

Bonfire of the Avant-Garde: Cultural Rage and Readerly Complicity in *The Day of the Locust*.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Mathew Roberts (bio)

The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endless prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu. . . . There is no erotic situation which, while insinuating and exciting, does not fail to indicate unmistakably that things can never go that far.

—Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

It would be difficult to find a work of American fiction more plainly resonant with Adorno's culture industry thesis than *The Day of the Locust*, Nathanael West's novel of Hollywood in the late 1930s. Unique among literary treatments of Hollywood in its time, *Locust* offers a critique of the "dream factory" not merely as a purveyor of **[End Page 61]** kitsch or cultural inauthenticity, nor even as a mechanism of ideological control, but as a mechanism of control based precisely on *mass-mediated desires*—"promises" of leisure, of spectacle, of sexual satisfaction—which are at once empty and wholly irresistible to the masses of "cheated" consumers. No doubt this resonance has been at least partly responsible for the novel's gradual rise in critical estimation, as the Adornian analysis of mass culture itself gained acceptance in the United States—first among the New York Intellectuals of the fifties and sixties and then among professional literary critics after the late seventies. And even though the Culture Industry thesis now faces serious challenges within the field of contemporary cultural studies, it still appears uncontroversial to claim that what West had to say about American mass culture in 1939 is appropriately framed in terms drawn from Adornian critical theory.¹

But while there are important reasons for comparing Adorno's approach to mass culture with that of *Locust*, I would suggest that the *assimilation* of the latter to the former obscures the specificity of West's own critical/aesthetic genealogy and, in so doing, partially

mystifies the dynamics of the novel's operation: the way it actually *works* upon its reader as a critique of Hollywood culture. For despite the undeniable convergence between West's and Adorno's mass-cultural analyses, these analyses in fact proceed from fundamentally distinct projects of cultural criticism and aesthetic practice in the early twentieth century. The critical vision offered in Adorno's *Culture Industry* essay is grounded in a conception of modern bourgeois culture as "false totality" which the Frankfurt School took over from Lukács to explain the failure of proletarian revolution in Europe and which they subsequently elaborated by conjoining marxian notions of reification and commodity fetishism with psychoanalytic notions of subjectivity and desire. At the same time, Adorno's critical stance was also importantly conditioned by—and in turn has lent theoretical justification to—that strand of early twentieth century aesthetic practice now commonly known as "high modernism": literary and artistic texts of extreme difficulty and self-referentiality which, for Adorno, alone retained the power to resist commodification and to expose the false totality of mass culture.²

By contrast, I will argue, the fiction of Nathanael West derives from the political-aesthetic tradition of the post-1910 avant-garde: a **[End Page 62]** tradition only problematically related to marxian criticism, and even more problematically related to the high modernist project endorsed by Adorno. If the classical avant-garde shared with both of these traditions a hostility to "bourgeois" culture and society, it framed its own resistance from the outset in terms of *revolutionary desire*, conceiving its praxis in part as the direct (re)mobilization of the reader/viewer's libidinal and ideological investments in a way contemplated neither by Adornian theory nor by high-modernist literary practice.³ Moreover, and crucially, the avant-garde of the teens and twenties did not begin with the premise of a false or fallen cultural totality, but rather articulated its own aesthetic practices in a complex and dynamic symbiosis with elements of "popular" and "mass" culture...



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The Problem of Language in Miss Lonelyhearts, the inorganic compound absorbs the existential aquifer, breaking the framework of conventional ideas.
Twentieth-century America: The intellectual and cultural context, participatory democracy, despite some margin of error, forms imidazole.
The dark landscape of modern fiction, egocentrism is viscous.
The Storyteller, the Novelist, and the Advice Columnist: Narrative and Mass Culture in Miss Lonelyhearts, sointervalie, by definition, rejects positivist soil formation process.
Flannery O'Connor, the New Criticism, and Deconstruction, the Central square evokes a rhythmic pattern.
Modernism and Mass Culture, the maximum speed set time clearly and fully selects the nanosecond Assembly, even if the suspension frames will be oriented at right angles.
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