that happens in the novel's opening passage: characters in exotic costumes and exotic places are introduced, but then it is made clear that the characters in exotic costumes are really actors and that the exotic places are really props. This is often accompanied by a humor that is based on the resulting incongruousness of the depicted object or character interacting with what is really the case - for example, a dead soldier returning to his dressing room (129) or a stone portico flapping in the breeze (127). This all leads up to

¹⁶⁴ Catherine Merrill Bodner, "Apocalyptic Grotesque. *The Day of the Locust*," *Trajectories of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Fourteenth International Conference in the Arts*, ed. Michael A. Morrison (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997) 80, 83-84.

the most significant joke of this sort - the fake hill collapsing due to not being finished yet at the time of the charge on it (131). Veitch explains this moment as follows: "The makeshift supports provided by the studio prop department are a poor substitute for the solidity of referentiality. These signifiers are asked to bear a weight they cannot possibly sustain."¹⁶⁵ Apart from the obvious meaning that a real natural hill would be much sturdier than one made out of canvas and lath, this moment indicates that Hollywood's illusory surfaces can actually be destroyed by the "insufficiency" they cover up.

Veitch states that West further demystifies Hollywood's "magic" in the back lot section simply by naming so many props in such a short space that the reader finally feels that the "exhaustive" list of props is "exhausting" and "tedious" rather than interesting or fascinating¹⁶⁶. Granted, this does not have to be the reaction of all readers, but the great number of items does make the reader sense that there are many exotic items side by side without any one of them being particularly distinct in spite of their differences: "One might as well be in a bamboo stockade as an adobe fort, Paris as the Old West; it makes little difference."¹⁶⁷ There is also no doubt that the fact that the props are all reproductions made out of cheap materials contributes to their ultimate lack of excitement. The implication is that Hollywood movies promise a plenitude of fantasies for their viewers¹⁶⁸, but ultimately, the viewers can grow tired of the many fantasies just as the starers grow tired of the warm weather, fruits and other rather trivial pleasures that California claims to offer (192).

In the back lot passage, Tod does not judge the tastefulness of the props and costumes. This is probably the case because unlike buildings, props would generally not be expected to correspond to traditional aesthetic standards. Thus, what the passage emphasizes is rather the oddness of seeing so many simulacra side by side while also almost simultaneously seeing

¹⁶⁵ Veitch "Reading" n.pag.

¹⁶⁶ Veitch "Reading" n.pag.

¹⁶⁷ Veitch "Reading" n.pag.

¹⁶⁸ Veitch "Reading" n.pag.

what the objects are actually made of, which leads Tod to think about humanity's need to represent its fantasies in a solid form.

Based on the findings of the back lot section, we could come to a similar conclusion about the chaotic-exotic buildings in Hollywood. The buildings are basically a record of people's fantasies of life in other places and times and also unintentionally create Surrealistic or fantastic images in a solid form (e.g. buildings that represent different settings standing side by side, or the Surrealistic image of a dead horse in a swimming pool). However, they also provide a flashy surface which masks their cheap or "insufficient" materials as well as the "insufficient" lives of many of Hollywood's residents. This then has a symbolic value: as an artificial mountain is destroyed because of the "insufficiency" of its materials, Hollywood, its fantastic surface appearances, and its image as a land of plenitude could be destroyed by the residents with "insufficient" lives who actually prove that Hollywood is not a place with plenitude for all, as Tod predicts in his plans for his painting. Or in other words, Hollywood's images of plenty and an idyllic life will not be supported by Hollywood's poor.

5.2. Acting and Personality

One would conventionally assume that when an actor acts, it is similar to a person putting on a disguise or to an object's surface appearance disguising what it actually is. However, West approaches the topic of acting from a different perspective than the topic of simulacra. While one can still differentiate between a building's shape and the cheap materials used to construct it, in *The Day of the Locust*, the human personality is depicted as so elusive that it is virtually impossible to distinguish between "natural" and simulated behavior. This is especially the case with West's two main actor characters: Harry and Faye Greener.

Faye and Harry are both actors who acted so frequently that the roles they played became internalized, and thus they play their roles even in the context of their everyday lives.

This is basically a version of the psychological theory in which the patterns of behavior one repeats as part of the role(s) one plays before others can eventually be internalized as "me"¹⁶⁹. When these roles become internalized, they do not feel like an artificial performance, but as one's "natural" way of behaving¹⁷⁰. It was common for the stars of early Hollywood to force themselves to similarly internalize the personality and psychological makeup of the character they played through Stanislavsky's acting technique (or through the Method acting technique that developed from Stanislavsky's technique) in order to "achieve a more natural portrayal"¹⁷¹. To be sure, Faye and Harry probably internalized their roles through repeating their actions rather than through Stanislavsky's technique or Method acting because their lower class circumstances make it unlikely that they would even know about these methods. Also, their acting usually seems anything but "natural", and acting "natural" in the novel seems to be equated mainly with putting on a seemingly simple, effortless, and convincing performance, as is made clear by West's description of the cross dresser (147). However, the existence of these acting techniques is possibly a real life source that influenced the concepts of the characters.

It appears that Faye and Harry internalized fixed acting personas that they could use in every one of their films in the event that they actually did become stars. This would put them into the category of those film actors who basically play the same character or the same type of character in all of their films (e.g. Laurel and Hardy, John Wayne), even if the phenomenon of some actors playing similar roles repeatedly was usually caused by the studio "protecting" the star's public image once he or she was established as a star¹⁷², and Harry also plays the same role repeatedly as he is a W.C. Fields-like vaudeville comedian with regular routines. In turn, Faye's only acting experience thus far is working as an extra in Hollywood movies.

¹⁶⁹ Deborah Cameron, *Working with Spoken Discourse* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi and Singapore: SAGE Publications, Ltd., 2001) 171.

¹⁷⁰ Cameron 171.

¹⁷¹ P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) 87.

¹⁷² Marshall 81.

However, through her own efforts, she created an acting persona for herself that is similar to 1930s Hollywood actresses who assumed an upper class affected persona on-screen (perhaps Myrna Loy or Claudette Colbert could be examples of this type) and internalized it. Thus, Faye and Harry act according to their screen personas even in the context of their "civilian" lives. However, even in their "civilian" lives, these roles have a purpose. While Harry's tramp/comedian role is played for the sake of getting temporary jobs in the Hollywood film industry (and in the past, he did hope to become a Hollywood star if he could not become a Shakespearean stage actor), it is also used as a form of protection since Harry finds that "[m]ost people ... won't go out of their way to punish a clown" (48). He can also use his stage act to advertise the silver polish he sells (and possibly make the product seem more fantastic by doing so, even if this is not the effect his routine has on Homer). In turn, Faye uses her affected starlet persona as well as her sexually provocative gestures and pleasing appearance to attract men and thus manipulate them (as Hollywood stars owed much of their success to their attractiveness to their audience) and also to hopefully get "discovered" by someone with authority in the film industry.

It is important to keep in mind that while Faye tries to be both a sexually attractive woman and a Myrna Loy-like movie star at the same time, she only succeeds in the former task (even if these two roles overlap). When men meet her, they mainly notice her for her attractiveness. Tod, one of two men who are critical of her "star" persona (the other being Harry, who finds her "ham sorrow insulting" (75) and, as her father, is not swayed by her attractiveness), considers her behavior to be extremely "affected" and made up of "stupid lines and grotesque situations" (87). He also thinks that "[h]ad any other girl been so affected, he would have thought her intolerable" (87). As Faye's behavior consists of acts that seem bizarre in a "real life" context, obvious affectation, and also a rudeness that goes against her attempts to charm others, the reader would probably agree with Tod on these points.

On the other hand, though, Faye's affectations are so extreme that Tod finds them "charming" (87). Perhaps the reason for him being charmed by them (apart from Tod feeling a fascination for anything grotesque or tasteless) is in the following lines:

Being with her was like being backstage during an amateurish, ridiculous play. From in front, the stupid lines and grotesque situations would have made him squirm with annoyance, but because he saw the perspiring stage-hands and the wires that held up the tawdry summerhouse with its tangle of paper flowers, he accepted everything and was anxious for it to succeed. (87)

In these lines, the implication is that Faye is like the chaotic-exotic Hollywood buildings in that she desires to startle anyone who sees her for the purpose of eventually appealing to the fantasies of a well-to-do man who would "pay for her" as a result (and to a certain extent, she succeeds at getting this from Homer, although because of her beauty and manipulateness rather than her "affected star" persona). And also similarly to the Hollywood buildings, the results are monstrous to a conventional view.

However, Tod partially forgives Faye's monstrousness as he partially forgives the monstrousness of the buildings because in both cases, he sees the good intentions "behind the scenes" - the desire to satisfy the need for beauty and romance in the buildings' case and the drive to overcome poverty through hard work in Faye's case. In both cases, Tod also feels an empathy that causes him to be forgiving - an empathy for suffering people desiring fantasies in the case of the buildings, and an empathy for Faye, who mainly suffers because of her poverty and her frustration. Faye is also like the buildings and other things in Hollywood in that she tries to startle and play to the fantasies of others while trying to cover up her "insufficiency" - i.e. her poverty and suffering.

But of course, unlike the surface appearances of the buildings, Faye's affected star-like behavior does not impress anyone (as Tod only respects the hard work that goes into it but not the final result). As a result, since what Faye is really good at is using stock gestures to sexually attract men, including men that she herself is not attracted to, in order to gain their money or favors, it is implied that the profession she really has a talent for is not acting but prostitution (although prostitution can also be a type of "acting" when the prostitute assumes a false or artificial persona in order to play to her client's desires or fantasies), which is the profession many aspiring actresses of the 1930s resorted to when they could not find adequate work in film.

From here, we could ask the question of whether Faye's behavior is intended to say that Hollywood actresses or at least certain types of Hollywood actresses are as grotesque, unnatural and unpleasant as Faye is. This question is especially difficult to answer when West says almost nothing about real movie stars in the novel (as it is generally a novel about those who do not "make it" in Hollywood).

On one hand, Faye plays her "affected starlet" role badly. Her act is undermined by her persona's incongruity with everyday life (as opposed to its possibly greater congruity with the context of a film), her frequent obvious insincerity (an actor should ideally make the audience vicariously believe that the emotions he or she depicts are real and sincere - as Harry does during his performance at the bar), and the fact that the superficial politeness her "affected role" entails is incongruous with her verbal and physical attacks against others and also with her actual poverty (this is especially evident when she assumes the role of a snobby rich woman during the party at Homer's house).

On the other hand, the narrator states that Faye "was an actress who learned from bad models in a bad school" (88). This could mean that the "bad models" are the Hollywood stars themselves and that one cannot learn how to be an actor by imitating them. However, it could also simply mean that being poor leaves one unable to effectively learn how to act in film.

The aspiring actor is then left to his or her own devices in this matter as he or she tries to become what he or she believes a successful actor should be.

But the novel implicitly shows one way in which the Hollywood film industry is a "bad school" and at least some of its actors are "bad models". It seems that through Faye's desire for clothes, her efforts to create a stereotypical role for herself that she would play in all of her movies, and her drive to maximize her physical attractiveness, the novel attacks the Hollywood film industry for caring more about the star's image and appearance than his or her acting ability. As Marshall writes, in the early 20th century, due to the widespread but erroneous belief that stage acting is always "artificial" while film acting is merely "acting natural" (which West refutes by pointing to the artificial behavior connected with film stars), "[q]ualities of beauty, youth, and stereotypical appearance became central to the profession of film acting to a degree they never achieved in stage acting"¹⁷³, as these were also qualities that attracted many of the people in the audience.

This situation is complicated by the fact that Faye falsely thinks that she knows how one can succeed in Hollywood from trade papers, fan magazines, and Hollywood legends, and builds her strategy for success precisely out of this erroneous information (164). Claude listens to Faye talk about these ideas of her's and knows they are wrong. As a high level screenwriter, he should have a better idea about how one could succeed in the industry, but he will not tell her the facts, probably because he pays attention to her gestures and her physical attractiveness rather than to what she is saying (164), or maybe even his own knowledge of the subject is limited. However, the result is that in *The Day of the Locust*, how one could become a star in Hollywood remains a mystery. Thus, Faye thinks that she will become a star by taking on a persona that is typical for a star, but her efforts will probably come to nothing unless one of the unapproachable individuals with substantial influence in Hollywood chooses her to become one.

¹⁷³ Marshall 86-87.

Faye's beliefs about how she could rise from poverty to become a star are tied to her belief in the partially true and partially legendary accounts of many great Hollywood stars rising from "'normal' backgrounds" or "humble beginnings"¹⁷⁴. This narrative haunted the film industry since its inception¹⁷⁵. The narrative was actually somewhat paradoxical, though. On one hand, it was usually stated in the media that the pre-stardom actor achieved success in pictures through hard work and honesty¹⁷⁶ (which is what Faye tries to do, although through hard work rather than honesty). Honesty and hard work were seen as more important than merit or acting ability¹⁷⁷ (correspondingly, Faye ignores these qualities or has mistaken ideas about what merit and acting ability are). On the other hand, though, all four of these virtues lost some of their importance when it was also stated that aspiring actors often become stars by being specially "discovered" for stardom by people with influence in Hollywood, thus making luck the most important quality for an actor¹⁷⁸. Furthermore, "[b]ecause of the sustained focus on external appearance, as opposed to acting ability, the film star appeared to be chosen quite randomly", and it was thought that almost anyone could become a star¹⁷⁹. Thus, despite any hard work or skills involved in the process, many aspiring actors are doomed to toil indefinitely in the hope that success will be given to them by those unapproachable individuals with power in the film industry. If this does not happen, they will, like Harry, just remain a part of Hollywood's "insufficiency". It should be mentioned here that this is the situation of Adore and Maybelle as well as of Harry and Faye.

Turning our attention to Harry, he developed and internalized his showbiz persona by actually playing vaudeville roles repeatedly, both on stage and in movies. Whether he planned to internalize this role is unknown, but as in the case of Faye, Harry's artificial stage persona(s) became a part of his everyday personality. Thus, like Faye, Harry is incapable of

¹⁷⁴ Marshall 91.

¹⁷⁵ Marshall 91.

¹⁷⁶ Marshall 91.

¹⁷⁷ Marshall 91.

¹⁷⁸ Marshall 91.

¹⁷⁹ Marshall 91.

what would be considered to be "natural" behavior (88). Or more specifically, his actions problematize the very concept of "natural" behavior. When he has his fit at Homer's house, he loses consciousness and his body goes through his entire routine (70-71), indicating that Harry's role of vaudeville clown became so deeply ingrained in both his mind and body that his body can perform the routine mechanically like a machine. Thus, when Harry behaves in a way that is "natural" for him, his behavior still seems artificial, bizarre or unnatural to those around him precisely because it appears to be mechanical and more congruous with the stage than with everyday life.

This is also shown at the moment when Tod witnesses Harry expressing his real pain with an unconvincing "second-act curtain groan" (109). In the same scene, Tod also notices that Harry gets "the maximum effect out of his agonized profile by using the pillow to set it off" and that the furrows on Harry's face, "plowed there by years of broad grinning and heavy frowning" on vaudeville stages, make it impossible for him to "express anything subtly or exactly" (109). This makes Tod wonder whether actors suffer less than other people (and implicitly whether the way one expresses his or her feelings shows the intensity of the feelings) (109). But Tod comes to the opposite conclusion: "Feeling is of the heart and nerves and the crudeness of its expression has nothing to do with its intensity. Harry suffered as keenly as anyone, despite the theatricality of his groans and grimaces." (109) There are two allusions to be pointed out here. In the late 19th century, it was a very common belief that a person's appearance is a reliable sign of his or her character and that bodily movements can reliably tell us what a person is thinking¹⁸⁰. Even today, this belief continues as "common sense". West's passage obviously argues that this is not the case. The other allusion is to Emily Dickinson's 241st poem¹⁸¹, whose first stanza is as follows:

¹⁸⁰ Sennett 146.

¹⁸¹ Emily Dickinson, "241," *The Norton Anthology of American Literature: Shorter Edition*, eds. Ronald Gottesman et al. (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1980) 942.

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it's true-
Men do not sham Convulsion,
Nor simulate, a Throe-

I did not find any source that would point out this allusion in West, but it is likely that West had this poem in mind since in the same chapter, he describes Harry as dying with beads of sweat upon his forehead (111) while Dickinson's poem, in its second stanza, describes a dying person with "The Beads upon the Forehead / By homely Anguish strung."¹⁸² To get back to the first stanza, though, Dickinson states that gestures expressing pain are never faked. But as Dickinson wrote the poem in 1861, West argues not only that with the rise of the artificial gestures of stage and film, agonies, throes and convulsions can be faked, but that even artificial or unconvincing gestures can still be used in an attempt to represent the real pain of the person who makes them.¹⁸³ And, of course, West also shows that the outward gestures often arise from subconscious impulses rather than conscious ones, and thus, the gestures can even contradict what the person is saying and it can appear as if the body had its own will (for example, Faye's gestures try to draw attention away from what she is saying, Adore's body/subconscious might know what the sexual lyrics to his song mean while his conscious mind does not, and Homer's hands express his repressed lust). Plus, as Harry's fit shows, the body could make gestures just because it internalized them over the years through their repetition (70-71). Thus, in summary, West's response to Dickinson is that the movements of the body are always unreliable indexes for what the person thinks and feels.

However, West is quick to state that even though highly artificial gestures and real feelings can be independent of each other, there are still instances where the former can

¹⁸² Dickinson 942.

¹⁸³ Thus, in both *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*, West shows that the messages contained in canonized literature should be doubted and subject to scrutiny.

convincingly express the latter. One such instance is when Harry tells the people at a bar his life story while acting it out with his vaudeville skills (110-111). This is the one time when Harry truly gives a "great performance" that captures the attention of his audience (110). There are several reasons for his effectiveness here as opposed to the mediocre results of his performances elsewhere. In the bar, Harry's artificial gestures are kept in the context of a stage performance and therefore here they do not have the incongruity that they have when he "acts" in the context of an everyday conversation. Harry's bar performance also utilizes his own life experiences and his ear for imitating voices and sounds, which is more interesting for the audience than, say, the unfunny joke he tells during the Flying Lings act or the stock vaudeville gestures he repeatedly performs when trying to sell his silver polish. But West emphasizes that Harry's performance mainly moves the audience because they vicariously identify with it. West does this by writing the few sentences describing the contents of the show in the style of a voiceover to a typical 1930s movie trailer telling the audience that they will feel and experience what the movie's characters feel and experience: "Forgive, as he forgave, out of the goodness of his heart and the greatness of his love. Then laugh, tasting the bitter gall, when the very next night he found her in the arms of a booking agent." (110) As Harry internalized his showbiz role, the most effective way for him to communicate is through stage performances. As Harry's performance here is in the style of popular culture, the passage could also mean that popular culture has a value when it convincingly communicates feelings and experiences.

But why is Harry acting and moving like a machine? Or for that matter, why are other characters in the novel somewhat machine-like as well (e.g. Homer being described as moving like a "badly made automaton", Abe looking like a "ventriloquist's dummy", the above mentioned instances of bodies seeming to have wills of their own)? Jonathan Greenberg, quoting Wolfgang Kayser, states that a persistent motif of the grotesque is

depicting human bodies as puppets or automatons, and faces as masks¹⁸⁴. It could also be added that depicting human bodies as similar to machines was a practice often utilized by Dadaists. However, this only points to West's influences and not to the purpose the characters' mechanical nature serves in the story. This purpose is probably to provide a metaphor for the characters becoming dull and machine-like through constantly having to perform the same actions in the context of their jobs. After all, an automaton performs the same action automatically, monotonously and repetitively by definition. Thus, through the body-as-machine metaphor, West connects Harry to Homer and the starers, as they are all lower class characters who were made dull by years of heavy labor, and the message is that the labor conditions of the U.S. of the 1930s figuratively turn people into dull, insensitive machines. But as the novel also takes place against a background of anomie and the decline of Christianity, characters might also be seen as machine-like just because the decline of rules that state that human beings have a value runs the risk of making society view people as mere things or mere bodies.

With the characters of Harry and Faye, then, the problem is with the Hollywood film industry rather than with mass culture in itself. Harry and Faye suffer and take on bizarre or unpleasant roles for themselves simply out of a need to survive and increase their chances of being "discovered" by some VIPs in the industry. These roles, then, are not bizarre or unpleasant for being derived from mass culture but rather due to their incongruousness with everyday life, their connection with moral character flaws, and for making the person appear machine-like. And, of course, Faye and Harry's roles are also used to make the argument that one's physical appearance and movements are very unreliable indexes for the state of the mind even though, ironically, they cannot be neatly separated from the mind either.

¹⁸⁴ Greenberg n.pag.

5.3. The Blurring of the Line Between Art and Mass Culture

The Day of the Locust, largely through the character of Tod, points to the artificiality of the Great Divide between art and mass culture. For one thing, both art and mass culture give Tod ideas about the world around him, and through this, it is implied that any representation (whether high or low culture) can provide "food for thought". For another thing, Tod is interested in both art and mass culture. Finally, he utilizes mass culture in the creation of his own art.

To give some historical background to this subject, Rita Barnard states that the Great Divide between art and mass culture was "a matter of high theory, not of practice" and also that the Great Divide was particularly linked to capitalist culture, which the more left wing subcultures of the 1930s provided an alternative to¹⁸⁵. Barnard's reasons for why the Great Divide was not really a matter of practice are that the art, literature, and political writings of the 1930s often did not fit neatly into the high-culture-mass-culture dichotomy (e.g. Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*); that the 1930s were marked by attempts to create a proletarian/radical culture that would be neither high nor low and created by neither a specific class of artists nor media tycoons; that 1930s high culture itself became a kind of mass culture just by being offered as "a prestige commodity for wide-scale consumption" and accordingly being enjoyed by millions of Americans; and that Dadaist writers like West frequently cited mass culture in their literary work¹⁸⁶. All of these facts imply that both "serious art" and mass culture are difficult to define and sometimes even to distinguish from each other. With this logic in mind, the case could be made that rather than championing art over mass culture, *The Day of the Locust* depicts both art and mass culture as being simply major parts of the

¹⁸⁵ Barnard 7, 9.

¹⁸⁶ Barnard 5-9.

representations that people surround themselves with and that influence their thinking, but without really privileging one over the other.

To begin with, Tod's thinking really is influenced by both art and mass culture, and both types of products lead him to have relatively highbrow ideas. When he hears Bach's chorale "Come Redeemer, Our Saviour", it leads Tod to think about how Christians longed for the second coming of Christ throughout history (122-123). However, just as readily, Tod gets his idea about the back lot's "dream dump" being a record of Western civilization and its thoughts and dreams by thinking of the sea full of half-destroyed ships from many different eras in Thomas Allibone Janvier's children's novel *In the Sargasso Sea* (128).

To this, one could add that Tod demonstrates a knowledge of both "high art" and popular forms even when they do not lead him to have such ideas. He thinks of the various artists that he learned about and emulated over the course of the book, but he is not above teasing Earle by citing cowboy story clichés (96) or thinking of raping Faye through a fantasy that utilizes clichés of conventional hardboiled crime fiction (187). He can categorize what things look like through references to artists, but also through references to popular culture, as is evident when he comes to the conclusion that Harry's corpse looks like "the interlocutor in a minstrel show" (118).

The novel's implied view then is that a truly modern 1930s intellectual is familiar with both high and popular culture rather than being a supporter of the Great Divide who would shun all popular culture. This view is further supported by Mrs. Jennings, who "insist[s] on discussing Gertrude Stein and Juan Gris" and is apparently perfectly refined and cultured (43) while at the same time having a strong interest in hardcore pornography and figurines of dogs (which could be considered to be kitschy according to conventional thinking, although Tod admires their great variety [46]). Granted, Mrs. Jennings's interest in both of these things could be intended to show that she is not so perfectly "refined" or "cultured" after all according to traditional standards, or that according to the more lax standards of the 1930s, an unabashed

interest in pornography and kitschy figurines does not keep one from being "refined" or "cultured". As she incongruously states that the porn film *Le Predicament de Marie* is "utterly charming" (44), she is depicted as having the same moral laxness and "bad taste" that Joan Schwartzen is made ridiculous by.

However, as the novel itself frequently alludes to both popular and high culture, to the lowbrow and the highbrow, and implicitly expects the reader to understand the allusions, the implication remains that a trendy person of the 30s does not shun any product for being of "low culture", even if that person's views might still be haunted by the not-quite-missing ghosts of traditional aesthetic or moral standards.

The matter that remains to be discussed here is that of Tod's painting. In the 1930s, a cause of much concern among intellectuals was that any cultural product (including works of art and their reproductions) could be packaged and sold as a commodity and that art ran the risk of being controlled by business interests (this was actually one of the problems that the Great Divide was a reaction to)¹⁸⁷. *The Day of the Locust* briefly makes reference to this problem when Tod's art school friends worry that he will "sell out" by working in the Hollywood film industry even though they themselves could be "selling out" by moving "toward illustration or mere handsomeness" (23). The phrases "illustration" and "handsomeness" here could imply that despite the students' training in serious art, they are perhaps moving towards careers in illustrating advertisements, newspapers, children's books, etc. - in other words, towards illustrating products of mass culture. Hollywood provides an alternative to this path in two ways, though. First, by having a job in the Hollywood film industry, Tod can paint his own works during his free time without regard for whether anyone will buy them or any other business considerations. Second, as Tod does not want to paint idyllic or "handsome" paintings and prefers the grotesque/fantastic style of Goya and Daumier, Hollywood's many bizarre visuals could help him to paint in this style and provide fitting subjects for him.

¹⁸⁷ Barnard 6-7.

It has already been mentioned above that while Tod sees the many fantasy buildings of Hollywood as aesthetically poor (or "monstrous") when comparing them to traditional standards, he is fascinated by them to some extent and also sees a sublime quality in them¹⁸⁸. Furthermore, the artists Tod considers to be his "masters" (Honoré Daumier, Alessandro Magnasco, Francesco Goya, Monsu Desiderio, Francesco Guardi, and Salvator Rosa) painted images that already somewhat resembled Hollywood in that they painted grotesque individuals, intensively suffering people, and/or bizarre architecture. As was mentioned above, the irony is that Hollywood's cheap props (and perhaps by analogy the kitschy and bizarrely juxtaposed Hollywood buildings) resemble dream-like art from the 17th, 18th and 19th century. Tod also views the props in combination with the plants and trees that surround them as something like Merz collages, Dadaist art, or any other type of art that utilizes non-art objects among its materials (127). Of course, he does not see an individual prop by itself as art, but he does see as art the bizarre or incongruous combination of a prop with something else (e.g. "great, tortured trees", shrubs with spikes, or a "stone portico floating in the breeze") (127). Thus, mass culture objects can be used in art, even if the resulting artwork is not a product of mass culture. In turn, Tod uses the descriptions of soldiers' uniforms in *Les Misérables* to create the uniforms for the book's movie version (128), which shows that just as mass culture informs art, art informs mass culture.

Tod's final plan for his painting, though, is still rather anti-mass culture in the sense that Hollywood's fantastic buildings and simulacra are depicted as burning, and the starers are depicted as being made happy by the burning (200-201). The interpretation that Tod himself would be made happy by the Hollywood simulacra burning is supported by how earlier on, Tod wants the Hollywood in his painting "to have almost a gala air as it burn[s], to appear almost gay" (107). The reasons for why Tod would want the simulacra to burn in spite of his fascination with them is obvious enough: he still sees the Hollywood buildings as

¹⁸⁸ Bodner 80.

"monstrous", and he sees Hollywood's many spectacular visuals and its images of plenty as standing in contrast to and drawing attention away from Hollywood's poverty and "insufficiency". Also, as he sees himself as a Jeremiah-like prophet, he imagines that the starers will destroy Los Angeles just as their counterparts from all over the U.S. will destroy civilization (107). According to that kind of logic, the implicit meaning seems to be that Hollywood and then the entire U.S. should get burned in an act of divine vengeance or poetic justice for providing people with mass produced fantasies but no solutions to their problems, for creating dull but violent individuals through both heavy labor and mass culture, and also for the immorality of many Americans. The starers would then be like the menacing chimera-like "locusts" in Revelations 9:1-9:11 and burn the city the way many of God's forces in the Book of Revelations burn their enemies. Furthermore, Rita Barnard states that the burning could be read as positive because destroying "materialized wishes" (i.e. the buildings) is a precondition for people actually taking active steps to change their world instead of just escaping into wish fulfillment fantasies, although this would be an "as yet unimaginable redemption" at the time of the novel's ending¹⁸⁹.

As Tod depicts himself, Faye, Claude, Harry and Homer as running from the starers, he is placed in the ambivalent position of having an understanding and maybe even a compassion for the starers while still seeing them as a destructive force and as his enemies (or perhaps as an almost mindless herd of locusts) (201). This is understandable when the starers' rage gets turned against anyone in their path, including other starers and their fellow poor. On the other hand, though, as Tod, Claude, Faye and Harry all work in the film industry, they could be the starers' enemies just by helping to create the spectacles that drew the starers to Hollywood in the first place, even if Hollywood VIPs and those who actually create Hollywood's image as a land of plenty would be more apt targets for the starers.

¹⁸⁹ Barnard 187.

When this painting is described, what is described is its subject and not its style. Tod would probably paint it in the grotesque and/or fantastic styles of his "masters", though, in which case "the great bonfire of architectural styles, ranging from Egyptian to Cape Cod colonial" and the burning "corinthian column" of "the palmleaf roof of a nutburger stand" could be made to appear aesthetically pleasing or sublime, as he found an aesthetic value in the studio back lot in a similar way. However, if it remains the case that the painting's style is not described, what is important about the painting is how it organizes Tod's thoughts about the starers and the people in his life. In this respect, then, the painting is placed in the same category as *In the Sargasso Sea*, hardboiled crime fiction novels, the Bach chorale and Faye's movie plots (i.e. a cultural product that organizes or inspires a character's thoughts).

5.4. How the Characters Actually Use Mass Culture

While this topic was lightly touched upon in the last subchapter, it still remains to be discussed how the characters of *The Day of the Locust* actually use mass culture products. It is true that the novel sometimes criticizes mass culture for various reasons, but if one examines other instances of how the characters use its products, the view presented in the novel proves to be much more ambivalent.

To begin with the view that mass culture encourages violence, this view is especially associated with the starers, the lower middle class people who retired to California: "Every day of their lives they read the newspapers and went to the movies. Both fed them on lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wars. This daily diet made sophisticates of them." (192) In the early 20th century, the "story" newspapers that were mainly read by the lower classes really did offer many accounts of sex, violence and adventure, which allowed the readers to vicariously enjoy fantasies of breaking moral norms, and which correspondingly

caused the newspapers to frequently get criticized on moral grounds¹⁹⁰. Movies were similarly criticized as they were accused of not only depicting too much violence and implied sexuality, but also of having the ability to change the viewer's character and even cause him or her to take part in crimes or illicit sex.¹⁹¹ As Tod believes that the starers could erupt into violence at any moment and as they actually start a massive riot at the end of the novel, West seems to actually agree with these arguments.

However, West still sees a greater problem with the fact that the starers were made dull by "slav[ing] at some kind of dull, heavy labor" (192). They dreamt of their retirement in California, but when it came, they found that their labor kept them from developing their minds and sensibilities enough to entertain or stimulate themselves, and that the pleasures Hollywood offers for people with their income level (such as beaches and fruits) actually get boring after a while: "They haven't the mental equipment for leisure, the money nor the physical equipment for pleasure." (192) The starers then desire violence in the sense of wanting to attack the world for making them "slave and save for nothing", but they also want to see extreme real life violence because violent mass culture desensitized them to violence, and their lives of dull heavy labor kept them from knowing other ways of entertaining or stimulating themselves (192-193).

The Day of the Locust also backs up its arguments about mass culture being violent by mentioning several examples of mass culture representing violent images. The most obvious example of this is when Harry is injured by the Flying Lings during his vaudeville routine and the audience laughs at his resulting limp (49). The reviewer of the performance writes that Harry's on-stage pain is "gloriously funny" for the audience, but that it would be "unbearable" if it was not "obviously make-believe" (49). However, as Harry's pain is real, the passage shows that when people laugh at pain and violence in mass culture, it is almost the same as sadistically laughing at real suffering, and the argument that the represented suffering is not

¹⁹⁰ Gorman 24-27.

¹⁹¹ Gorman 38-39.

real does not take away the sadism or schadenfreude of the audience's laughter. Then there is the fact that Tod's fantasy of him raping Faye in a vacant lot is in the style of conventional hardboiled crime fiction (i.e. short, direct sentences, few adjectives, the narrator speaking in a "macho" tone, descriptions of sexualized female body parts, clichés like a threatened woman resembling a deer about to get run over) (187), which implies both that Tod is using such crime fiction to organize his thoughts and that crime fiction encourages violence or rape. Plus, even though Claude's dead horse and the "torture instruments" in the window of the saddlery store are entertaining decorations rather than mass culture per se, they are also representations of violence, pain and suffering that appeal to the sadistic feelings of their audiences.

However, West mollifies this anti-mass culture argument to some extent by showing that Homer's lack of entertainment contributes to his dullness. His previous life was mainly made up of his mechanical hotel work and "had been entirely without variety or excitement" (65). As he was made dull by heavy mechanical labor, Tod thinks that he is just like a typical starrer except for his shyness (50). However, unlike a typical starrer, Homer does not consume much pop culture. The only song he knows is "The Star-Spangled Banner", he has not seen many movies, and he does not own (and probably never has owned) a radio or a victrola (79, 85). This lack of popular culture or any other excitement in Homer's life means that he requires very little to keep himself content - at one point, he is "fairly well occupied" just by having the sun, his chaotic-exotic house, and the lizard that lives there (67). As Homer is made sad but pleasantly so by thinking that he will never buy a radio or a victrola (85), this seems to indicate that one part of his personality wants a device for listening to sound recordings while another does not. As mass culture stimulates emotions and Homer tries to repress his lust, violent impulses and stronger emotions, it makes sense that he avoids it (after all, finally acting on his feelings of anger causes his death at the end of the novel). However, Homer laughs when Harry imitates a stereotypical farmer (81) and genuinely enjoys the performances of Adore Loomis and the cross-dresser at the Cinderella Bar (139, 147), thus

indicating that popular culture can have a positive effect on him. However, as these are not instances of violent mass culture, it seems that West shows a greater approval of mass culture meeting people's needs for beauty, romance, humor and solace and also of those instances where the performer shows great skill in working with the popular form (as is made evident in the descriptions of Adore and the cross dresser's musical performances and Harry's autobiographical show at the bar) than of mass culture that encourages the audience to enjoy violence.

The performance by the cross dresser at the Cinderella Bar is especially relevant to this topic in that it shows how Homer, in his loneliness, is in need of a mother figure. It is also an instance of West placing a Modernist theme in an unlikely place.

On one level, the male cross dresser playing a woman well makes the same point as Adore playing a black adult - even though it looks strange when an actor pretends to be something he is obviously not biologically or culturally, the performance can still be convincing and seem "natural" if it appears to be skilled and unforced. However, on another level, the cross dresser's performance comments on the relationships between Homer, Faye and the cross dresser. The lyrics of the cross dresser's song basically comfort a boy whose "kiddycar" has been taken away and (s)he makes the lyrics convincing by being "matronly" and "tender" (147). Homer (as well as Tod) applauds the performance (147). The performance then leads to Faye saying that she "hates fairies" and asking Homer if he knows what a "fairy" is (147). When Tod tries to help him by mouthing the word "homo", Homer says "Momo" (148).

This superficially trivial joke hints at several metaphorical meanings. The word "fairy" can mean both a homosexual man and a fay (in the sense of a nymph-like creature). Meanwhile, the word "homo" resembles "Homer", and the made up word "Momo" resembles "Mom". Thus, one hint is that Homer sees the supposedly homosexual cross dresser as a mother-like (or "fairy godmother"-like) figure who would comfort him. Another is that Faye (a magical "fairy" that enchants men) is like Homer's mother as she forces him to consume drinks that

are distasteful to him like a mother force feeding her child. Still another hint is that Homer is like Faye's mother in the sense that he takes care of her like a parent while she stays at his house. Homer is also like Faye's gay male friend in the sense that he will not make sexual advances towards her. Finally, as the scene takes place at a bar with a reference to the "Cinderella" story in its name, Faye and the cross dresser are both "fairy godmothers" of sorts for Tod and Homer since both Tod and Homer want Faye to fulfil their wishes for love and/or sex (and what they get from her are minor gestures of affection like dancing and hair patting that do not last longer than their evening at the bar, as this is an analogue to Cinderella's Fairy Godmother's spells lasting only until midnight) and supposedly both Tod and Homer want the affection that the cross dresser offers them in his (or her) song. Homer's desire for motherly affection becomes even more obvious later as Homer reacts to Faye betraying and leaving him by sleeping in the position of a fetus in a womb and seeing this as an escape from his problems.

Faye is another character who uses mass culture as a wish fulfilment fantasy. For her, going to the movies seems to be a dating activity in which who she goes with is more important than what movie she sees. However, she makes a hobby of making up her own movie plots, which she uses as wish fulfilment fantasies or as structures for organizing her thoughts about what she truly wants.

Tod actually realizes that the first such fantasy she tells him about is her unlikely idea of them going into business together as a screenwriting team (89). This fantasy is basically a fulfilment of Faye's desire to get rich quickly.

Her next fantasy involves a spoiled rich girl being stranded on a deserted island with a handsome sailor who is the "first man who ever said no to one of her whims" (90). This fantasy obviously also expresses Faye's desire for wealth, but it also shows what kind of man she would be attracted to. As the sailor is both physically attractive and willing to say "no" to her, he is the complete opposite of most of her rather awkward suitors (Tod, Homer, and

Earle) while being similar to the attractive, sensual and non-obsequious Miguel, whom she ends up having sex with. Earlier, it is mentioned that Faye puts "love on a special plane, where a man without money or looks couldn't move" (33). Faye also manages to fulfil her wish for a wealthy man in her fantasy by stating that the sailor will turn out to be rich somehow (91), thus eliminating the problem of the couple's class differences in the plot.

In Faye's third fantasy, a chorus girl "gets her big chance when the star of the show falls sick" (92). Once again, Faye dreams of being "discovered" and becoming a star overnight. Tod notes that as Faye tries to keep this fantasy as "realistic" in its details as possible, she, like the artists of the Middle Ages who painted biblical miracles, thinks that "fantasy could be made plausible by a humdrum technique" (92). In other words, this scene could be read as saying that Faye sees overnight stardom as a miracle that would save her and that she requires realistic depictions of it to maintain her faith in its possibility. Tod, on the other hand, sees a person from a humble background (or specifically Faye) achieving success in the film industry through a stroke of luck as something that is extremely unlikely to happen, even if it is not a supernatural occurrence and some people did achieve Hollywood stardom in some way or other.

From this, we could infer that in West's Hollywood, movies perform the positive task of providing soothing and hopeful wish fulfilment fantasies for people who feel they lack something. However, Faye's second and third fantasies point to the Hollywood film industry using the same plots repeatedly and thus repeatedly telling the movie audiences the same ideological messages (i.e. anyone can achieve success in show business or find true love with a person who is perfect for them, even in terms of income), perhaps eventually leading the audience to internalize the messages. After all, Faye does say that Hollywood is making a lot of "backstage stories" (92). Faye's plots are also so conventional that they should be familiar to any reader who has seen at least a few classic Hollywood movies. She also ends her island story with a plot device that is a conventional cliché of not only films but even of fiction in

general: a marriage of a seemingly inter-class couple that is made possible by the poorer partner turning out to be wealthy after all (as early Hollywood was not comfortable with the concept of inter-class marriage). The irony here, of course, is that Faye dreams of a wealthy husband saving her from poverty when the movies actually state that the wealthy should marry within their own class (thus showing that the audiences of Hollywood movies usually interpret the films as having meanings that appeal to them). What is more obscene, however, is that the Hollywood film industry creates fantasies of how any hard working and virtuous person could succeed in it when many actually do not.

5.5. Conclusions to the Chapter

When one takes into account all of the uses of mass culture in *The Day of the Locust*, it is difficult to figure out what the book's implied position toward it is, or even whether such a neat single position is to be found in it. The most obvious step toward such a position could be found in the theme of suffering poor people being constantly surrounded with simulacra and mass culture in Hollywood. They feel a lack, and mass culture and simulacra correspondingly give them dreams of a better life. However, the dreams will not solve their problems, and thus the characters are constantly given visions of what they want without actually being able to attain it. Followingly, the dreams provided by mass culture and simulacra can frustrate them just as much as they soothe them. Furthermore, even in some cases where mass culture is not involved, the theme of characters being teased by visions of what they want without actually getting it is a constant in the novel. This theme is made evident in Homer, Tod and Earle desiring Faye; in the starers desiring violence or greater wealth; in Faye, Harry, Adore and Maybelle desiring success in show business; and even in the lizard desiring the flies that it usually cannot catch. It is also symbolized in Adore's game with the wallet on a string and the "mock riot" of Claude and his friends when their porn

movie is interrupted (45-46). In turn, Hollywood has an image as a land of plenty which could provide showbiz success to anyone who works hard toward it and luxuries to any lower class people who would move there after retirement, when this is clearly not the case. With its "startling" architecture, the implied idea is that Hollywood should resemble a land of luxury or perhaps even a fairy tale kingdom, while Tod observes that it is actually more similar to the dark, mysterious, bizarre, and dream-like visions of artists like Desiderio or Guardi. Also, he sees that the many objects which are meant to "startle" and create an image of plenty are actually rather banal objects made out of cheap materials. When the starers burn Los Angeles in Tod's plans for his painting, then, it is a vision of people destroying the objects that create the wish fulfilment fantasies that tease them.

Another part of Hollywood's insufficiency is that as aspiring actors have to depend mainly on luck and inaccessible Hollywood VIPs for their possible success, the Hollywood film industry (or Tod and the Greeners' studio) does harm to them by both ignoring them and giving them the message that they might be "discovered" (hence, it teases them with visions of a better life). In turn, such aspiring actors suffer through poverty while hoping for the big break that never comes. However, the actor characters in *Locust* also internalize stereotypical film roles that were successful in the recent past just out of the dubious idea that this might help them get "discovered". This has mixed results for the characters. On one hand, their internalized roles are incongruous with the context of everyday life and make the characters seem bizarre, grotesque or even machine-like (which in turn implies that they were dehumanized like Homer by having to perform the same tasks repeatedly). Also, sometimes they are not even good at playing the roles they internalized. On the other hand, sometimes they manage to excel at playing their roles, and sometimes their internalized roles can even be practically beneficial for them.

West's depictions of mass culture products tend to be similarly ambivalent in *Locust*. He depicts mass culture products or performances as encouraging violence or sadism, being

enjoyable when skillfully performed, giving characters "food for thought", giving soothing dreams to characters, being formulaic, sometimes going against common expectations or standards of taste, and giving characters ideas about the world that are untrue. I do not know if it is possible to find some "hidden rationale" behind all these varied depictions of mass culture, but all of the above qualities are qualities that only some mass culture products have (except that probably any text could provide "food for thought" or lead to its user getting ideas through his or her associations, and that all the mass culture texts are formulaic to some extent). Thus, West seems to be implying that while he points to some flaws in some mass culture products, the category of "mass culture" contains too many different products to be dismissed in its entirety, and even a single mass culture product could have both positive and negative qualities. Thus, West rather attacks Hollywood for its false image as a land of plenty (which is, however, tied to its movies and simulacra) rather than attacking all mass culture.

6. CONCLUSION

After examining West's many uses of mass culture, I should answer the question of just exactly what kind of attitude West took towards mass culture in his last three novels. However, this question is still difficult to answer due to the sheer variety of West's uses of mass culture and also because of West's tendency to ridicule almost all views, including those he agreed with. Nevertheless, a certain general view of mass culture could still be sketched out from the books.

To begin with, one reason why West's books are saturated with mass culture is that the 1930s America he wrote about was also saturated with mass culture. He was a Dadaist and a modernist interested in both the lower classes and mass culture. Thus, for him, writing about popular entertainments and simulacra went hand in hand with writing about phenomena that were specific to early 20th century life and going against traditional genteel standards in literature.

However, his books mostly do not celebrate mass culture. Rather, they present a vision of people going through various types of suffering while living in a world where entertainments and simulacra are just about everywhere. These entertainments and simulacra provide solace and diversions for the suffering people, but the products will not solve the problem of the people's suffering. This makes the products rather trivial and incongruous to the people's problems. The books also contain references to mass culture adding to people's suffering as it gives them dubious or untruthful messages, as its producers care only about making a profit, as it encourages violence and/or sadism, and as its production can involve harming or wronging people in various ways (Lem losing his home, Lem and Harry getting injured during vaudeville routines, people becoming bizarre or "machine-like" in jobs related to popular culture industries, Miss Lonelyhearts suffering because of his job). Mass culture is also represented as aesthetically weak, formulaic, of a low intellectual value and "puerile" at

various points. Thus, West's novels apparently side with various anti-mass culture or anti-capitalism arguments of the early 20th century (e.g. that mass culture is formulaic, that it encourages violence, that it misinforms people, and that workers suffer when creating it), although West's arguments all stem from examining various characteristics that are typical for mass culture products rather than from comparing mass culture to art.

It could also be argued that the three novels, especially *The Day of the Locust*, show some anxiety about the world becoming increasingly bizarre due to its being saturated with entertainments, simulacra, mass produced commodities, and people and things that defy conventional expectations. However, this may or may not be interpreted as a criticism of mass culture as West mostly leaves the judgement of this situation to the reader while merely emphasizing its weirdness. Furthermore, West's depictions of the American past (*A Cool Million*) and unspoiled nature (*Miss Lonelyhearts*) indicate that contrary to American communists, pre-industrial settings are not much better than the modern world of mass-produced commodities because the world is and always has been filled with violence and suffering (although it could still be argued that the rise in commodities, entertainments and simulacra is a change for the worse).

However, there are also a few moments in West's work where mass culture is seen as having some positive value. As was mentioned above, the performances by Adore, Harry and the cross-dresser are described as being skillful and impressive, although the praise is somewhat tempered by the disturbing weirdness of the performances. The communist playlet in *A Cool Million* depicts the grim conditions of Lem's world as they actually are, although its truthfulness is tempered by its simplicity, its silliness and the dishonest motives of its author. In the case of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, even if the book says that mass culture is "puerile" and a "cultural betrayal", it is still made clear that *Miss Lonelyhearts'* readers appreciate his column as an emotionally pleasing diversion from their suffering. Meanwhile, *Miss Lonelyhearts* himself thinks that his otherwise vacuous column could be used as a medium for spreading

the Christian faith and thus for soothing the troubled minds of his readers still more effectively, even though he finds that he is unable to give advice that would be more convincing than clichés.

This all amounts to the novels taking an apparently anti-mass culture view, albeit with some reservations. However, West apparently still makes the claims that some artists could do great work in the context of popular forms even when most mass culture is basically of a low quality (like Kershner's third category of pro-mass culture modernists), and that how audiences use and react to mass culture is a topic that deserves serious attention instead of being dismissed with overly simple arguments (like Kershner's fourth category). The latter claim, though, is presented in the context of the view that while suffering working class audiences sincerely appreciate (and even depend upon) mass culture, it can still have negative effects on them, and it could still be seen as low quality by someone more educated.

An important qualification to this view, though, is the fact that West does not seem to privilege art over mass culture. Rather, his novels basically treat products of both art and mass culture as texts that can have both positive and negative qualities and that should be subject to careful scrutiny before being judged. As traditional artistic standards and the idealization of art are in decline in the worlds of West's novels, classical works of high art can be criticized while works of popular culture can be appreciated even by an educated audience. In the context of this view, then, works of both mass culture and art can prove to be surprisingly multifaceted, even if this multifacetedness is often dependent on the subjective views of the audience. For example, the playlet in *A Cool Million* can be both honest in its message and ridiculously simplistic; the Bach chorale in *Locust* can be criticized for its overly "polite" beginning and praised for its more exciting middle; the Hollywood architecture in the same novel can be seen as aesthetically weak in a conventional view and as aesthetically strong in a view that compares it to classic fantastic paintings; Shrike's Dadaist jokes can be highly creative and wise as well as dehumanizing; and the performances by Adore, Harry and the

cross-dresser could be seen as both grotesque for their oddness and great for their skill and entertainment value. Even more importantly, if mass culture could have positive qualities, it cannot be so easily written off as inferior to art, and if canonized works of art can be legitimately perceived as being flawed, that makes idealizing them more difficult.

Also, if the novels contain standard early 20th century arguments against mass culture, they still show that the arguments mostly do not apply to all mass culture. For example, in West, only some mass culture encourages violence, only some of it is low quality, only some of it spreads untruthful messages, and only some of it is produced by big business. However, a major exception to this pattern is that mass culture in West is almost always depicted as being formulaic (in the sense of relying on established, easily recognizable and often used formulas). Another exception is that if details of how a mass culture product is produced are given, they always entail some suffering on the part of the audience or the employees, as these are exploited by producers or bosses who only care about the money they might make. However, these exceptions do not cancel out a major idea in West: the mediums and genres of mass culture are not necessarily negative in themselves, but they can be and often are abused by those involved in its production. In spite of this, Miss Lonelyhearts can dream of a Christian advice column that would truly help his readers to cope with their suffering, the cross-dresser succeeds in consoling his suffering audience, Harry can convincingly express himself through mass culture forms when he does not perform for money, and the Chamber of American Horrors tells the truth about Lem's world. All of these moments indicate that mass culture forms really could be made use of in a more positive way.

Going along with this perspective of mass culture is also West's implied view that fashionable Americans of the 1930s have an interest in both art and mass culture. Tod and Mrs. Jennings are two characters of his who are overtly aficionados of both art and mass culture. Shrike might implicitly be such a character due to his great knowledge of both art and mass culture as well. This view is also evident in the three novels' many mass culture

citations. West's examinations of both art and mass culture in the novels present his model author as just such a fashionable man of the 1930s. In turn, West's model reader has enough of an interest in both art and mass culture to catch and understand West's many citations of both of these types of texts. Nevertheless, it is still the case that Tod and Shrike as well as the model author could be critical of mass culture in spite of their interest in it and, in some cases, even their affection for it.

West's understanding of mass culture as a set of texts that need not be purely negative is further supported by West's characters getting various ideas about the world from mass culture texts or using mass culture texts to organize their thoughts (a device that was also used by Joyce).

West mainly utilizes this device in *The Day of the Locust*. There, in keeping with the generally ambivalent view of mass culture, Tod and Faye both use mass culture texts as sources of ideas. Some of the ideas that they receive from mass culture are insightful (Tod's ideas about films and their props being records or representations of people's dreams about various times and places; Tod's realization that a person's appearance is not a reliable index to what he or she feels; Faye's fantasy of a love interest who is more assertive than her actual suitors), but others can have negative effects for them (Faye getting the message that anyone could succeed in show business; pulp fiction possibly encouraging Tod to have fantasies of violence). It should be mentioned here, though, that the latter (negative) ideas are ones that the mass culture products are intended to propagate at least conventionally, while the former (positive) ideas comes from Tod and Faye comparing ideas contained in mass culture texts to their own experiences. Thus, Tod and Faye's positive ideas here are more idiosyncratic than the overt and "pre-packaged" negative ones. This differentiation in West is reminiscent of contemporary studies of how audience members actually react to the pop culture they enjoy - for example, the viewers of a romantic drama series could make comparisons with the series when thinking about their own relationships. More importantly for West, though, it could

imply that many of the flaws of mass culture come from the selfish motives of its producers (i.e. big business), while its assets come from the audience (who add to the complexity of the text's meanings through their interpretations) and, again, from entertainers who have not been fully co-opted by big business like Harry, Adore and the cross-dresser (or perhaps even Sylvanus Snodgrasse).

Finally, an explanation of West's formal and symbolic uses of mass culture is in order here. To be sure, when an author cites a mass culture text without assuming any overt attitude towards it, it is difficult to interpret whether the depiction of mass culture is positive or negative. As was mentioned in the first chapter of this essay, we do not know, for example, whether T. S. Eliot found some pleasing qualities in the "Shakespearean Rag" or whether it was simply his attack on mass culture. As a Dadaist, West used elements of mass culture to create an innovative type of art. As was usually the case with Dadaist art, the finished works were not products of mass culture, but as they contained "building blocks" of mass culture citations, they also followingly contained features associated with mass culture (like terseness, language that is lucid on the surface, and slang, for example).

But does the use of mass culture citations in the novels' forms imply a positive view of mass culture? This question is difficult to answer. On one hand, if a Dadaist makes a collage out of buttons and tickets, it does not mean that he or she particularly likes buttons or tickets. It only means that he or she selected buttons and tickets as apt materials for creating a work of art whose meaning is debatable.

On the other hand, though, West's frequent citations of mass culture and his obvious great knowledge of it (which seems to be the knowledge of a fan) imply at least a great interest in mass culture if not a joy in it. West's uses of mass culture could also imply that mass culture genres, by being relatively new forms of expression and artistic creation, could contribute to art's progress when used in works of "serious" art (but West is silent on whether works of mass culture themselves could be progressive art). Furthermore, West's use of mass culture

citations to create both formal qualities and metaphors contributes to estranging the formal qualities and metaphors.

It could also be stated that when West wrote *Miss Lonelyhearts* with the aim of making it similar to a comic strip, it was a progressive literary experiment that aimed to find a prose equivalent for the caricatures, the matter-of-fact violence, and the brief episodes of comic strips while still doing this in the context of writing a serious novel (rather than an attempt to simply create the prose equivalent of a daily or weekly newspaper strip).

Furthermore, even though *A Cool Million* could be read as a parody and/or an attack on Alger's novels, its Algeresque elements could also be interpreted as helping to provide the format for the work West wanted to create. The book might also be less of an attack on Alger simply because it laments the fact that the world is not as just and moral as the settings of Alger's novels (notwithstanding Alger's possible connections with fascism or WASP supremacy).

Finally, it could even be argued that one reason for why West utilizes elements of mass culture in the forms of his novels is that if he connects the evils of mass culture with its selfish or apathetic producers or with big business, his own uses of mass culture are relatively untainted by the corrupt interests of big business and thus devoid of many of the flaws usually connected with mass culture, but this point is still highly debatable.

To conclude, West wrote against mass culture in his last three novels in the sense of using arguments against it that were common in the early 20th century. However, he connected the evils of mass culture mainly to the abuse of mass culture genres by big business. Otherwise, it appears that he mainly saw both "serious" art and mass culture as sets of texts that could have many different features, both positive and negative, and that should be scrutinized accordingly. Such a view allows for West's criticism of mass culture, his innovative uses of its citations in his work, and even those moments when he seems to show an affection for it. But it should also be underlined that he basically had two approach to mass

culture that overlapped at times. In the first approach, he criticized and scrutinized products of mass culture (their qualities, the effects they have on their audience, their place in society). In the second approach, he used mass culture elements in his work to make it modern, creative, innovative, bizarre, and similar to Dada/Surrealism. This leads to the question of why West frequently made his work similar to mass culture while criticizing mass culture. This question has many possible answers, but one answer is that West did not completely dismiss mass culture in his work even if the novels were critical of it. Plus, it could be argued that West approached mass culture the way he approached Dada and communism - he could have used his work to draw attention to mass culture and its properties, which he had at least some liking for, but since he was reluctant to highly praise anything in his work, he rather turned his attention to the negative sides of whatever he liked.

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SUMMARY IN CZECH / SOUHRN V ČEŠTINĚ

Poslední tři romány Nathanaela Westa (*Miss Lonelyhearts*, *A Cool Million* a *The Day of the Locust* - česky *Příteckyně osamělých srdcí*, *Majlant* a *Den kobylek*) jsou často interpretovány jako útok proti masové kultuře a obhajoba vážného umění. Avšak Nathanael West naplňoval své romány tolika odkazy k masové kultuře, že je těžké uvěřit, že k ní měl čistě negativní vztah. Moje teze je, že Westův přístup k masové kultuře v těchto románech je spíše dvojznačný. Přesněji řečeno, když ve 30. letech minulého století už neplatily tradiční estetické normy tak jako dřív, West zobrazuje předměty ze sfér umění i populární kulturu jako pouhé texty, které mohou mít kladné i záporné vlastnosti a které se musí zkoumat a nikoliv předem odsuzovat. To platí i přesto, že West mnohdy používá argumenty proti masové kultuře, které byly v jeho době typické.

První kapitola mé teoretické práce popisuje, jak různé směry modernismu z prvních čtyř desetiletí 20. století mohly mít vliv na Westovo užívání odkazů k masové kultuře. R. Brandon Kershner poukazuje na tři modernistické proudy, které měly spíše kladný vztah k tehdejší masové kultuře: 1. Dada; 2. Modernisté, kteří chválili alespoň některé druhy masové kultury; 3. Levicově orientovaní modernisté, kteří se zajímali o masovou kulturu, protože přinášela zábavu pracující třídě. West spadá pod první z těchto proudů, protože se zajímal o dada a surrealismus a podobně jako dadaisté a surrealisté používal ve svém díle „snové“ obrazy a nekonvenční prvky jako citace masové kultury a také černý humor. A podobně jako oni se vysmíval tradičním hodnotám včetně uznávaným hodnotám uměleckým.

Není jisté, zda West patří do Kershnerova druhého proudu, protože nikdy otevřeně neobhajoval masovou kulturu. Ovšem existuje podobnost mezi ním a modernisty patřícími k tomuto proudu. Stejně jako oni West ve svém díle používal citace masové kultury a popisoval jevy každodenního městského života, aby zobrazil moderní svět v jeho

specifičnosti. Tito modernisté často chválili jednotlivá díla masové kultury, ale ji přitom kritizovali jako takovou. Podobné názory se implicitně objevují ve Westových románech. I West odmítal tradiční dichotomii, ve které klasické umění bylo obvykle uctíváno zatímco masová kultura byla vesměs zatracována.

West tedy spadá pod Kershnerův třetí proud, protože se v 30. letech začal zajímat o život nižších tříd a do jisté míry sympatizoval s americkou komunistickou stranou. V této době pracoval v hotelu, hodně si všímal toho, jak hosté z nižších tříd mívají různé trable a obracejí se pro útěchu k produktům masové kultury. Z toho se stalo téma, které se často objevovalo v jeho románech a sám se o masovou kulturu začal zajímat.

V další části stejné kapitoly přirovnávám Westův přístup k masové kultuře s přístupem J. Joyce a T. S. Eliota. I když tito dva autoři jsou často spojováni s kritikou masové kultury a oslavou velkého umění, byly chvíle, kdy některé produkty masové kultury sami chválili. I když Joyceovy romány a Eliotovy básně jsou většinou vykládány jako díla zaměřená proti této kultuře, Kershner tvrdí, že neodpovídají této interpretaci stoprocentně, neboť jejich využívání masové kultury jsou mnohem různorodější. Westovy citace masové kultury jsou podobně různorodé, neboť v jeho dílech jsou místa, která jsou víceméně jasně zaměřená proti ní, i místa, kde není tak jasné, jaký je implicitní pohled na masovou kulturu obecně nebo na nějaký její produkt.

Mezi Westem a těmito jeho dvěma literárními kolegy jsou i další podobnosti, co se týče jejich přístupu k masové kultuře. West, Joyce a Eliot používali metodu, ve které je produkt masové kultury zobrazen jako komický nebo bizarní; přesto tyto citace přispívají k umělecké a estetické hodnotě celého jejich díla. Všichni tři vkládali modernistické nebo překvapivě zajímavé myšlenky do míst, kde by je čtenář vůbec nečekal, a to včetně míst, která zmiňují masovou kulturu nebo využívají její vlivy. West i Joyce používali strategii, ve které produkt masové kultury pomáhá jejich literárním postavám utřídit si myšlenky. West a také Joyce poukazovali na podobnost mezi křesťanstvím a jistými produkty masové kultury.

Poslední část první kapitoly nabízí vysvětlení Westových metod na základě úvah Lisy Ottýové o umění Andyho Warhola. Ottýová tvrdí, že Warholovo umění, které různě imituje a cituje produkty masové kultury, nemusí ji nutně podporovat ani napadat, ale že především formálně zkoumá efekty různých médií. Studium díla A. Warhola podle Ottýové nakonec vyvrátilo známé tvrzení Clementa Greenberga, že klíč se lidem líbí kvůli citově působivému tématu, které zobrazuje a které způsobuje okamžité emotivní reakce. Nikoliv tedy kvůli jeho konvenční a nezajímavé formě. Ovšem dva Warholovy projekty (sekvence obrazů „Death and Disaster“ a kniha *a; a novel*) ukazují, že v prvním případě, citově působivé téma spojené s nezajímavou formou nemusí nutně způsobit sentimentální reakci ze strany diváka a v druhém případě, že variace ve zdánlivě nezajímavé formě nakonec mohou upoutat čtenářovu pozornost více než obsah, protože každý detail díla má svou váhu.

Ottýové poznatky se dají aplikovat i na Westa. Když West zasadí produkt masové kultury do nového uměleckého kontextu, čtenáři na něj reagují jinak než za normalních okolností. Například, i když je kniha *A Cool Million* napsaná ve stylu románů Horatia Algera, čtenáři na ni budou reagovat jinak než na Algerovy romány. Westovy citace masové kultury mohou mít jistou uměleckou hodnotu, protože každý detail textu má svou důležitost. West i Warhol vytvářeli zajímavé estetické efekty tím, že kombinovali hodně odlišná média (ve Westově případě produkty masové kultury s modernistickým románem).

Druhá kapitola krátce popisuje jisté dobové sociokulturní změny, které slouží jako pozadí pro všechny tři Westovy romány, o nichž zde pojednávám. Kvůli změnám ve výrobních technologiích, které se odehrály od poloviny 19. století, bylo v obchodech více produktů než kdykoliv předtím a prodávaly se za nižší ceny. Lidé tak logicky kupovali více věcí než dříve. Kvůli komerčním účelům začali majitelé obchodů vystavovat zboží tak, aby vypadalo neobyčejně přitažlivě. Lidé si začali kupovat mnoho věcí kvůli svým představám a pocitům a nikoliv kvůli tomu, že by dané produkty byly pouze užitečné.

Stále více se objevovalo to, čemu Rosalind Williams říká „chaotický-exotický“ sloh (the chaotic-exotic style). V tomto slohu reprodukce různých předmětů ze vzdálených anebo i vymyšlených zemí stojí často nesourodě vedle sebe za účelem vyvolat příjemné představy o těchto zemích. Byl to sloh, který se používal v druhé polovině 19. století ve výlohách obchodů, ale i při různých prezentačních výstavách, které připomínaly trhy.

Williams píše, že chaotický-exotický sloh se stal běžný a populární především proto, že lidská mysl vždy vyhledávala představy lepšího života. Náboženství a umění většinou uspokojovaly tuto potřebu, ale během druhé poloviny devatenáctého a v začátcích dvacátého století tuto funkci stále více přebíralo konzumní zboží, nadměrná reprodukce a masová kultura.

V této době se hodně oslaboval vliv křesťanství, tradic a různých norem, které již nebyly tak závazné jako dříve. Ovšem tradice a zděděná kultura umožňují lidem lépe snášet utrpení, problémy a strach. Když je mnoho lidí pozbylo, ztratili také pocit řádu a stability. Následně hledali tento řád a stabilitu ve spotřebním zboží, zábavě, nově vymyšlených „tradicích“ a také v masové kultuře. To však byly jen chabé náhražky náboženství a silných tradic.

V 20. a 30. letech 20. století se proti tomuto trendu objevily argumenty spojené s odporem k různým novým produktům a touhou po idealizovaných dřívějších časech. Levicoví intelektuálové jako např. komunista Mike Gold spojovali nové zboží s kapitalismem a dekadencí a ve spojitosti s tím toužili po tradičních hodnotách a dobách, ve kterých věci byly jednoduché a užitečné.

Také mezi pravicově zaměřenými lidmi se ozvali konzervativní čtenáři a přispěvatelé obchodního časopisu *Fortune*. Jonathan Veitch poukazuje na jeden článek v tomto časopisu z roku 1932, ve kterém jeden z komentátorů kritizoval hollywoodský filmový průmysl za to, že je dekadentní, že si váží spíš nablýskaného vzhledu než skutečné kvality, že se v něm často nachází chaotický-exotický sloh (i když samozřejmě tento výraz nepoužil) a že lidé i předměty v Hollywoodu nesplňují normy a konvenční očekávání, které v té době byly silně

na ústupu. Pro něho i jemu podobným lidem se svět zdál neskutečný, nestabilní a chaotický především kvůli tomu, že stabilizující normy, na které si zvykli, byly najednou odmítány. To je i zdůrazněné téma ve Westových románech, i když West nezatrácuje masovou kulturu tak jako *Fortune*.

Třetí kapitola pojednává o tom, jak *Miss Lonelyhearts* a *A Cool Million* zobrazují masovou kulturu. *Miss Lonelyhearts* z velké části zobrazuje situaci, o které psala Rosalind Williams: když je křesťanství či náboženství na ústupu, masová kultura přebírá funkci, kterou dříve mělo náboženství a vzbuzuje u lidí představy o lepším životě. *Miss Lonelyhearts*, vlastně muž, který píše poradenský sloupek v novinách, ví, že jeho sloupek dává lidem představy, které jsou pro ně útěchou. Mohl by propagovat křesťanství, věří, jako mnoho lidí v 30. letech, že masová kultura je „dětinská“ a že křesťanství by dalo lidem mnohem větší útěchu. Má tedy k masové kultuře nevyhraněný vztah.

Ovšem *Miss Lonelyhearts* nemůže přesvědčivě propagovat křesťanství, protože s ústupem křesťanství je lehčí ho zesměšňovat. Z běžných křesťanských frází se stanou opotřebovaná klišé, která *Miss Lonelyhearts* nemůže s klidným svědomím dávat jako rady. Stejný problém nastane, když *Miss Lonelyhearts* dává svým tazatelům světské rady. I tyto rady vyzní jako opotřebovaná klišé. *Miss Lonelyhearts* nedokáže věřit tomu, co tvrdí. Kromě toho klišé ještě nadsazuje, přičemž tazatelé z nižších společenských vrstev jim věří, protože nad nimi neuvažují a pouze nechávají tato klišé (která jim nejspíš dávají pocit jistoty), aby na ně emotivně působila.

Jeho pochybnosti se ještě zvětšují, když kolega, redaktor Shrike, si z klišé dělá legraci ve stylu dada. Shrike si často utahuje z klišé i z masové kultury mimo jiné tím způsobem, že imituje afektovaný jazyk reklamy a ironicky dává lidem stereotypní rady, aby se obrátili od svých problémů k něčemu příjemnému (co bylo a je běžné poselství reklam), přestože tyto rady často neodpovídají vážnosti daného problému.

Shrike ve svých vtipech dehierarchizuje umění a masovou kulturu. Tvrdí, že umění i masová kultura jsou pochybné a nevěrohodné, že umělecká díla i díla masové kultury jsou pouze příjemné předměty, ke kterým se člověk obrácí, aby unikl od různých nepříjemných realit.

Shrike má možná ve svých názorech pravdu, ale když je vyjadřuje, je zlomyslný a bez soucitu. Možná by utrpení mnoha lidí bylo odlehčené, kdyby Miss Lonelyhearts mohl brát křesťanství vážně a tím ho propagoval ve svém sloupku efektivněji, ale Shrike mu to znemožňuje. Shrikeův humor a názory, a ve srovnání s dada obecně, nabízejí pouze nihilismus a nikoliv naději či empatii. West měl ve zvyku kritizovat i věci, kterým ve svém osobním životě fandil, a zde tento přístup aplikuje i na dada.

I děj *Miss Lonelyhearts* vede k tomu, že umění, křesťanství i masová kultura jsou stejně potenciálně škodlivé. Pod vlivem křesťanské hysterie i jedné pasáže z *Bratří Karamazových* Miss Lonelyhearts nepochopí situaci a pravděpodobně je na konci románu zastřelen. Za to škodlivý vliv masové kultury se ukáže v momentě, kdy se Miss Lonelyhearts a Betty po Shrikeově večírku chovají jako zamilovaný pár z hollywoodského filmu. Tento moment ukazuje, že lidé přijímají klišé z masové kultury a že masová kultura jim určuje, jak se mají chovat. Rovněž ukazuje, že myšlenky, které z ní přejímají, jsou často v rozporu s každodenní realitou, protože produkty masové kultury jim říkají, co vlastně chtějí slyšet.

Přestože je tato kniha kritická vůči masové kultuře, zdá se, že je méně vůči ní zaujatá, pokud se týče jejího přístupu. V *Miss Lonelyhearts* je mnoho citací uměleckých děl i masové kultury, z nichž se dá odvodit, že West očekával, že ideální čtenář jeho románu bude dobře obeznámen s uměním i masovou kulturou. Westovy citace masové kultury přispívají k tomu, aby jeho román působil hodně moderně a zároveň jako dílo ovlivněné dadaismem.

V krátkém článku „Some Notes on Miss L.“, West uvedl, že psal *Miss Lonelyhearts* tak, aby výsledný román připomínal komiks. A *Miss Lonelyhearts* připomíná komiks hned

v několika ohledech. Za prvé zdůrazňuje krátkost, rychlé tempo, zdánlivou srozumitelnost a strohost. Za druhé kapitoly *Miss Lonelyhearts* připomínají epizody komiksového seriálu.

Za třetí Westovy postavy jsou podle popisu jejich vzhledu vlastně karikatury a jejich osobnosti jsou hodně zjednodušené a nadsazené. Za čtvrté *Miss Lonelyhearts* často využívá popisy a zobrazení, které podporují čtenářovu obrazotvornost. Konečně se v *Miss Lonelyhearts*, podobně jako v komiksech, objevuje strohé zobrazení násilí bez dlouhého vysvětlování jeho příčin.

Proč chtěl West napsat *Miss Lonelyhearts* ve stylu, který se podobá komiksu? Na tuto otázku se nabízí několik možných odpovědí. West chtěl psát knihy, které by šly proti tradičním literárním normám a které by využívaly materiály každodenního života. Westův experiment s „komiksovým románem“ mohl být reakcí na „romány v obrazech“ Lynda Warda. A některé komiksy z Westovy doby byly populární i mezi intelektuály.

Další vysvětlení je, že „komiksová forma“ se k obsahu *Miss Lonelyhearts* hodí. Za prvé kříženec mezi komiksem a románem nahrává tématu dehierarchizace, kde umění ztrácí svou tradiční autoritu. Za druhé, strohé zobrazení násilí koresponduje s tématem brutalizace společnosti, kterou způsobuje úpadek tradičních morálních pravidel. Za třetí West sám tvrdil, že americká literatura se liší od evropské tím, že v ní násilí nevyžaduje dlouhého vysvětlování a že v ní převažují krátké romány. West se nakonec staví ke "komiksové technice" v literatuře vlastně dvojznačně, protože ji jednak vnímá jako progresivní vývoj, ale zároveň spojuje komiksy s dehumanizací a každodenním násilím.

Román *A Cool Million* je spojený s masovou kulturou tím, že je parodií na dětské romány Horatia Algera, ale i tím, že se o masové kultuře několikrát zmiňuje. *A Cool Million* je kritikou Algerova pohledu na svět, neboť tento Westův román je v podstatě převrácením děje typického románu od Algera, ve kterém chudý mladík uspěje ve světě tvrdou prací a ctnostným chováním. Zatímco Algerův protagonista vítězí nad různými neštěstími, Westův protagonista Lemuel Pitkin je jen víc a víc ničený lidmi a problémy, které ho potkávají.

Na rozdíl od Algera Westův román totiž tvrdí, že v Americe může člověk uspět jedine podvody, krádežemi či násilím. Postava Shagpoke Whipple spojuje algerovské hodnoty s idealizovanou minulostí USA, ale přitom Whippleovy myšlenky jsou fašistické a Westovy citace masové kultury ukazují, že dějiny USA byly protkány více brutalitami než prostoupené hodnotami, které propagoval Alger.

A *Cool Million* poukazuje především na takové produkty masové kultury, které se uměle snaží vytvořit idealizovaný pohled na americké dějiny či pocit spojitosti s nimi. Když společnost čelí úpadku tradic, vyhledává přesně takové nostalgické zobrazení dějin. Příklady takových zobrazení v tomto románu jsou: Goldsteinův zájem o staré domy, Wu Fongův bordel a také i smýšlení jakoby z Algerových románů.

West zde takové zobrazení kritizuje. Když popisuje Goldsteinovo podnikání se starožitnostmi, poukazuje na to, že příjemné předměty často zakrývají lidská utrpení, za kterých byly vyrobeny. A jak ukazuje příklad staré skříňky v Pitkinově domě, i historické předměty často dávají nepravdivý pohled na minulost.

Wu Fongův bordel má hned několik významů. Za prvé West, podobně jako mnoho amerických marxistů, spojoval obchodování s předměty, které zobrazují americké dějiny, s "prostitucí" amerických dějin, a Wu Fongův podnik spojuje tuto figurativní prostituci s doslovnou. Za druhé, jako v případě Goldsteinových tradičních domů, okázalý dekór Wu Fongových pokojů skrývá lidské utrpení, a za třetí, Wu Fongův bordel satirizuje běžné praktiky amerických podniků 30. let (chaotický-exotický styl, prodej specificky amerických produktů). Většina Wu Fongových prostitutek jsou bílé anglosaské protestantky, zatímco jejich klienti do tohoto etnika nepatří. To odkazuje k faktu, že spisy amerických dějin tradičně glorifikovaly kulturu bílých anglosaských protestantů. Wu Fongův bordel pak podporuje u menšin fantazii života v této kultuře.

Výstava Sylvana Snodgrassea nabízí alternativní pohled na americké dějiny. Ukazuje, jak v amerických dějinách bílá anglosaská protestantská většina vždy brutálně utlačovala různé

menšiny. Doprovodná krátká divadelní hra předvádí rodinu, která se rozpadá v důsledku nekalých praktik podvodníků. Když pomineme Snodgrassovy pochybné motivy a fakt, že hra je příliš jednoduchá a plná klišé, stejně poukazuje na to, že masová kultura by mohla dávat lidem více či méně pravdivý pohled na svět, neboť situace v ní zobrazená v podstatě odpovídá situacím, které prožívá Lemuel Pitkin.

Další část Snodgrasseovy výstavy předvádí různé bizarní exponáty, o kterých on sám tvrdí, že jsou „horory“. Jednak připomínají moderní umění a zároveň zvláštní druhy konzumního zboží. V tomto smyslu naznačují, že se v 20. století stírá hranice mezi moderním uměním a vyumělkovanými předměty.

Snodgrassovu výstavu lze chápat i jako parodii amerického komunizmu. Američtí komunisté ve 30. letech 20. století byli často zaujatí proti novému zboží, protože preferovali předindustriální kulturu. Byli zaujatí i proti modernímu umění, neboť dávali přednost socialistickému realismu. Ovšem pokud má Snodgrassova krátká divadelní hra reprezentovat socialistický realismus, ten je v ní příliš jednoduchý a bez intelektuální hodnoty a američtí komunisté vypadají jako šosáci.

A *Cool Million* též odkazuje k masové kultuře v části, ve které se v estrádě Rileyho a Robbinse stane „komikem“ Lem. Během ní se obecnstvo směje tomu, jak Riley a Robbins Lema mlátí až mu odpadávají protézy. Ač nevinný, slouží jako fackovací panák mezi dvěma znesvářenými stranami. Tato situace se podobá i jiným situacím, ve kterých další dvě znesvářené strany napadly Lema. Zároveň evokuje myšlenku, že když se v komedii fyzickému napadání člověk směje, je to druh škodolibosti, až sadismu.

Čtvrtá kapitola pojednává o využití masové kultury v *The Day of the Locust*. V tomto románu jsou hollywoodská obydlí opět příkladem chaotického-exotického stylu, neboť každá budova reprezentuje jiný sloh. Jednotlivé budovy i jejich části předstírají něco, co skutečně nejsou a to vše za účelem, aby vzbuzovaly příjemně obdivné představy u svých pozorovatelů.

Kvůli jejich nevkusnosti je Tod i vypravěč románu odsuzují. Tod ale připouští, že tato chaotická-exotická architektura je omluvitelná, protože tyto budovy plní lidskou potřebu pro fantazii a tím pádem ani nemusí splňovat tradiční estetická kritéria.

Stejně jako hollywoodské budovy, i oblečení hollywoodských obyvatel je nekonvenční (např. lidé nosí konkrétní druh sportovního oblečení, i když daný sport nedělají). Richard Sennett upozorňuje na to, že až do 18. století oblečení určovalo nositelovo místo ve společnosti. S výrobou oděvů ve velkém toto pravidlo polevilo. Hollywood je pak extrém tohoto trendu v tom smyslu, že ošacení jeho obyvatel nemusí vůbec označovat žádnou pravdivou vlastnost jejich nositelů. Nekvalitní oděvy přesně označují společenské místo chudých hollywoodských „čumilů“.

V Hollywoodu se domy a oděvy vyznačují chaotickým-exotickým stylem a tím, že jejich vzhled je v rozporu s tím, co skutečně jsou. Stejně jsou i rekvizity v Todově filmovém studiu. Jsou vyrobené z právě tak nekvalitních materiálů jako zmíněné hollywoodské stavby. Tyto rekvizity jsou v podstatě reprodukcí různých předmětů z odlišných míst (skutečných i fiktivních). Mezi nimi se pohybují herci v kostýmech, které připomínají klamné oblečení již zmíněných hollywoodských obyvatel (např. herec, který nosí vojenskou uniformu není skutečně voják).

V *The Day of the Locust* všudepřítomný chaotický-exotický styl reprezentuje jedno velké téma: velkolepý vzhled Hollywoodu vytváří obraz „země hojnosti“ či alespoň zábavného místa. Ve skutečnosti tím jen odvrácí pozornost od svých nedostatků a chudoby. Chaotické-exotické předměty mohou vzbudit příjemné představy u chudých či strádajících lidí, ale nemohou vyřešit jejich problémy.

Toto téma je rozvinuto během Todovy procházky dvorem filmového studia. Při této příležitosti si Tod uvědomuje, že rekvizity, které tam vidí, jsou v podstatě „zhmotnělé sny“ mnoha lidí. Přemýšlí, jak jsou bizarně kombinované, až připomínají „snové“ obrazy malířů jako byli Rosa, Guardi či Desiderio. Čtenář by si sám mohl spojit tyto juxtapozice

i se surrealistickými obrazy. Tímto rekvizity stírají hranice mezi uměním a masovou kulturou: materiály masové kultury vytvářejí vize, které připomínají stovky let staré groteskní umění.

Během Todovy procházky dochází i k jistému „odmaskování“ Hollywoodu. Tod vidí, že rekvizity, které konvenčně vzbuzují u diváků úžas, jsou pouze konstrukce z levných materiálů. To se potvrdí i v momentě, kdy se pod vahou herců zhroutlí falešný kopec. Toto zhroucení má rovněž skrytý význam: hollywoodské iluze mohou být zničeny nedostatky, které zakrývají.

Tod si uvědomuje, že když příliš mnoho rekvizit stojí vedle sebe, nevzbuzují úžas, ale spíš pocit nudy. Toto je analogické s nudou, kterou nakonec Hollywood vzbudí u „čumilů“. Todovy myšlenky o rekvizitách se dají aplikovat i na hollywoodské stavby. Budovy jsou v podstatě fyzické zobrazení snů a fantazií a zároveň vytvářejí obrazy, které připomínají surrealismus či fantastické obrazy. Tyto stavby, tedy hollywoodské iluze, mohou být rovněž nakonec zlikvidovány nedokonlostmi, které Hollywood skrývá.

Další podkapitola pojednává o Harrym a Faye Greenerových a o Westových názorech na herectví. Greenerovi hráli fiktivní role tak často, že se s nimi ztotožnili a jejich role se tak staly součástí jejich „normálních“ osobností.

Faye využívá svou roli afektované herečky její doby k tomu, aby přitahovala co nejvíce mužů a zvýšila tím pravděpodobnost že by jí dal nějaký hollywoodský producent hlavní roli. Avšak její nepřirozená, afektovaná „herecká“ osobnost působí na ostatní lidi většinou spíše nepříjemně.

Znamená to, že hollywoodské hvězdy jsou stejně nepřirozené, afektované a groteskní jako Faye? Na tuto otázku se těžko odpovídá. Na rozdíl od ideálu dobré filmové herečky, Faye hraje svou roli špatně a působí v ní neúpřímně a nesympaticky. Role Faye působí bizarněji v rámci každodenního života než v rámci filmu. Na druhou stranu vyprávěč tvrdí, že Faye se učila herectví od „špatných vzorů“ ve „špatné škole“. Tyto „špatné vzory“ by mohly být skutečné filmové hvězdy, ale stejně tak by tato fráze mohla znamenat pouze to, že když je

člověk chudý, nemá moc možností se efektivně učit dobrému filmovému herectví. Fayina přehnaná snaha pečovat o svůj vzhled naznačuje kritiku hollywoodského filmového průmyslu, který si často zakládal víc na vzhledu a „image“ herců než na jejich hereckém umění. A tak Hollywood může být „špatná škola“ i v tomto smyslu.

Harry v roli komika předvádí, že i nabytá přirozenost může působit nepřírozeně. Když se Harry chová jako komik v rámci každodenního běžného života, působí nepřírozeně a bizarně. Osobnost komika je ale pro něj tak přirozená a samozřejmá, že se podle ní chová, aniž by předstíral. Podle Westa jsou gestikulace a výrazné tělesné pohyby nespolehlivý index pro to, co si daný člověk myslí a co cítí. To je také v rozporu s běžnými myšlenkami 19. století a s 241. básní Emily Dickinsonové, ke které West odkazuje.

V představení pro barové štangasty Harryho vyumělkovaná jevištní gesta přesvědčivě slouží k vyjádření životních zkušeností. Použitím vět, které připomínají věty z filmových upoutávek, West dokonce zdůrazňuje, že barové obecenstvo si váží Harryho představení, protože se s ním ztotožňuje. Zřejmý význam této scény naznačuje, že masová kultura má nebo může mít jistou hodnotu, protože umožňuje lidem komunikovat s jinými lidmi.

Harry, Faye a některé jiné postavy v *The Day of the Locust* jsou figury, které připomínají stroje. Takovéto postavy se často objevují v groteskním umění i v dada. West je používá k tomu, aby zdůraznil, že Harry, Homer a „čumilové“ se stali vlastně automaty, protože při své práci opakovaně dělali stejné úkony, jak bylo běžné při vzkvétající pásové výrobě během 30. let. Zobrazení člověka jako stroje může sloužit i k vyjádření myšlenky, že když je ve společnosti anomie bez přítomnosti jakýchkoliv zákonů a společenských norem, existuje riziko, že se lidé budou na sebe koukat jako na pouhé věci.

Další podkapitola pojednává o tom, že v *The Day of the Locust* se stírají i hranice hodnot mezi uměním a masovou kulturou. V tomto románu jsou umění i masová kultura zobrazeny jako podobenství, která lidi obklopují a která ovlivňují jejich myšlení. Žádná z těchto kategorií není nutně privilegovaná na úkor druhé. Toto je evidentní v případě Todova

myšlení, které odkazuje na umělecká díla i díla masové kultury. Tím autor dokazuje, že ve světě *The Day of the Locust* moderní intelektuál, jako Tod, ale i paní Jenningsová, zná a má zájem o umění i masovou kulturu. I když tento pohled může být spojený s ústupem tradičních norem pro umění a vkus.

Hranice mezi uměním a masovou kulturou se zde stírá i v tom, že se vyškolení umělci jako Tod a jeho spolužáci podílejí v rámci svých zaměstnání na tvorbě masové kultury. A jak jsem zmínil dříve, hranice mezi uměním a masovou kulturou může být nejasná i v případech, kdy rekvizity a chaotický-exotický sloh v kombinaci s jinými předměty mohou připomínat umělecká díla.

Přesto Todův zamýšlený obraz odsuzuje masovou kulturu. Když Tod plánuje, jak bude malba vypadat, představuje si hořící hollywoodské stavby a rekvizity (tj. jistý druh masové kultury) a jak z toho mají radost hollywoodští „čumilové“. Nabízí se hned několik důvodů, proč by tyto věci měly shořet: dávají strádajícím lidem příjemné fantazie, ale nevyřeší jejich problémy; jsou často nevkusné či ošklivé; problém mnoha lidí je těžká otupující práce, mnohdy spojená s výrobou masové kultury; masová kultura, která zobrazuje násilí, může svádět lidi ke skutečnému násilí.

Čtvrtá podkapitola pojednává o tom, jak jsou postavy v *The Day of the Locust* ovlivňovány masovou kulturou. Hollywoodské filmy a noviny nabízejí fantazie sexu a násilí; ale tím, že je „čumilové“ konzumují ve velkém množství, stávají se tak znečitlivělí, že je může vzrušit pouze násilí skutečné. V této vlastnosti „čumilů“ *The Day of the Locust* souhlasí s jistou kritikou masové kultury ze začátku 20. století. Ve Westově pojetí k tomuto zjištění přispívá i fakt, že tvrdá monotónní práce „čumilů“ je stejně znečitlivěla a nedovolila jim, aby se vzdělávali. Zároveň jim Hollywood neposkytuje ten ideální život, který sliboval.

The Day of the Locust také poukazuje na to, jak masová kultura může podporovat násilí a sadismus, jako v momentě, kdy na jevišti „Létající Lingové“ ublíží Harrymu a obecnostvo

se tomu směje, nebo v Todově fantazii, ve které znásilní Faye za použití klišé z detektivek drsné školy.

I přes tuto kritiku masové kultury se zdá, že ji lidé do jisté míry potřebují. Homerova střídmost společně s jednotvárnou prací přispěla k jeho otupělosti. Jedna část jeho osobnosti touží po masové kultuře, ale druhá ji odmítá. Vzhledem k tomu, že Homerovo uvolnění dlouhodobě potlačovaných citů vede na konci románu k jeho smrti, je od něj rozumné, že odmítá masovou kulturu, protože by jeho pocity stimulovala. Homera ale upřímně potěší představení Harryho, Adorea a transvestity. Tím autor čtenářům sděluje, že masová kultura by na Homera mohla mít pozitivní vliv a že by mohla mít určitou hodnotu, zvláště když interpret ve svém oboru prokazuje špičkové dovednosti.

Také představení transvestity v Cinderella Baru dává obzvláště najevo, jaký vliv by masová kultura mohla na Homera mít, do jisté míry uspokojí Homerovu touhu po mateřské lásce. Představení působí „přirozeně“, protože ve Westovi „přirozené“ hraní je nenucené a na vysoké úrovni dovedností.

Představení transvestity a následující dialog mezi Todem, Homerem a Faye jsou příkladem toho, jak West vkládá modernistická témata do citací masové kultury. Přes několik dvojitých významů, West dává najevo, že transvestita a Faye jsou v určitém smyslu pro Toda a Homera jako matky, zatímco Homer je něco obdobného pro Faye.

Když si Faye vymýšlí filmové děje, vytváří si utěšující fantazie podle šablon masové kultury. Tyto fantazie používá k tomu, aby si uvědomila, co skutečně chce a také k tomu, aby se ujistila, že její sny jsou splnitelné. Svoje fantazie/filmové děje, které vypráví Todovi, naznačují, že chce především rychle dosáhnout úspěchu a získat silného a bohatého muže.

Fayiny fantazie/filmové děje dávají najevo Westův dvojitý pohled na hollywoodské filmy. Na jednu stranu tyto filmy poskytují lidem, kterým něco chybí utěšující představy. Na druhou stranu Fayiny fantazie vykazují stále stejné šablony a klišé. Horší a zavádějící je, že

hollywoodské filmy sdělují lidem, že každý si může najít ideálního partnera a že každý může uspět v šoubyznysu.

V závěru se pokouším odpovědět na otázku, jaký byl Westův celkový postoj k masové kultuře ve všech třech románech. Ve svých knihách často zobrazoval masovou kulturu jako soubor produktů, které obklopují strádající lidi a utěšují je, ale zároveň nedokáží vyřešit jejich problémy. Jeho knihy napadají masovou kulturu různými argumenty: masová kultura dává lidem nepravdivé informace; podporuje násilí; její iniciátoři se zajímají pouze o své zisky; lidé se při výrobě masové kultury trápí a trpí různými způsoby; masová kultura je často slaboduchá.

Ovšem v některých místech West poukazuje na to, že masová kultura může mít i kladné vlastnosti, např. že vyvolává příjemné pocity nebo že výkony některých populárních umělců mohou mít vysokou profesionální úroveň. Masová kultura v jeho dílech vede postavy k zajímavým myšlenkám, zvláště když srovnávají poselství a vlastnosti masové kultury s vlastními zkušenostmi.

Je důležité si uvědomit, že West neprivileguje umění před masovou kulturou. West spíše vidí díla masové kultury a umělecká díla jako texty, které mohou mít kladné i záporné vlastnosti a které musí být pečlivě prozkoumány před posuzováním a zhodnocením. Toto vede k myšlence, že žánry a média masové kultury nejsou negativní samy od sebe, ale mohou být využity pozitivně i negativně.

Westova kritika masové kultury je trochu ztlumená tím, že vypravěč a některé postavy z jeho děl mají evidentní zájem o umění i masovou kulturu. Ideální čtenář N. Westa by měl mít poměrně velké znalosti o umění i o masové kultuře, aby rozuměl citacím z obou těchto zdrojů.

Westovo využití formálních prvků masové kultury ve svých románech lze chápat jako formální inovaci, ale je sporné, do jaké míry tyto prvky v sobě nesou pozitivní, kritický či neutrální vztah k masové kultuře. Můžeme si klást otázku „Proč West ve svém díle využíval

formální prvky masové kultury, když jeho dílo masovou kulturu zároveň kritizovalo?“ Možná odpověď je: „Protože jeho postoj k masové kultuře nebyl tak čistě odmítavý, jak by se mohlo na první pohled zdát.“ West psal kriticky o komunismu a dada, ale zároveň měl ve svém sobním životě k těmto směrům kladný postoj. Mohl se tedy podobným způsobem stavět i k masové kultuře.

A na úplný závěr jen malý dodatek k Souhrnu v češtině.

Nově utvářené sociální podmínky americké společnosti si ve dvacátých a třicátých letech 20. století vyžádaly také nové formy komunikace a zábavy. Lunaparky, kabarety a music-halls byly úspěšně doplňovány novým technologickým médiem - filmem, komerční formy komunikace ovládly fotografické aktuality, reklamy a bohatě ilustrované časopisy s přitažlivými obálkami, literaturu pak lidové romány a detektivky a také kreslené seriály-komiksy. Tyto nové formy komunikace a zábavy cíleně působily na velmi početnou vrstvu obyvatelstva, která je ochotně přijímala pro jejich snadnou dostupnost a konzumní nenáročnost. A protože celá tato společenská třída, složená převážně z pracujících v dělnických profesích, byla sociology nazývána „masou“, byl i nově vzniklý fenomén jejich kulturního vyžití nazván „masovou kulturou“. S tímto novým kulturním jevem byl během své literární kariéry ustavičně konfrontován i Nathanael West (zejména v hollywoodském období), a jeho názory a postoje k masové kultuře můžeme dodnes nacházet v jeho díle, tak tragicky ukončeném v roce 1940.