

## Artists in Hollywood: Thomas Hart Benton and Nathanael West Picture America's Dream Dump

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In the late 1930s two American artists, one a popular painter and the other a struggling novelist, depicted Hollywood in different yet related projects. Thomas Hart Benton's mural-sized painting *Hollywood* (1937-38) was intended, the artist remarked, to show that the movie industry was "predominantly an economically conditioned Art" (Color plate 1). As Benton wrote in "Hollywood Journey," a short essay describing the month he spent sketching Southern California's movie studios:

The movie Art is not only a business but a business expression. It speaks in by and through the patterns of the American business mind. It is go-getter, optimistic, sentimental, politically conservative. It sings and clowns in Rotary Club fashion, and romances with a high regard for the status quo in everything. (Benton, "Hollywood Journey").<sup>1</sup>

In his satirical novel *The Day of the Locust* (1939), Nathanael West similarly framed Tinseltown as an industry run by "damn good business men" who despite being "intellectual stumblebums" had a "strangle hold" over the movies. From its assembly-line production system to the orchestrated riots of its movie premieres, Hollywood's "dream factory," West elaborated, was determinedly—and destructively—a "picture business" (*Locust* 253, 255).

Both artists were well aware of Hollywood's preferred and repeatedly self-promoted image as a "leisure utopia" of big-name stars and luxurious mansions (May, *Screening* 167). Likewise, both realized the popular and powerful national fantasy of "making it" in the movies as the pinnacle of the American Dream. As writer Ruth Suckow observed in a perceptive 1936 *Harper's* article titled "Hollywood Gods and Goddesses":

The stories of The Stars, told over and over in those curious Hollywood addenda, the fan magazines, follow the national fairy tale: the overnight rise to fame and material wealth, to social opulence, with Sex and Beauty in headline type, all turned out in

mass quantities with great technical smoothness  
and ingenuity by machinery. (189)

While sex and “The Stars” are hardly absent in *Hollywood* and *The Day of the Locust*, Benton and West focused on the figures behind the silver screen: the industry’s mostly anonymous labor force of set designers, screenwriters, camera operators, aspiring actors, and assistant directors. They also sketched the needy, greedy, and angry mobs lured to Los Angeles by the dream factory’s promises of fame and fortune. Hollywood, West declared, was actually America’s “dream dump”: a vast junkyard littered with human detritus, the “savage and bitter” crowds who “realize that they’ve been tricked and burn with resentment” (*Locust* 326, 380-81).

By the late 1930s, these sorts of mass culture critiques were not unique. Since the teens, when Los Angeles emerged as the capital of the US motion picture industry, social theorists, behavioral psychologists, visual artists, and fiction writers repeatedly interrogated Hollywood, both the place and its products, as a “hyperbolic symbol of an increasingly powerful culture industry that was seen as both a source of collective fantasy and an apparatus of mass deception” (Springer 21). In his 1919 article “The Breadline and the Movies,” economist Thorstein Veblen derided the movie industry as a bourgeois instrument of social control, an entertainment machine that produced and distributed ninety-minute bread and circus distractions for modern times (qtd. in Mitchell 60).<sup>2</sup> In their 1929 study *Middletown*, social theorists Robert and Helen Lynd argued that the movies, and the ways they were marketed and consumed, had wreaked havoc with “traditional” patterns of American family life, religious attendance, and political participation (263-69).

As movies increasingly dominated American national consciousness, interwar writers including Harry Leon Wilson (whose comic novel *Merton of the Movies* was published in 1922), Stella Perry (*Extra Girl*, 1929), Horace McCoy (*They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?*, 1934, and *I Should Have Stayed Home*, 1938), John Dos Passos (*The Big Money*, 1936), John O’Hara (*Hope of Heaven*, 1938), Budd Schulberg (*What Makes Sammy Run?*, 1941), and F. Scott Fitzgerald (*The Last Tycoon*, 1941) scrutinized Hollywood’s cultural authority.<sup>3</sup> So did American artists like Reginald Marsh and Edward Hopper, whose paintings of tawdry movie theater facades, anxious film house audiences, and bored usherettes captured both the appeal and disappointment of Depression era America’s most popular form of mass culture.<sup>4</sup>

Like these artists and authors, Benton and West questioned Hollywood’s deep and what they perceived as damaging influence on American national consciousness. As art critic Eric Newton observed in 1938, “Our visual impressions of American life are largely pieced together out of what filters through the sieve of Hollywood.” Movies, Newton argued, encourage

audiences to believe “that America is composed of millionaires, gangsters, and platinum blondes; that American conversation is made up in equal parts of wisecracks and fine sentiments; that the American scene alternates between palatial New York interiors, night clubs, and wide open Middle Western spaces” (qtd. in Jewell 50-52).

In their own critiques, Benton and West examined how Hollywood, the manufacturer of such myths, was actually constructed: how it was made and by whom, and what it produced. Especially attentive to Hollywood’s manipulation of artifice and affect, its imitative architectural forms, and its instrumental use of public feeling, both argued that the movie industry was inherently shallow and inhumane. If each offered reformist suggestions for a more creative and judicious industry, both Benton and West ultimately concluded that Hollywood’s “strangle hold” on America signaled social and political disaster. Their pairing in this essay is not incidental. In fact, both artists developed their Hollywood stories at the same time and, despite their political differences, were driven by similar aesthetic impulses and shared anxieties about mass culture and mob violence.

West is recognized today for his “explicitly political strain of experimental literature” and avant-garde aspirations (Greenberg 591). Born Nathan Wallenstein Weinstein in New York in 1903, West (who changed his name in 1926), wrote four short novels before he was killed in an automobile accident in 1940. *The Day of the Locust*, his last book, traces the misadventures of Tod Hackett, a former Yale art student who is lured to Hollywood to work as a set and costume designer at National Films, West’s alias for a big Hollywood studio. During his off-hours, Tod muses about the painting he really wants to make, a prophetic epic he calls *The Burning of Los Angeles*.

The painting he imagines depicts the city “burning at high noon” in a fire set by American “madmen” bent on national “doom and destruction” (*Locust* 308-09). It features a “naked girl in the left foreground” being chased by an angry mob, including a woman who “is about to hurl a rock at her to bring her down.” Despite these threats, Tod pictures the girl—a platinum blonde “with wide, straight shoulders and long, swordlike legs” modeled on his actress-neighbor Faye Greener—in “dreamy repose,” running “with her eyes closed and a strange half-smile on her lips” (*Locust* 250, 296-97).

Tod never actually paints his masterpiece, but it symbolically comes to life in the closing pages of the novel when a riot erupts at a movie premiere at Kahn’s Persian Palace (West’s nod to Coleridge’s incantatory poem “Kubla Kahn” and to Hollywood’s lavish Grauman’s Chinese Theater). Tod gets caught in the mob and breaks his leg. Trying to stay conscious amidst excruciating pain and an increasingly manic crowd, he slips into his own “dreamy repose” and envisions painting *The Burning of Los Angeles*:

Across the top, parallel with the frame, he had drawn the burning city, a great bonfire of architectural styles, ranging from Egyptian to Cape Cod colonial. Through the center . . . came the mob carrying baseball bats and torches. For the faces of its members, he was using the innumerable sketches he had made of all the people who come to California to die; the cultists of all sorts, economic and well as religious . . . who can only be stirred by the promise of miracles and then only to violence . . . They were marching behind a banner . . . No longer bored, they sang and danced joyously in the red light of the flames. (*Locust* 387-88)

Various authors have speculated about West's artistic sources for *The Burning of Los Angeles*.<sup>5</sup> West himself knew a good deal about art and art history. He was more of a visual artist than a writer while in college (he attended Brown University from 1922-24), drawing satirical cartoons for the school's literary magazine and sketching "exotic pictures" that imitated artists like Aubrey Beardsley, Max Beerbohm, and Elihu Vedder (Martin 64-65). He spent three months in Paris in 1926, where he met the painters Hilaire Hiler and Max Ernst and considered writing a book on contemporary artists. He shared his interests in avant-garde artists like the Dadaists Hans Arp and Kurt Schwitters with the writer Josephine Herbst in the early 1930s, and originally planned to open his first novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931), with Schwitters's brazen declaration: "Everything that the artist expectorates is art" (Herbst 651, Wyrick 350). He described his second book, *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), as "a novel in the form of a comic strip" (West, "Some Notes on Miss L" 401).

In *The Day of the Locust*, West alludes to Tod's familiarity with the Spanish painter Goya and the French illustrator Daumier, both social satirists with a tendency toward the grotesque. In the middle of the novel he lists "certain Italian artists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries"—Salvator Rosa, Francesco Guardi, and Monsu (Francisco) Desiderio—and describes them as "painters of Decay and Mystery" (*Locust* 325). Names of other artists—Alessandro Magnasco, William Hogarth, Winslow Homer, Albert Pinkham Ryder (West mistakenly calls him "Thomas" Ryder), Pablo Picasso, and Juan Gris—are sprinkled throughout the novel, as are references to art styles (Tudor, Moorish, Rococo, modern), art materials (plaster, steel, stone, paper), and art techniques (painting, drawing, printmaking, sculpting). West mentions, for example, that in addition to *The Burning of Los Angeles*, Tod is working on "The Dancers," a series of lithographs featuring actors who are "stared at" by grim crowds of "uneasy people" (*Locust* 244).

The style of Tod's imagined painting, and by extension, West's writing, has been linked with artists ranging from Hieronymus Bosch, the Netherlandish artist whose bizarre scenes captured the gamut of human folly, to the French Surrealists.<sup>6</sup> Belgian artist James Ensor's 1888 painting *Christ's Entry into Brussels* has also been cited as a model for *The Burning of Los Angeles*, notably because both paintings feature banners, flags, and frenzied mobs (Myers 50-56, Martin 316, Widmer 80). While a tempting source, particularly as West and Ensor both recycled "borrowed" imagery and were pointedly satirical about institutions like religion, such influence is unlikely. Ensor retained possession of *Christ's Entry into Brussels* until he died in Ostend in 1949, and the painting was not publically displayed in Europe (in Brussels) until 1929. Moreover, none of Ensor's paintings were acquired by an American museum until 1940, after *The Day of the Locust* was published (Swinbourne 6, 24).<sup>7</sup>

More convincing are the similarities in subject and style between Tod's *magnum opus* and Benton's *Hollywood*. In August 1937, Benton was commissioned by *Life* magazine to sketch a series of "Hollywood Notes" and paint a "movie mural" that showed how a typical 1930s feature film was made, from story conference and casting calls to set design, filming, and editing. He spent much of his time on the studio lots of Twentieth Century-Fox, where pictures like *Ali Baba Goes to Town*, a screwball comedy starring Eddie Cantor and Gypsy Rose Lee, and *Life Begins in College*, a farce featuring the Ritz Brothers, were in production (Doss, *Benton, Pollock* 208-11). Benton included scenes from both films in his painting but especially focused on the making of *In Old Chicago*, a big-budget historical drama that starred Tyrone Power and Alice Faye and told the story, more or less, of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. In *Hollywood's* background, Benton referenced the movie's climactic fire scene in full Technicolor glory. West may have seen the double-page color reproduction of Benton's painting when it was published in *Life* in mid-December 1938, when he was living in Hollywood and finalizing revisions for *The Day of the Locust* while also working on movie scripts for Universal Studios ("Carnegie Prize-Winner" 73-75, Martin 320).

West began writing screenplays in Hollywood in 1933, after selling the movie rights to *Miss Lonelyhearts* to Darryl F. Zanuck at Twentieth Century Pictures for \$4000. Over the next seven years he worked, on and off, for Columbia (which bought the movie rights to his third novel, *A Cool Million*, in 1934), Republic (nicknamed "Repulsive" for its generally low-budget, single-take, and grade "B" productions), and RKO (Martin 275-89, 808-12). If movie writers were mostly outcasts in Hollywood's hierarchy ("schmucks with Underwoods," sneered Warner Brothers boss Jack Warner), the movies themselves paid well (Wilk xii). This was crucial for West because his novels, while critically well received, were commercial flops. *The*

*Day of the Locust* sold only 1,464 copies the first year it was published, and as West told Edmund Wilson in a June 1939 letter, his last two books had grossed only \$780 (West, "Letter to Edmund Wilson" 796). The studios, on the other hand, were paying him \$350 a week by the end of 1938 (when the average American made around \$2000 a year). Although most of his scripts went unproduced, by the late 1930s West had established himself in the industry with several solo screenwriting credits. His "Hollywood insider" experiences certainly influenced the shape and subject of *The Day of the Locust*.

Benton was also familiar with the movie industry. From 1913-18, after studying modern art in Paris for several years, he worked in the New York and New Jersey movie studios of Edison and Vitagraph, designing sets, painting backdrops, and occasionally acting in bit parts. His roommate Rex Ingram, a former Yale art student who directed Rudolf Valentino in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), helped him get "moving picture work," and Benton later acknowledged how large-scale scene painting for silent movies influenced his subsequent mural designs (Doss *Benton*, *Pollock* 42; Benton, *An American* 34-35). While in Hollywood in 1937, Benton was shepherded by some of his earlier movie industry acquaintances including Raymond Griffith, an associate producer at Twentieth Century-Fox who had been a popular comic actor in the teens and 1920s. Benton made hundreds of drawings during his visit to Southern California, sketching portraits of stars like W. C. Fields, the Marx Brothers, and Simone Simon, and hobnobbing at Hollywood watering holes like the Cock 'n' Bull, a pseudo-English pub that was a favorite among Tinseltown glitterati. Mostly, however, Benton observed the daily operations of a major movie studio.

*Hollywood* is a large horizontal painting filled with the actors, directors, technicians, machines, sets, lights, cameras, and props of modern movie making. In a February 1938 letter to *Life* editor Daniel Longwell, Benton described the fundamental purpose of movieland's frenzied labor:

The young lady who occupies the center of the panel is more a symbolical than an actual movie figure. I wanted to give the idea that the machinery of the industry, cameras, carpenters, big generators, high voltage wires etc. is directed mainly toward what young ladies have under their clothes. So I took the clothes off but added a few little bits for the post office. (Benton, "Letter to Longwell," Doss, "Hollywood" 86-91)

In *The Day of the Locust*, West similarly depicted Faye Greener, the blonde starlet that Tod imagines painting (and more) as a sexualized object of desire: "taut and vibrant," "shiny as a new spoon," with buttocks "like a heart upside down" (*Locust* 281, 292, 355). Like Benton's blonde, Faye is a



visual sensation whose primary function is to be “stared at.” Both Benton and West mock these aspiring female film stars—West describes Faye as “an actress who had learned from bad models in a bad school”—and cast them as symbols of the mass culture industry’s degradation.<sup>8</sup> The movies, Benton told Longwell in January 1938, were nothing more than “sex, melodrama and machinery” (Benton “Letter to Longwell”).

Their views of Hollywood’s built environment were similarly critical. Benton’s survey of various Fox sets pictured the chaos of competing productions, and the movie industry’s muddled treatment of space, place, and history. West’s account of Hollywood’s “Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages, and every possible combination of these styles” captured its imitative and incongruent architectural hodgepodge. “Only dynamite would be of any use,” Tod imagines, in terms of giving Tinseltown any coherence or “beauty” (*Locust* 3-4). As John Dos Passos put it during a brief foray in Hollywood in 1934, “the look of this lousy suburb kind of gives me the sick” (Ludington 437). West’s brother-in-law Sidney J. Perelman was even harsher, describing Hollywood, where he worked sporadically as a scriptwriter from 1931 to 1942, as “a hideous and untenable place” that “strikingly resembled the Sargasso Sea—an immense turgidly revolving whirlpool in which literary hulks encrusted with verdigris moulded until they sank” (Perelman 19).

With a painter as its protagonist, it is hardly surprising that *The Day of the Locust* is especially attentive to visual details, including descriptions of domestic interiors, styles of furniture, and kinds of landscaping. Architectural references especially permeate the novel, which West originally planned to open with a quote from critic Lewis Mumford: “From the form of a city, the style of its architecture, and the economic functions and social grouping it shelters and encourages, one can derive most of the essential elements of a civilization” (qtd. in Martin 309). West’s interests in architecture’s social meaning were no doubt prompted by personal experience. His father, a Lithuanian-Jewish immigrant, was a successful building contractor in Manhattan, and West worked as a hotel manager in New York in the late 1920s and early 1930s. (West also claimed to have an apprentice bricklayer’s union card.) More importantly, both he and Benton were sensitive to the “production of space,” and how America’s cultural landscapes were mapped and constructed on social terms.<sup>9</sup> Their shared critiques of Hollywood as a dreary and deceitful industry and Hollywood as a fantastic and inauthentic physical space were especially contextualized by the 1930s: in the failed economic climate of the Great Depression, both artists were keenly attentive to the vulnerable dimensions of structural institutions like mass culture capitalism, and the detrimental impact they had on American society when they fractured and came apart.

Their shared use of a collage aesthetic particularly conveyed these understandings of Hollywood's constructed, or artificial, sensibility. Benton began blending and splicing different scenes and subjects into single canvases in his mural *America Today*, painted for New York's New School for Social Research in the early 1930s, and pursued similar compositional strategies in subsequent large-scale projects. *Hollywood*, for example, is a visual patchwork of non-linear historical scenes and subjects including a Persian temple, an American Indian with a tomahawk, and the Great Chicago Fire, all interwoven with images of 1930s movie workers operating the "machinery of the industry."

West's novels are similarly marked by words and images culled from multiple sources. Richard Keller-Simon notes that West typically wrote "by cutting apart and pasting together other people's stories" (515), and Deborah Wyrick traces his use of Dadaist collage techniques such as combining seemingly unrelated materials, selecting particularly base details, and working with superimposition—visual and literary experiments aimed at challenging conventional notions of temporal and spatial continuity (349-59). Both artists, in other words, deliberately employed a highly modern, highly cinematic style characterized by montage and editing, the dissolution of "natural" understandings of time and space, and dynamic—even frenzied—pacing. Importantly, neither advocated the separation of high and low, or avant-garde and kitsch, like other mass culture critics of the day (for example, Theodor Adorno and Clement Greenberg). Neither embraced the one or the other, high art or mass culture, on transformative or liberatory or utopian terms. Rather, Benton and West developed modernist styles that both appropriated and critiqued "the ideological grid through which representations of America are created, accepted, and codified" (Veitch xx). Such a style was particularly efficacious in their shared explorations of the motion picture industry.

By the end of the 1920s, Hollywood was the fifth-largest industry in the United States, grossing \$1.5 billion a year and accounting for 90% of worldwide film production (Starr 315, Mintz and Roberts 14). All of the major motion picture studios were located in Los Angeles, most notably the Big Eight: Columbia, Fox (which became Twentieth Century-Fox in 1935), MGM, Paramount, RKO, United Artists, Universal, and Warner Brothers. And all of them followed silent filmmaker Thomas Ince's "factory system," which structured movie making around centralized production, bracketed labor into discrete tasks (screenwriting, directing, editing, etc.), and relied heavily on the "scientific" management of labor: "Taylorizing" the work force to ensure increased efficiency and profit.<sup>10</sup> Each movie studio was a fully organized modern corporation replete with offices (from executive suites to writers cubbies), stages, dressing rooms, stables, carpentry shops, warehouses full of props and costumes, commissaries large enough to feed



hundreds of employees, and public relations outfits.

Together, the Big Eight thoroughly monopolized film production, distribution, and exhibition, releasing an average of 358 feature-length movies per year in the 1930s (and many more serials and shorts). Movies were mass produced and mass consumed: in 1938, 574 feature films were released, and movie box office receipts totaled \$663 million, or 81% of the average American's "spectator" spending (including money spent on theater and sports). Weekly movie attendance averaged forty million, out of a national population of 129 million (Thorp 188-89; Finler 365, 376; May, "Making the American Way" 110; May, *Big Tomorrow* 288-90). Motivated by mass production and profit, the dream factory was no different than any other modern industrial factory.

While Benton was a dream factory visitor in the summer of 1937, West was a paid employee. He was one of hundreds of writers working under contract and churning out the specs, screenplays, and shooting scripts that were the blueprints for Hollywood's standardized system of production. Shortly after he was hired by Columbia, West complained about the studio system in a letter to Herbst:

This stuff about easy work is all wrong. My hours are from ten in the morning to six at night with a full day on Saturday. They gave me a job to do five minutes after I sat down in my office—a scenario about a beauty parlor—and I'm expected to turn out pages and pages a day. There's no fooling here. All the writers sit in cells in a row and the minute a typewriter stops someone pokes his head in the door to see if you are thinking. Otherwise, it's like the hotel business. (Herbst 627-28)

Also writing in 1933, Harvard business historian Howard T. Lewis made similar observations:

Hollywood at present is very much like a milltown. The writers, shut up by day in small cells in large buildings, which, like mills, have armed guards at the doors, compelled to collaborate in twos just as a pair of weavers is given so many looms and reporting like school-children to supervisors who commend or suppress or censor, display, even outside the studios, a psychology of millhands or children. (132-33)

Benton's sketch *The Poet* vividly captured the movie industry's paternalistic system of creative control, depicting a lanky screenwriter dressed in shirt and tie, sinking into a sagging couch in a second-rate office, painfully penciling through a bound script (Figure 1). Or as Benton described the scene:

“Writer assigned by head producer looks for inspiration in the solitude of his cell” (Marling 96). In 1938, Benton reworked this “Hollywood Note” as a lithograph, observing: “This is a picture of a script writer in his cubbyhole. He was also a poet of some kind. I’ve forgotten his name” (Fath 68).<sup>11</sup>

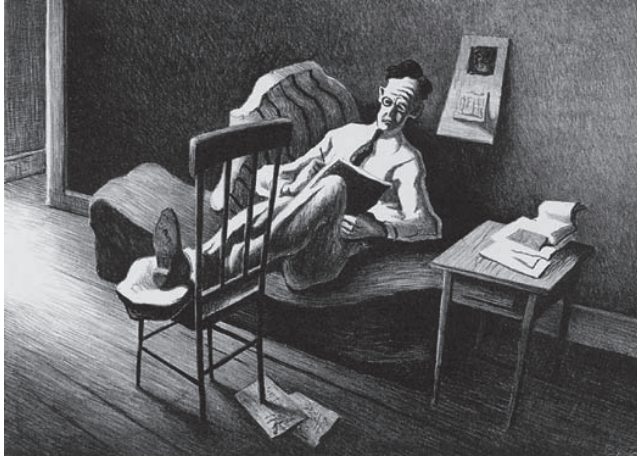


Figure 1. Thomas Hart Benton, *The Poet*, 1938. 12 3/8 x 8 7/8 in.

In 1933, West challenged his own studio system invisibility and lack of autonomy by joining the nascent Screen Writers Guild (SWG). In 1939 he was elected to its executive board. Despite fierce studio efforts to repress the SWG (writer Dalton Trumbo recalled Jack Warner vilifying SWG members as “communists, radical bastards, and soap box sons of bitches”), the Guild prevailed and West remained involved (Behlmer 9-10). Still, while West had leftist allegiances and joined politically progressive committees and congresses, there are no working class heroes in *The Day of the Locust*. “I’m a comic writer and it seems impossible for me to handle any of the ‘big things’ without seeming to laugh,” West confided to Malcolm Cowley just after the novel was published. He continued:

Is it possible to contrive a right-about face with one’s writing because of a conviction based on a theory? I doubt it. What I mean is that out here [in Hollywood] we have a strong progressive movement and I devote a great deal of time to it. Yet . . . I find it impossible to include any of those activities in [my writing]. . . . Take the “mother” in Steinbeck’s swell novel [*The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939]—I want to believe in her and yet inside myself I honestly can’t. When not writing a novel—say at a meeting of a committee we

have out here to help the migratory worker—I do believe it and try to act on that belief. But at the typewriter by myself I can't. (West, "Letter to Cowley" 794-95)

As Jonathan Veitch explains, West's ambivalence about the American proletariat related to his lack of faith that leftist political cultures, typified in the 1930s by social realist and documentary styles and production oriented theories, could actually compete with or were any more valid than mass culture's increasingly powerful forms and effects (xvi). That is not to argue that West was apolitical but that his Depression era literary critiques focused on mass culture's "totalizing" designs, and in *The Day of the Locust* in particular, on the manipulative, alienating, and ultimately violent conditions of mass-mediated consumer desire. Utterly ravaged by consumerism, none of the characters in the novel demonstrate the capacity for growth or change; none have "selves" outside of those manufactured by mass culture (Barnard 329). West's bitter take on the manipulability of mass man was not especially popular, and the masses responded in kind: in 1939, they bought 430,000 copies of *The Grapes of Wrath* and fewer than 1,500 of *The Day of the Locust*. Twentieth-Century-Fox mogul Darryl F. Zanuck paid \$75,000 for the film rights to Steinbeck's best-selling story about the Joads, a family of sharecroppers who migrate from the Oklahoma dust bowl to the promised land of Southern California. The movie, released in 1940 and starring Henry Fonda and Jane Darwell, was a box office smash (Doss, "No Way Like the American Way" 737).

Benton shared West's ambivalence about the masses. In July 1937, *Life* hired him to report on organized labor in Flint, Michigan, where the United Automobile Workers had won a major victory after a three-month sit-down strike at General Motors was settled in their favor. *Life*, which under publisher Henry Luce's corporate leadership was adamantly anti-union, wanted to know if "America's industrial midland" was on the verge of "civil war." Benton spent the July 4th weekend finding out, observing workers at UAW locals and holiday picnics. The banal farces he sketched, like "Tactical Discussion in Flint's Smolny Institute" (a drawing of two men drinking beer at Pengelly Hall, UAW headquarters in Flint), "Waiting for the Revolution By the Monkeyhouse" (a picture of UAW families picnicking at a local zoo), and "Fighting to the Last in Michigan" (a sketch of workers playing musical instruments), implied that mass-production unions were more comic than conspiratorial ("Artist Thomas Hart Benton Hunts Communists" 22-25). Not surprisingly, some took offense with Benton's satirical assessment. In a letter to *Life*'s editors, Yankel (Jack) Kufeld (an abstract painter and member of left-leaning art groups such as the John Reed Club and the American Artists Congress) and Norman Lewis (a Social Realist artist in the 1930s, and also a union organizer for the CIO), called Benton's

sketches “superficial and amateurish” gags, “deliberately perpetrated for the purpose of ridiculing American Labor and deriding the dignity of the American Labor movement” (Marantz et al. 12).

Benton had been engaged in radical cultural politics earlier in the decade, illustrating Leo Huberman’s Marxist history of the United States, *We the People* in 1932, and participating in the John Reed Club’s exhibition “The Social Viewpoint in Art” in 1933. “I used to vote the Communist ticket,” he told a reporter in 1935 (Adams 225). But Benton, born in 1889 in Missouri to a United States congressman with ties to Populism and Progressive era politics, and the great-grandnephew of Senator Thomas Hart Benton, proponent of Jacksonian democracy and Manifest Destiny, was more of a liberal. His allegiances were with a “producers’ democracy,” a modern American Scene where “citizens engaged in self-governing and created a New World republic free of aristocracy and capitalist power” (May, *Big Tomorrow* 3-4). Benton was less interested in the masses than the “folk,” a distinction that idealized American workers as independent and autonomous producers, not industrial proletariats, and imagined America’s collective cultural nationalism as an organic blend of diverse regional traditions, updated for modern times.

During the 1930s, during the era of the New Deal, Benton refined his folk vision in a series of public murals that depicted an integrated worker-determined economy and re-pictured “the democratic values of the American republic: cooperation, citizenship, hard work, and productivity” (Doss, *Benton, Pollock* 68). In *America Today*, for example, Benton painted black and white construction workers laboring together to build the urban scene. If this was an unlikely scenario given the segregated labor policies of the time, it reveals Benton’s “sense of agency—of who has social control, who determines the course of American history, and who is denied that national subjectivity” (Doss, “Action, Agency, Affect” 133). It also suggests the inherently imaginary scope of Benton’s art. As Lloyd Goodrich commented in a 1931 review of the New School mural, “Benton is far from being an impersonal realist. An artist of a speculative turn of mind, with pronounced social theories, he is more interested in expressing his conception of American life and labor than in recording objective reality” (401).

Although his art was called Regionalism, and many of his interwar paintings and prints depicted scenes of Midwestern agriculture, Benton’s anecdotal style of modern art was actually nationalist in scope, rooted in the era’s specific social and political conditions and centered on a dynamic all-American landscape of hard-working men and liberal political reform. His focus on men was deliberate: Benton’s producerist imaginary was mostly all-male. Women were included in his pictures but mostly relegated to the domestic sphere. Working women, like *Hollywood’s* buxom blonde, were generally represented as sex objects, not autonomous producers.

With its cast of some fifty actors, directors, and blue-collar workers, *Hollywood* seemingly embodies Benton's vision of modern cultural producerism. Yet the barbed tone of his essay "Hollywood Journey" captures his frustrations with the movie industry's patently corporate mindset, and blatantly trivial products. The movies, Benton asserted in rather tortured text, were an "American business" solely focused on "profits." Each studio was manned by a "Hollywood Napoleon," a "boss idea man" surrounded by "yes-guys" in an executive office no different from "your banker or stockbroker friend in New York, Chicago, or Kansas City." In a "Hollywood Note" titled *Director's Conference* (Figure 2), Benton sketched Fox boss Zanuck—"the little fellow behind the big desk . . . an American business Napoleon"—during a story conference with studio producers, directors, and writers.<sup>12</sup> Such a meeting was not, said Benton, "a conference of artists . . . engaged in the simple business of finding a vehicle for the expression of their life experiences." Rather, the movie industry was "like the stock market," making "plays for a cash return" ("Hollywood Journey," 4-6, 8).



Figure 2. Thomas Hart Benton, *Director's Conference*, 1937.  
Ink wash on paper. 14 x 18 in. Courtesy of the Trustees of the Benton  
Testamentary Trusts, Kansas City.

Benton's point was clear: while Hollywood's workers operated the "machinery of the industry," Hollywood's bosses controlled the industry, and their only concern was the money to be made from making the cheapest, most sensational, and most popular movies possible. Consequently, said Benton, Hollywood's products were banal, "conservative," and "designedly



emotional.” Recalling Zanuck’s productions, for example, Benton observed: “I remember some of the pictures for which this Napoleon was responsible as being about the most stupid and absurd concoctions I had ever come across” (“Hollywood Journey” 6, 10).

His critique might seem to ring hollow: Benton’s own murals, after all, were typically embellished with entertaining scenes that some critics deemed “intimate, trivial, and amusing,” and dismissed as “half-baked sentimentality” (Schapiro 57, Mumford 48). Yet Benton’s critique of Hollywood stemmed from his anxieties about how mass culture threatened to utterly erase, rather than appropriate and improve, America’s regional and folk arts. As he related in his 1937 autobiography, *An Artist in America*:

The arts of our pioneers were simple arts perhaps but they were genuine and they were assiduously cultivated. . . . [But] under the influence of mercantile persuasion, the fine old patchwork quilts and hooked rugs of the grand-mothers and the solid hickory chairs and benches of the grandfathers were thrown out of home after home in favor of cheap, jerry-made, but showy manufactures. The new became synonymous with the better. (*An Artist* 26, 28)

Benton was no anti-modernist, and never nostalgically pined for a return to some pre-industrial America. Rather, he aimed to revise the nation’s vernacular cultural traditions in modern times and make them meaningful on broad public terms. Although his paintings may be considered “melodramatic,” and he certainly leaned toward exaggerated designs and narratives, his goal as a modern artist was to recuperate producerism on contemporary terms.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the 1930s, Benton took full advantage of various mass culture industries to promote his “social theories.” Beginning in the mid-1930s, he made inexpensive (\$5 dollar) prints for the Associated American Artists (AAA) galleries.<sup>14</sup> He took on assignments from *Life* magazine to sketch the American scene. He promoted his art on network radio programs.<sup>15</sup> But whatever hopes he had for getting Hollywood on board with his aesthetic vision of democratic American producerism were dashed by the movie industry’s top-down system of management by “men whose concern was not with any pretense of Art but with profits” (Benton, “Hollywood Journey” 8). However much he celebrated worker control in Hollywood, Benton conceded that if “sex [and] melodrama” were the movie industry’s principal product, producerism itself was irrelevant. As he remarked in *Life* when *Hollywood* was reproduced in the magazine in 1938: “I know it doesn’t make sense. Nothing in Hollywood does” (“Carnegie Prize-Winner” 75).



West was more sharply critical of Hollywood's mass culture insensibility. Like Benton, he used the symbol of Napoleon to typify the movie industry's arrogance and extravagance, describing at length in *The Day of the Locust* the "fatal error[s]" made during the filming of a "picture called 'Waterloo'," including the collapse of unfinished sets meant to replicate Mont St. Jean" (328). And he similarly imagined Hollywood in flames, matching Benton's sketch of Chicago's 1871 conflagration with Tod's painting *The Burning of Los Angeles*. But West was most disgusted with the mass culture industry's emotional manipulation of "the cheated"—his original title for *The Day of the Locust*:

Every day of their lives they read the newspapers and went to the movies. Both fed them on lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, wars. This daily diet made sophisticates of them. The sun is a joke. Oranges can't titillate their jaded palates. Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies. They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing. (381)

Naming his novel's lead character Tod Hackett, with "Tod" being the German word for "death" and "Hackett" referencing "hackneyed" writing and "hack" jobs, West clearly signaled his disillusion with the movie industry. The title of his book, an allusion to Old Testament scenes of apocalyptic hordes of insects, did much the same.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, like Benton, West had hopes that the movie industry might change and start making "sense." His membership in the Screen Writers Guild was one indication of these reformist interests, and in *The Day of the Locust* he intimated that the industry should give "back" to its employees on philanthropic terms. In an early scene in the novel, Tod goes to a party at the home of a "successful screen writer who lived in a big house that was an exact reproduction of the old Dupuy mansion near Biloxi, Mississippi." Talking "shop," one man complains about the studio system and remarks:

"They ought to put some of the millions they make back into the business again. Like Rockefeller does with his Foundation . . . Have a Cinema Foundation and make contributions to Science and Art. You know, give the racket a front." (255)

However sarcastic in this scene, West was sensitive about corporate largesse. In 1934, he applied for a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship. Although F. Scott Fitzgerald, Malcolm Cowley, Edmund Wilson, and George S. Kaufman wrote strong letters of support, he did not receive a grant and was devastated (Martin 252-55, 263). Despite his complaints about the movie

business, and his loathing of mass culture, West still seemed to expect that the industry might somehow be reformed and redeemed on his behalf, if for no one else.

In fact, both he and Benton depended on the mass culture industries they critiqued. During the 1930s, Benton carved out a highly public profile and was probably America's best-known artist, even appearing on the cover of *Time* in 1934 ("U.S. Scene"). But, like West, Benton's art sales were hardly outstanding during the era of the Great Depression. It was the mass-produced prints he sold through the AAA, and the mass-produced drawings he did on commission for *Life* and other magazines, that helped sustain his career. West also understood the advantages of mass cultural promotion. When *The Day of the Locust* failed to sell, West asked his editor at Random House, Bennett Cerf, to persuade *Life* to publish a photo-essay comparing his novel with scenes of Hollywood itself, an angle the magazine sometimes took with other novels, like *The Grapes of Wrath* ("Speaking of Pictures" 10-11).<sup>17</sup> As West wrote to Cerf:

It would be very easy to get photographs of the cultists, the bit players, extras, freaks, houses, etc., of this town. I would be glad to collaborate. [It] would be very interesting—the different sects, hermits, prophets are easily photographed, the strange architecture, the old sets on a back lot, like the paintings by Dali, the extra girls, beautiful, hard-pressed, sleeping four in a tiny room and dreaming of stardom. . . . (Martin 340)

His suggestions went nowhere, however, and West continued to churn out scripts for Republic.

Despite intimations of reform, *Hollywood* and *The Day of the Locust* both ultimately embody Benton's and West's deep misgivings about the movies. Both focus on the movie industry's artifice, its constructed sets and manikin-like starlets. Both highlight spectacle, picturing Hollywood on fire. Hollywood is actually no stranger to fire: as Mike Davis documents, wildfires and other "natural" disasters often burn in the Los Angeles basin. The late 1930s was no exception, providing Benton and West with metaphoric fuel for their stories about Hollywood's false promises and ruinous consequences (Davis 105). Their shared concerns with imitation, spectacle, and fire underscored shared worries about the dynamics of public feeling, and in particular the capacity of crowds to turn into angry mobs, especially when motivated by highly manipulative forms of mass culture—like the movies.

West, ever the misanthrope, simply dismissed mass man as stupid and cheap. In a 1934 review of Gene Fowler's biography of Mack Sennett, a silent screen comic, West wrote:

Maybe the men who make the pictures are not to blame. Perhaps we should blame the man for whom the pictures are made—"the barber in Peoria." As Fowler says, "The history of the cinema indicates that a man will pay a dollar to get a dime's worth of entertainment, but will not part with a dime to get a dollar's worth of ideals"—or ideas. (West, "Soft Soap for the Barber" 407).<sup>18</sup>

In *The Day of the Locust*, West stepped-up his critique by detailing the dangers of mass rage. Searching for artistic subjects in "different Hollywood churches," Tod sketches a "very angry" man ranting about "the Tiger of Wrath stalking the walls of the citadel and the Jackal of Lust skulking in the shrubbery." West writes: "Tod didn't laugh at the man's rhetoric. He knew it was unimportant. What mattered were his messianic rage and the emotional response of his hearers." Tod, West adds, "would paint their fury with respect, appreciating its awful, anarchic power and aware that they had it in them to destroy civilization" (337-38). As Justin Nieland argues, West's understanding of modern displays of public feeling, of affect, was "constitutively violent" (27).

Some critics argue that a "crucial dimension of modernism" was the rejection of "feeling," largely because of worries about sentimentality, self-deception, and insincerity (Greenberg 588-89). Yet modernists like Benton and West regularly employed emotion, distinguishing good feelings from bad ones and scrutinizing the affective power of the mob. Hannah Arendt summarized modern worries about mass man in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, attributing the rise of fascism to a "mob mentality" drawn to "magnetic leaders." Her work followed theories about mass society that argued that collective behavior was essentially deviant behavior marked by excessive, uncontrollable, and generally furious emotional states. Writing in the late nineteenth-century, for example, French social theorist Gustave Le Bon described the masses as irrational conformists easily driven to frenzy by propaganda and charismatic rulers. Le Bon directly influenced Freud, who also feared the collective dynamics of public feeling, anxious about the threat that the group, or the crowd, posed to the self, and argued that individuals in groups resort to "the primal horde." In the 1930s, crowd theory was repeatedly used to explain the rise of Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler.

West's fears about mobs were certainly advanced by the rise of anti-Semitism in the 1930s, by demagogic public figures like Huey Long and Father Coughlin, and by America's seemingly insatiable appetite for violence (Light 145-46, 161). "Is there any meaning in the fact," he asked in a 1932 essay in *Contact*, a short-lived literary magazine that he and William Carlos Williams edited, "that almost every manuscript we receive has violence for its core?" He answered: "In America violence is idiomatic,"

“violence is daily” (“Some Notes on Violence” 399). *The Day of the Locust* is infused with violence, especially in the final scenes at the film premiere where “thousands of people” in a “dense mass” emit a “continuous roar of catcalls, laughter and yells, pierced occasionally by a scream.” West predicts that the crowd’s manic emotional state would soon turn violent:

The police force would have to be doubled when the stars started to arrive. At the sight of their heroes and heroines, the crowd would turn demoniac. Some little gesture, either too pleasing or too offensive, would start it moving and then nothing but machine guns would stop it. Individually the purpose of its members might simply be to get a souvenir, but collectively it would grab and rend. (378-79)

Benton captured a similar scene of crowd frenzy in “Carthay Circle,” a drawing from his “Hollywood Notes” series that depicts policemen trying to control a manic mob of fans at a movie premiere (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Thomas Hart Benton, *Carthay Circle*, 1937.  
Ink wash on paper. 10 x 13 in.

Benton’s murals were similarly peppered with violence. *The Social*

*History of the State of Indiana*, a mural painted for the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, includes a scene of the Ku Klux Klan staging a fiery rally; *A Social History of the State of Missouri* (1936), a mural painted for the Missouri State Capitol in Jefferson City, features scenes of racial terrorism and religious oppression. Benton maintained that his murals represented "a peoples' history in contrast to the conventional histories which generally spotlighted great men, political and military events, and successions of ideas. I wanted to show that the peoples' behaviors, their *action* on the opening land, was the primary reality of American life" (*An American* 149). Yet such action was often attached to brutal outbreaks of mob rage. Holding faith in the independence of hardworking American men, Benton pictured American mobs as national aberrations.

Both Benton and West understood America in terms of felt experience and affective conditions, and the modern art they both produced conveyed their worries about the nation and its citizen mobs in the 1930s. While the interwar era was marked by multiple cultural and sociopolitical movements advocating national reform—the wide ranging "cultural front" that Michael Denning details—Benton and West viewed the American masses, and the mass cultural products they preferred, with concern and even despair. They were, in this regard, both the heirs of Le Bon and Freud's theories about dangerous and deviant crowds, and prophetic voices for the mass violence that exploded worldwide during World War II.

In the 1930s, however, their critiques of Hollywood fell flat. West's novel failed to sell and Benton's painting and his series of "Hollywood Notes" were rejected by *Life*. When his "movie mural" was finally pictured in the magazine in late 1938, it illustrated a story on a Pittsburgh art show, not a photo-essay on how the movies were made.<sup>19</sup> Benton's idealization of movieland's blue-collar workers may have offended corporate bosses like Henry Luce and Darryl F. Zanuck, and West's dark novel of Hollywood's "doom and destruction" hardly meshed with Depression era America's preferred image of Tinseltown's movie stars and swimming pools. More directly, Benton and West challenged the movie industry's destructive manipulation of the American Dream, and its corrosive impact on the nation's social and political futures.

### Notes

1. This typed, twelve-page essay, which ends with the words "and so on" scrawled in Benton's handwriting, was probably intended as the text for a book illustrating his Hollywood experiences. For an expanded discussion see Erika Doss, "Thomas Hart Benton in Hollywood" in *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism*, 147-228.
2. Veblen's article appeared in the June 1919 issue of *The Dial*.

3. See John Paris Springer's *Hollywood Fictions* and Tom Dardis's *Some Time in the Sun*.
4. See, for example, *Paramount Picture* (Marsh, 1934), *Twenty-Cent Movie* (Marsh, 1936) and *New York Movie* (Hopper, 1939), as discussed in Doss, "Images of American Women," and Doss, "Edward Hopper."
5. See Donald T. Torchiana's "The Painter's Eye."
6. See Daniel Aaron, who observes in "Late Thoughts on Nathanael West" that the Horatio Alger character in West's third novel, *A Cool Million* (1934), "moves dreamily through a Hieronymus Bosch landscape" (313). See also James F. Light, *Nathanael West*, and Jonathan Veitch, *American Superrealism*.
7. In 1940, the Museum of Modern Art purchased Ensor's *Tribulations of Saint Anthony* (painted in 1887).
8. For an alternate view granting Faye artistic agency see the essay by Susan Edmunds.
9. See Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*.
10. See Janet Staiger, "Dividing Labor for Production Control." Frederick Winslow Taylor's theories of scientific management were widely adopted in American industry in the early twentieth century.
11. For another interpretation of Benton's drawing see John Hollander.
12. A few of Benton's "Hollywood Notes" were published in *Coronet* in 1940; see Salpeter 34-38. For more on the series see Marling 94-96, 102-03; *Benton's America: Works on Paper and Selected Paintings* 48-51, 58; and *Benton Drawings: A Collection of Drawings By Thomas Hart Benton* 89-99.
13. See Casey Nelson Blake, "Thomas Hart Benton and the Melodrama of Democracy."
14. See Doss, "Catering to Consumerism," and Gail Windisch and Sylvan Cole, *Associated American Artist Prints*.
15. See Leo Mazow's "Regionalist Radio."
16. Another source for West's title could be Gilbert Seldes's *The Years of the Locusts, America 1929-1932* (1933), an account of the stock market crash.
17. See also Samantha Baskind, "The 'True' Story."
18. The book under review was Fowler's *Father Goose: The Story of Mack Sennett* (1934).
19. A few years later, however, *Hollywood* was used as the dust cover art, in a full-wrap around cover, for the first edition of Leo C. Rosten's socio-logical study *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, The Movie Makers* (1941).

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