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Fake Empire: Artificiality in Nathanael West’s “Day of the Locust”

Hollywood has often been referred to as a “dream factory”, a place where anything was possible. It was a place where people could go and make something of themselves. The problem was that this idea was just an illusion; many would head out west to this land of opportunity, but not everyone would succeed. It is these failures that populate Nathanael West’s “The Day of the Locust.” By pointing out the artificiality in images and characters in the novel, West is able to expose 1930’s Hollywood for the sham and fallacy that got unwitting dreamers to flock there with stars in their eyes.

The Day of the Locust tells the story of the underbelly of 1930’s Hollywood, focusing on the wannabes, the has-beens and those who never would make it. Seen through the eyes of Tod Hacket, Hollywood is comprised of two types of people; the Masqueraders, those who put on an artificial persona represented by the Greeners, and those Midwesterners who came to “California to die” (West 23) represented in the novel by Homer Simpson. These two types of personalities clash throughout the novel, resulting in an apocalyptic riot at a Hollywood premiere. To best understand West’s cynicism about Hollywood, one must know the background of the town in which he arrived in the late 1930’s.

In his book “An Empire of Their Own,” Neal Gabler shows the creation of Hollywood by immigrant Jews who wanted acceptance into the cultural elite but could not get it due to anti-Semitism. These were men who started out in the clothing business and finally moved out west to create the dreamland that would become Hollywood. Louis B. Mayer, head of MGM, represents this ideal to a tee. He felt that the output of films at his studio should reflect his own personal view of America and American families. This can be seen in the wholesome American families in the Andy Hardy films and the cosmopolitan world of the elite Mayer so wanted to be a part of. Mayer was a man who “wanted [his] values installed in this country and knew… how influential film could be… and wanted to capitalize on that” (Gabler, 216)

Many popular writers came to the city to make a decent living. On the caste of the studio system, the writers didn’t get the best respect from the studio head. . Beloved writers like William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald tried their hand at screenwriting when money was tight. Some like Fitzgerald became relatively successful, but others like Faulkner struggled, and the experience left them bitter. At one point Faulkner was making just $300 a week. (Wallace 36) It was in this atmosphere that West came to Hollywood to write scripts. Being a script writer at such a “Poverty Row” studio as Republic for $200 a week created a bitterness that would come to fruition in “Day of the Locust”. (Long, 16)

The images of artifice shows up right in the beginning of the novel in the scene where protagonist Tod Hackett heads home from the studio. As a he walks down the street he passes many houses that represent the mélange that is Hollywood architecture. As West describes it, Tod walks by “Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas … Swiss chalets [and] Tudor colleges” (West 23-4). This variety of house styles is typical of those who make it big in Hollywood and choose to create their dream homes no matter how bizarre they may look. The funny part of this is that all of said house are made of “plaster, lath, and paper” (West 24), which just show how these dream houses are still only dreams. Even though they make a ton of money in the film business, the residents are not able to truly live in a real castle or villa. There houses are no more real than a Hollywood set. This shows that for Hollywood, the fake sets don’t just exist on the soundstages, but throughout the entire city.

No character in this novel better represents desire for a dream home than Tod’s writer friend Claude Estee. Not all writers in Hollywood were poor and failures; many like Fitzgerald and Anita Loos made a very good living off scriptwriting. Claude is one of those writers; he built his house to replicate an actual southern plantation estate. Residing in his own personal Tara, Claude creates this whole artificial persona and mannerisms of a colonel in the confederate army. He takes this persona so far that he even gets his racial insults incorrect when he calls out to his Asian servant “[Come] here you, black rascal” (West, 36). His attempt to be a fat southern colonel also contrasts with his skinny and awkward body type. His posturing does nothing but show the fact that “his lack of relation to the past or a stable tradition of any kind” (Wood 114). Claude came to Hollywood without a personality and was able to take on his dream persona, but a dream is all it is and it makes him look comical. The fact that Claude completely ignores the world around him in favor of this dream persona shows that Hollywood is this place for people to live in an artificial dream. This dream self may be the preferred method of life for some people, but once it is exposed for the sham that it is bad things will happen.

This idea of people wanting to live out their dreams is quite evident in the image of the fake dead horse at the bottom of Claude’s pool. West uses this image to critique the wealthy who need these elaborate and bizarre conversation pieces to show just how wealthy they are. One party guest in particular is so caught up in her illusions that she wants to believe that the horse is real. She is so deeply entrenched in her belief that she yells at people when they point out that the horse is fake. Her line “you just won’t let me cherish my illusions” (West 39) is telling of the artificiality of Hollywood and the belief of those who flock there chasing their dreams of stardom. They look at Hollywood as what they want it to be, a land of opportunity. If anyone infringes or corrects them they will get defensive and hold onto that false reality. The guest is just one of many characters in the novel that refuse to separate their dreams from the reality of their existence.

This fake dead horse also represents the idea in Hollywood of death as a spectacle. In the glory days of Hollywood when a major star would die, for example, Rudolph Valentino, a massive funeral would be held with thousands of attendees. It is this spectacle that draws the crowd to Harry Greener’s funeral. The spectacle of the funeral is shown in the funeral parlor itself which features imitation stained glass windows and dimming stage lights creating a “theater for death (Wood 121). The theatrical nature of the parlor draws a small crowd that believes they have stumbled onto a funeral for an important individual. A Hollywood funeral drawing a crowd is not an unusual occurrence, just look at any major actor’s funeral ceremony.

The theatrical funeral is fitting for the character of Harry Greener a man who entire artificial persona is that of a clown. Has-been is too kind of a way to describe Harry because his entire fame is based off a passing mention in a New York Time’s vaudeville review. Harry’s entire background is an illusion because he clings onto this review as proof that he was once the star of the vaudeville stage when in reality he was the comedic punching bag for a small acrobatic troupe. He then uses his clown persona to make a living hocking a miracle polish door- to-door. This clowning persona has become the only persona he has, using it as a defense mechanism against all the setbacks that have occurred in his life because “most people won’t go out of their way to punish a clown” (West 48). Harry is a man who has been beaten down so often in his life that he has to lose himself in the role of a clown to make his life bearable. Harry is not a rare occurrence; many artists come to Hollywood and have to mask their true selves in a false persona. Many gay male actors were forced to act straight in public, and there are countless celebrity couples who absolutely despise each other in private, but have to hold hands and kiss on the red carpet.

Image is everything in a Hollywood that bred the likes of Marylyn Monroe and Jean Harlow. So it is no surprise that for a handful of those starlets there are thousands of Faye Greeners. Faye Greener is portrayed in the novel as a parody of the Hollywood blond bombshell. With her constant exaggerated sexual posturing, Faye isn’t so much a real person but a sexual automaton” (Widmer 74) programmed to live in a Hollywood fantasyland. This becomes most evident in the scene where she searches her mind for film ideas and West describes her shuffling through a deck of her dreams. She is “manufacturing another dream to add to her already thick pack” (West 89). In a sense Faye is exactly like Hollywood; she is a factory with the purpose of manufacturing dreams. The funny thing is that all of her dreams are cliché romances and sexual fantasies much like plenty of Hollywood’s output. Faye persona is a pure product of Hollywood a robotic version of a blonde bombshell whose dreams are cliché film romances.

As a character Homer Simpson is not that artificial, the same could not be said of his place of residence Homer Simpson’s house is full of clashing ideas and false material. West describes Homer’s house as having a living room with a Spanish décor and a New England style bedroom. The oddest part of the house is that the two bedrooms are exact copies of each other. (West, 53-4) The clashing styles of the house could symbolize the clashing personalities of those who inhabit it. Homer is quiet and shy, whereas Faye Greener is very boisterous and flirtatious. This clash will lead to a major conflict when Homer catches Faye in bed with another man, setting off deep seated frustration. Artificiality is very prevalent in West’s description of the parts of Homer’s house with a “door made of gumwood… painted [to look] like fumed oak… and a roof… [made of] fireproof paper colored and ribbed to look like straw”. (West, 53) Homer’s house seems to be as artificially constructed as a Hollywood set.

Some of the more humorous images of artificiality in the novel come from the chapters set in and around the Hollywood studio. West chose to open and end the novel with an image of a crowd. The crowd of the opening is a collection of soldiers from a variety of different nations; extras in a war picture the studio is filming. This group is unsuccessfully being corralled by a man with a megaphone directing them to the set. This image is contrasted at the end with the rioting crowd at the film premiere whose illusions get shattered. These fake soldiers pose no threat, but the people at the premiere become biblically destructive.

The artificiality of the Hollywood studios is heavily stressed in the chapter where Tod tries desperately to find Faye whose doing some work as an extra. What follow is the stereotypical moving from one setting to another as seen in many films about Hollywood. West creates this tension and chaos through the way the chapter is written. Moving from Western sets to Paris nightclubs and then being surrounded by “the skeleton of a zeppelin… the bones of a dinosaur… the Trojan horse and…. Dutch windmills”, (West, 127) one can’t help but feel the disorientation and chaos that Tod feels. This disorientation is used to represent how any outsider who is suddenly thrust onto the chaos of a studio lot. In a way West makes the reader into one of those onlookers who came from Middle America to this land of opportunity. We as readers are no different from people like Homer Simpson who come to Hollywood to die.

The riot that ends the novel can be seen as what happens if all those people who arrive in Hollywood had their dreams simultaneously shattered. The difference between this crowd and the masses of soldiers in the opening and on the studio sets is that those groups had a sort of controlled chaos. It may be chaotic but it is the kind of chaos that occurs on a studio lot. On the other hand, the crowd at the premier represents that sort of chaos that shows men at their most primitive and uncontrolled state. The riot is started after Homer attacks an irritating wannabe child star who threw a rock at his head. Once people like Homer have their dreams and illusions shattered, they turn into an animalistic version of themselves which is how this apocalyptic riot occurs. They finally see the city for what it truly is and their naturalistic urge is to raze it to the ground.

The theme of artificiality runs continuously throughout the novel. It is seen in everything from the settings to the characters themselves. West uses this theme as a critique of Hollywood and it creation of these false hopes which leads naïve dreamers to the city in order to pursue stardom. This stardom, which may never come, leads to depression, wasted lives, and a loss of one’s identity. In West’s view Hollywood was not only a place where dreams were made, but also a place where dreams were easily crushed.

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