Opening the Gates of Pandemonium: Simulacra of Apocalypse in Nathanael West’s *A Cool Million* and *The Day of the Locust*

Abstract: Nathanael West’s last two novels, *A Cool Million*, or *The Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin* (1934) and *The Day of the Locust* (1939), thematize the mass-cultural impact of simulation in ways that point forward to post-World War II American literature. They do so most notably by establishing a connection between the twentieth-century economic culture of consumption (the ideology of consumerism) and apocalyptic traditions of Western thought, a connection they explore through the figure of the simulacrum and the structural motif of unveiling. This article intends to demonstrate that West’s literary analysis of simulacra transcends the boundaries of traditional readings of ‘modernism’ and that, contrary to a number of interpretations, his texts do not offer a straight repetition of but a critical commentary on apocalyptic modes of thought and reading.

The gates of pandemonium are open [...].
Nathanael West, *A Cool Million*, 233

I.

In what Jean Baudrillard has called the ‘agony of the real,’ the signifying regime of the classical models of representation and illusion, characterized by a dualism of appearance and reality, loses its validity and is replaced by ‘simulacra,’ simulations of simulations that no longer require any basis of reference except themselves. Simulation is now said to be ‘pure’ and therefore ‘true’ in the sense of ‘no longer falsifiable.’ Controlled by codes, it replaces the dominant reality schemata of the renaissance (the fake) and the age of industry (production) – simulation becomes ‘hyperreal.’ Simulacra, if unveiled, reveal no deep structure of an underlying reality but merely their own impenetrable surfaces. And yet they are nonetheless real, if we define the real with Lacan as beyond the symbolic and imaginary or, indeed,
with Philip K. Dick, as “that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.” Simulacra perpetually frustrate the apocalyptic urge to lift the veil, to ‘dismantle’ the surface and uncover the secret of reality which lies underneath ideology’s thick layers. Instead of a vertical, intensive, or apocalyptic surface/depth binarism, some modernist and many postmodernist texts are therefore structured according to a different strategy: a horizontal, extensive or cartographic approach, a more or less “random cannibalization” – or carnivalization – “of all the styles of the past” that frustrates any apocalyptic vision. Apocalyptic desire, such as Thomas Pynchon, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, embodies in the character of Oedipa Maas, is also the presumptively ‘natural’ approach of the reader as a consumer of the literary text, a desire that is regularly thwarted in and by (post)modernist narrative.

Progressively, Nathanael West’s last two novels turn into what Philip K. Dick has called ‘fake fakes’: by adopting the conventional formal façade of literary artefacts in a culture of consumption, they engage with an apocalyptic modernity that is beginning to be superseded by the logic of simulacra. By pretending to function as entertainment in a consumerist popular setting, they spring the trap on the reader who is forced to realize that apocalyptic reading may be an inappropriate approach to these texts or, for that matter, any literary text in a post-apocalyptic modernity.

Read as a quasi-picaresque novel, or an inversion of such a novel, the journey of *A Cool Million*’s ‘hero’ Lemuel Pitkin is set against the backdrop of a society in economic decline, increasing anomie, and ideological turmoil. The conventions of the genre might lead readers to expect a social satire presented through the eyes of a pícaro or ‘rogue’ who, from an initially low status, is shown to rise in social status through luck, opportunity, and the weakness of others. But the world of this novel owes more to the anti-picaresque of Thackeray’s *Barry Lyndon*, in that its society is largely immune to satire: its operation has become as blind as fortune itself, and the gullible hero is mostly at the mercy of the machinations of others.

In this society, both the production and consumption of simulacra and the rise of competing apocalyptic movements stand out as decisive cultural factors, forming the two “millstones” between which Lemuel Pitkin is progressively “ground out of existence” (188). The narrator reports on Lem’s progress from an aloof point of view that is comically contradicted by the events of his narrative. West thus allows his narrator’s language to ring hollow and exposes his genteel phrases, his high moral tone and his ideological convictions as inept and inappropriate to the story. The narrator’s language is a simulation that can be easily deconstructed. In *A Cool Million*, style has become a kind of extremely flexible mechanism of narration and meta-narrative that the reader needs to realize as constituting a separate level of the literary text, a level that s/he has to engage

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and work with, and to work against – a technique that owes more to eighteenth-century narrative (Smollett, Fielding, Sterne) than to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ‘naturalist’ novels.

At the very beginning, this is illustrated by the narrator’s formulaic description of the “humble dwelling” of Lem and his mother, Mrs. Sarah Pitkin, in the following phrase: “An antique collector, had one chanced to pass it by, would have been greatly interested in its architecture” (143-44). This is proved literally true in the same initial chapter when the narrator complacently notes, in parentheses, that he “was right in [his] surmise” and that “[a]n interior decorator, on passing the house, had been greatly struck by its appearance” (145). The consequence of this is that the house is foreclosed on Mrs. Pitkin, then is literally dismantled and displayed in the window of Asa Goldstein’s store of “Colonial Exteriors and Interiors” on New York’s Fifth Avenue (ibid.), where Lem will find it again in chapter 10. The hero’s “humble” home is converted into an artefact, transformed into a luxury commodity that acquires an ideal value much greater than its former use value. The narrator, who presents the sale of the house as a “tragedy” (145), never comments on the irony of this transformation of Lemuel’s birthplace into an antique from the time of the War of Independence. When Lem sees it as an “exhibit” in the shop window, the house has been transformed into a piece of decorative art:

At first the poor boy could not believe his eyes, but, yes, there it was exactly as in Vermont. One of the things that struck him was the seediness of the old house. When he and his mother had lived in it, they had kept it in a much better state of repair. (178)

Exactly the same and yet different, the house has become hyperreal. The ‘seedy’ nature of such commodification is highlighted and intensified by the reader’s knowledge that Mr. Asa Goldstein, the antique dealer, is also the outfitter of Wu Fong’s brothel, where he has created “a perfect colonial interior” with whose “designs or furnishings [...] even Governor Windsor himself could not have found anything wrong” (170). Later, when economic depression forces Wu Fong to scale down and turn his former multi-ethnic establishment, a “House of All Nations” (169, 202), into “an hundred per centum American place” (202), the same dealer helps him construct a kind of sexual themepark in different historical US styles: “a Pennsylvania Dutch, Old South, Log Cabin Pioneer, Victorian New York, Western Cattle Days, California Monterey, Indian, and Modern Girl series of interiors” (202).

The narrator appears to connive at this bowdlerization of American history, unmasking himself as not particularly knowledgeable in the process: “Governor Windsor” (170) is a rather crude mistake for John Winthrop (1588-1649), first Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.\(^5\) Colonial and post-colonial Ameri-

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\(^5\) It is also a reference to the English colonial background of the United States, and, on a more richly meaningful level, a reference to the artificiality of names and the constructed nature of traditions generally: “Windsor” is the name the British Royal Family adopted during World War I, severing their too obvious ties to the German house of Hanover by adopting the name of their
can history is transformed into a commodified and sillified travesty, providing indiscriminate background settings for a bordello. Yet the Americanization of Wu Fong’s brothel also heralds a more directly political and ideological trend of 1930s society: an increasing trend toward xenophobia and an isolationist monocultural bias which the narrator also appears to commend. The novel’s language imitates the discourses of antisemitism and resurgent fascism, without apparently noticing its intrinsic contradictions. It seamlessly reproduces an ideological formation in which the concept of ‘America’ turns into the cliché of the American dream and the Gospel of Success, caricatured in the Dickensian character of Nathan “Shagpoke” Whipple, Lem’s unlikely mentor, father figure and, even more unlikely, former President of the United States. Whipple, like Lem, undergoes a series of career changes throughout the novel, to which he responds with unflagging optimism: from President of the United States to president of the Rat River National Bank, and later to Fascist agitator and, finally, dictator, with dead Lemuel (“All hail, the American Boy!” 255) playing the part of the movement’s crucial martyr. Whipple’s political preaching turns from homespun exhortations to self-reliance and the belief in the success of capitalist economic virtues, as embodied in the figures of Rockefeller and Ford, to more and more hate-filled accusations of other parties, creeds, and cultures. In the character of Whipple, the populist schemer, West viciously portrays the decline of political culture in 1930s America and the transformation of democratic ideals into demagoguery.

At the beginning, Whipple refuses to lend Lemuel money because, although “the youth of a nation is its only hope” (148), this youth had better fend for himself: “Don’t be discouraged. This is the land of opportunity and the world is an oyster” (149). He delivers a setpiece of a speech to Lemuel in order “to reassure him” (150), though his actual motivation may be to make Lemuel feel better about signing his mother’s cow over to him for thirty dollars – this being the only valuable property their family still possesses. Whipple’s use of the cliché of the world as an oyster is particularly telling in this respect, as its origins can be tracked back to Shakespeare’s *Merry Wives of Windsor*, where the context is given by Falstaff’s refusal to lend money to Pistol (“I will not lend thee a penny”), to which Pistol replies: “Why then, the world’s mine oyster, which I with sword will open.”

Both Whipple’s thievish intentions and his militant aggressiveness, which will become visible only later in the novel, are prefigured in this allusion. Whipple goes on to deliver the following sermon:

“America,” he said with great seriousness, “is the land of opportunity. She takes care of the honest and industrious and never fails them as long as they are both. This is not a matter of opinion, it is one of faith. On the day that Americans stop believing it, on that day will America be lost.

“Let me warn you that you will find in the world a certain few scoffers who will laugh at you and attempt to do you injury. They will tell you that John D. Rockefeller

residence, Windsor Castle. – In Homer Simpson’s house in *The Day of the Locust*, there is “a Windsor chair” and “a Governor Winthrop dresser painted to look like unpainted pine” (288).

was a thief and that Henry Ford and other great men are also thieves. Do not believe them. The story of Rockefeller and of Ford is the story of every great American, and you should strive to make it your story. Like them, you were born poor and on a farm. Like them, by honesty and industry, you cannot fail to succeed.” (150)

Whipple here rehearses the poignant simplicity of traditional American political rhetoric. Especially striking are the female personification of America (“She”), the Christian undertones (not opinion, but faith), a hint at his fervent anti-Communism (“a certain few scoffers”) and the mythic synecdoche of Rockefeller and Ford (their story “is the story of every great American”). Their mythic significance in capitalist culture is strengthened further by the title and epigraph of the novel: “[John D. Rockefeller would give a cool million to have a stomach like yours.’ – OLD SAYING” (142). In the epigraph, as in Whipple’s sermon, the emphasis is on the ‘likeness’ between “every [... American” and these pseudo-mythic figures, whose legendary and popular status is confirmed by the classification of the epigraph as an “old saying.” Striving to be like them, trying to make their story his own, Lem’s journey becomes readable as a quasi-religious pilgrimage in search of success and meaning in life, a kind of imitatio Ford in a replica of Thomas a Kempis’s imitatio Christi. The culmination of the imitatio Ford, ironically, is an imitation of Christ, when Lem becomes the Fascist party’s ‘Savior’ by giving his life, in their interpretation, as a sacrifice to their cause. Like his family home, he becomes a pseudo-sacralized exhibit, his body de-naturalized and ‘dismantled’ into a series of relics.

In Whipple’s final speech, the religious undertones are openly connected with his Fascist ideology as he enumerates Lemuel’s “rewards” (254): jail, poverty, violence, and death. Lem’s story is given millennial significance as a new kind of gospel:

“Simple was his pilgrimage and brief, yet a thousand years hence, no story, no tragedy, no epic poem will be filled with greater wonder, or be followed by mankind with deeper feeling, than that which tells of the life and death of Lemuel Pitkin. [...] But he did not live or die in vain. Through his martyrdom the National Revolutionary Party triumphed, and by that triumph this country was delivered from sophistication, Marxism and International Capitalism. Through the National Revolution its people were purged of alien diseases and America became again American.” (255)

In the process of transformation that occurs as the novel unfolds, political action increasingly turns into mere symbolism and the tautology of an ‘American America,’ which in itself is already a contradiction, negating the diversity on which America has been constructed. Whipple’s promise of a better life to Lemuel and the rest of his followers is cast in the terms of an apocalyptic transformation of society that is both revolutionary and revelatory, and which, at the novel’s end, is envisaged in the symbolic transformation of Lemuel Pitkin, who is not merely physically ‘dismantled’ but reconfigured into a pseudo-religious political martyr of the Leather Shirts’ movement; but, as we know, having read Lemuel’s life story, this apocalyptic symbolism is a forced construction, empty of actual content. Lemuel, like his birthplace, has been physically deconstructed and symbolically reconstructed, transfigured into a copy of himself with a different
meaning, dramatized or narrativized into a “story,” “tragedy,” “epic poem,” perhaps even an “old saying.”

West illustrates how, in a politicized society marked by the conflict of competing ideologies, whatever happens is not only registered but transformed by language until it becomes mere language. The cliché-ridden, disinterested and dehumanized narrative of *A Cool Million* emphasizes this point; in its calculatedly obtuse simplicity and callousness, it carefully replicates and critically deflates the ideological fictions it presents, from the inversion of the Horatio Alger success story formula to the inclusion and prophetic enhancement of elements of American political reality of the 1930s. The fascist rally at the end of the novel is no less theatrical, if less funny, than the “Chamber of American Horrors” in which Lemuel, before his death, plays the role of a stooge. What is more difficult to assess is the novel’s own stance in relation to its diagnostic and prognostic discoveries. As a textual artefact, it underlies the same cultural logic of representation and consumption that it denounces. Parody is thus neither necessary nor possible. In fact, the text appears to satirize and denounce its own moral and satirical pretensions in the figure of the poet-cum-pickpocket Sylvanus Snodgrasse, whose “desire for revolution was really a desire for revenge” and who, “having lost faith in himself, [...] thought it his duty to undermine the nation’s faith in itself” (238). Likewise, *A Cool Million* has lost faith in the reconstructive power of satire, and satirizes satire by reflecting upon the representational and epistemological foundations of satirical form. It is certainly significant in this context that Snodgrasse, while keeping “the crowd amused” with his speech in the park, has his “confederates” (his brothers in faith) pick the audience’s pockets (184). As in Whipple’s case, faith and fraud go hand in hand, and language is the medium of their correlation. Language and rhetoric, it appears, are now no longer serious means of political discussion and moral inquiry, but have become the tools of confidence men. They do not serve the purpose of mediating but of abolishing reality. In any case, they are, as the novel demonstrates in its final chapters, losing their persuasive appeal and political efficacy to more visual and superficially more immediate theatrical forms of representation that directly address and involve their audience. West’s turn to the ‘culture industry’ of 1930s Hollywood in his next novel may well be a response to this greater trend toward the medialization of society.

II.

Whereas *A Cool Million* presents an array of (pseudo-)apocalyptic ideological constructions, establishing distance from these constructions — including, precariously enough, the construction of satire itself — by means of comedy, *The Day of the Locust* no longer offers an accessible perspective *ab extra* to the ubiquitous, constructed reality that is its setting, its world. Together with the formal elements

of parody and satire, the subject of politics and the agenda of political change have vanished from this novel, at least from any explicit level. Instead, West turns from mass politics to mass culture and mass hallucination, and to the question of art’s role within mass culture. Again, this question is first cast in apocalyptic terms, as the title of the novel implies, but the opacity of a world of simulacra no longer allows for an apocalyptic critique, a critique that gains its leverage from the ontological dualities of reality and appearance, truth and lie, authenticity and in-authenticity, genuine and false consciousness, being and non-being.

As a textual artefact, *The Day of the Locust* is superficially much more coherent and traditional, less fractured and experimental than any previous West novel. But it is not a mere return to naturalist or realist fiction, nor is it less self-conscious and self-reflexive with regard to its formal construction and narrative strategies. Instead, it continues West’s ongoing critique of literary language not by being more anti-mimetic, but by being pseudo-mimetic. *The Day of the Locust* is in some respects a simulacrum of traditional narrative fiction that plays by the rules. But it also offers its readers – especially those who approach this text with some knowledge of its predecessors – the possibility to see these rules for what they are. Yet this does not come about because of ruptures, juxtapositions, and an unreliable narrator, but more or less in spite of their absence. In this respect, *The Day of the Locust* replicates or imitates, in a literary form, the subversive strategies of a Hollywood film that has to be acceptable and marketable within the studio system and that succeeds by fulfilling presumptive audience expectations with a vengeance.

The problem it thematizes is precisely this: what are the possibilities of art and the artist under the conditions of mass consumer culture? Hollywood is the perfect setting and synecdoche for this problem because it constitutes the main interface between artistic talent and corporate control, or between individual creativity (romanticism) and mass consumption (modernity). In the character of Claude Estee, West presents a successful screenwriter who provides the movie industry with narratives of “amour and glamor” (277) for the average entertainment consumer, the semi-proverbial “barber in Purdue” (276). The writer Estee is someone who has adapted to the conditions of modern mass media, making money out of other people’s dreams. Yet he is significantly less important for *The Day of the Locust* than Tod Hackett, the painter and set designer whose aesthetic responses to the mechanized culture of simulacra that surrounds him structure the novel. In a culture of images, writing is a mere accessory, creating stencils from which potent moving images can then be created – as is demonstrated by Tod’s own brief attempt at screenwriting based on the tawdry dreams of Faye Greener. Estee makes clear that writing is no longer of aesthetic interest, but a matter of ‘remembering the audience’ (cf. 276) and guessing at the barber’s (the average customer’s) desires.

The visual arts assume a predominance over writing, but this predominance is ambivalent: the conflict acted out by Hackett is the conflict between the visual artist’s production of illusions and his ability to generate, in visual form, a com-
mentary upon these illusions. The function of literary writing is not directly thematized by any character in the novel, unless we read Tod’s aesthetic development as a meta-commentary on *The Day of the Locust* as a text, a somewhat familiar critical maneuver that is not completely safeguarded from falling into one of West’s literary traps. Tod may be the protagonist of this novel, but his opinions, problems, and solutions should not be too readily identified as reflecting those of the narrator or author. On the other hand, the narrator’s comments on Tod might be literary meta-commentaries: if West’s narrator describes him as “despite his appearance [...] a very complicated young man with a whole set of personalities, one inside the other like a nest of Chinese boxes” (260), he may at the same time be describing the complex, nested and elusive structure of his own narrative. West’s critique of 1930s society and mass media culture coincides with a critique of different responses to that society and culture, a critique that does not lead to an unequivocal solution, but perhaps to “a whole set” of solutions, “one inside the other” (260). The simple binary logic of substitution: illusion vs. reality; sign vs. referent; stimulus vs. response; superstructure vs. base, and so forth, is replaced by a more complex logic of polyvalence: an unnamed number of tiers or levels that are not connected in a surface/depth relation, but in a heterarchical order in which any level can comment on any other one at any time. One of the possible responses to modernity that West critiques in *The Day of the Locust* can be called the ‘apocalyptic’ response, and this is the one I will examine in the following paragraphs. By way of the novel’s title, it promises to be significant also for an estimate of the relation of the text itself to the modernity it describes, and to the possible function of literary communication within this modernity.

If the language of West’s novel is often apocalyptic, insofar as it alludes to certain texts of the Bible, certain religious metaphors, and a general tradition of Western and specifically American culture “conflating the metaphoric dualities of millennium and cataclysm,” this has usually been read from within a mythological perspective of archetypal criticism à la Northrop Frye as a straight engagement with this tradition rather than a meta-commentary on its strategies and functions. But does West employ “the demonic imagery of apocalypse” simply “to give metaphoric definition to the social disintegration which he portrays,” in order to present “actual secular chaos” without envisaging “a promised new world to counterbalance the destructive upheaval of the old”? In other words, is it justified to call *The Day of the Locust* a “brutally pessimistic vision”? Although such straight readings appear motivated by West’s title – an allusion to *Revelation* 9:3,7 – and a pervasive presence of Biblical references from Jeremiah

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to St. John of Patmos,10 I would argue that they constitute a severe reduction of the novel’s potential meaning. The Day of the Locust is less a description of 1930s Hollywood as a microcosm of the United States or of Western civilization in apocalyptic terms (but without the possibility of redemption) than it is a critique of the possibility of describing 1930s society and (mass)culture in apocalyptic terms. The latter reading may not render this novel less ‘pessimistic’ but, on the contrary, expose an even greater negativizing potential vis-à-vis a culture in which the mythic and symbolic metaphors of apocalypse have themselves become (too) widely available clichés and have entered the cultural logic of simulacra in the mass media of which West is one of the first great critics in the twentieth century. In a society that continuously and, as it were, strategically conflates traditional epistemic distinctions of reality and fake, animate and inanimate, living and dead, sign and referent, in the monistic artefactual ubiquity of the simulacra that it produces and that produces it, the applicability of apocalyptic metaphors and the readability of signs as symbols and portents of an approaching, and approachable, higher order of reality becomes, to say the least, questionable. There is no longer a stable basis of meaning or a viable critical tool for interpreting this society – which has become a media society – in any unambiguous way.

A Cool Million had already revealed the essential link between politics and theater in mass culture and opted for a sarcastic, folkloristic denial of the feasibility of political activism in a proto-Fascist America. This perspective is radicalized in The Day of the Locust. West’s working title for this novel, “The Cheaters and the Cheated,” may have assumed a clear political and moral dividing line between victims and perpetrators but, just as plausibly, it may have been intended as a blurring of that very line. The final title, like the novel as a whole, could be read as an evasion of the political and social questions asked by A Cool Million, but also as their transformation. The political and the social do not disappear but are translated into other concerns: aesthetic, media-related, sexual, moral. The Day of the Locust does not sketch the downward trajectory of one character who becomes the victim of a mediialized reality, but the different, and differentiated, responses to this reality by a number of characters who are related in complex ways.

In this respect, the apocalyptic resonances serve less to present this reality in its cataclysmic and ‘pessimistic’ inevitability, but work on mainly two levels: 1) They serve as an immanent critique of apocalyptic patterns of thought which had become inadequate for describing the cultural logic of simulacra prevalent in 1930s mass media culture, and 2) perhaps even more importantly, they underline this reality’s potential of transformation, and the characters’ potential to transform themselves with or against it, or their inability to do so. This might be seen as the novel’s most important and pervasive theme. Characters are constantly becoming, are on the verge of becoming, are trying or failing to become some-

thing else, to transcend their present conditions, to discover or to reveal their ‘true’ being, or to reinvent a different ‘truth’ about themselves. In its frequent descriptions of animate beings in terms of inanimate objects, and vice versa, the text replicates this movement of transformation. It is a descriptive technique that derives immediately from St John’s Revelation, a fact curiously overlooked by most ‘apocalyptic’ critics of West. In the locusts passage of the Revelation, note the rich and confusing comparisons of these insects with both human, animal, and inanimate objects, and the repeated emphasis on “appearance” that both allows for epistemic doubt and for the poetic license to dispense with a clear dividing line between fact and fiction:

In appearance the locusts were like horses equipped for battle. On their heads were what looked like gold crowns; their faces were like human faces and their hair like women’s hair; they had teeth like lions’ teeth and chests like iron breastplates; the sound of their wings was like the noise of many horses and chariots charging into battle; they had tails like scorpions, with stings in them, and in their tails lay their power to injure people for five months.¹¹

In The Day of the Locust, trees and hills glow like Neon tubes (262), a man is like “a piece of iron” (357) or “like a badly made automaton” (412), a woman “like a cork” (406), and so forth. Even more resonant, with regard to West’s novel, are the lines that immediately precede the Biblical passage just quoted: “During that time people will seek death, but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them” (Revelation 9:6). In West’s text, the loiterers who populate Hollywood Boulevard at night, wearing clothes “bought from mail-order houses” (261), “had come to California to die” (261; cf. 334, 420). They are waiting for an apocalyptic moment that never arrives. And, even if it came, we can learn by referring back to the Biblical source that nothing would be changed. Here St John of Patmos seems to anticipate West even in his tone:

The rest of mankind who survived these plagues still did not renounce the gods their hands had made, or cease their worship of demons and of idols fashioned from gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk; nor did they repent of their murders, their sorcery, their fornication, or their robberies. (9:20-21)

Even stranger than the apocalyptic (mis-)reading of The Day of the Locust are the readings of its final chapter, the riot scene. A large number of critics have read the riot as a cataclysmic finale, as “the moment when the pent-up oppositional forces of the outmoded, the excluded, and the superannuated are explosively released.”¹² Contrary to such a positive interpretation of the novel’s last chapter as depicting an apocalyptic event, I agree with Jonathan Veitch in reading the riot in front of Kahn’s Persian Palace Theatre as an anticlimactic commentary on the idealized destruction in Tod Hackett’s painting. Instead of displaying the “gala air” (334) that Tod imagines for “The Burning of Los Angeles,” the actual riot is

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characterized by “an utter lack of gaiety” and “a vicious banality.” The revolution does not take place, and it certainly is not fun.

The riot, and Tod’s perception of it, are carefully prepared and prefigured in the novel: there is, at the very beginning, the costumed army of extras moving “like a mob [...] as though fleeing from some terrible defeat” (259); there is “the mock riot” that erupts when, at Mrs. Jenning’s “callhouse” (277), the erotic film Le Predicament de Marie is interrupted, “[u]nder cover” of which Tod “sneak[s] out” (281); and there is Tod’s artistic imagination of an apocalyptic painting about the destruction of Los Angeles, which, as the text makes clear repeatedly, serves as a kind of escape from actual life for him. When the actual riot happens, it is markedly different from any of these preparatory prefigurations, all of which are to some degree removed from ‘real life’: a part of movie-making, a staged pseudo-riot, or a work of art. Real life, compared to all these, is unbeatably more grotesque, brutal, and banal – “[s]adistic humor and cheap thrills,” “the sullen fury of the petit-bourgeois” instead of “the cosmic aspiration of sacred violence.”

Perhaps, then, it is this realization that drives Tod into madness at the end, or, as the case may be (critics are divided on this point also, and the ambiguity of Tod’s siren-like laugh is difficult, perhaps impossible, to solve) into the opposite of madness: the ultimate realization of contingency that enables him to see the tragic in terms of farce.

Death, destruction, violence, and release are key elements of Tod Hackett’s mental make-up; they structure his perceptions of reality. For instance, as the narrator reports Tod’s thoughts, he notes that “[o]nly dynamite would be of any use against” the “truly monstrous” buildings in LA that cannot be distinguished from movie props: “the Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages, and every possible combination of these styles” (262). It is, above all else, Tod’s own ‘apocalyptic vision’ that West uses to criticize apocalyptic interpretations of modern reality. For this reason, when the narrator reports that Tod (whose name means ‘death’ in German and is perhaps intended as an allusion to Oswald Spengler’s somber vision of The Decline of the West) “knew” that the middle- and lower-class people of Hollywood “had come to California to die” (261), he does not necessarily subscribe to this interpretation. In fact, the narrator may be playing a sophisticated game with his readers, who are brought to realize – if they remember or look up the text of the Revelation – that death, the envisaged moment of release, will not come, at least not in the form of the great cataclysmic release that Tod imagines in his painting “The Burning of Los Angeles.” Tod fails to laugh at the houses, although, as the narrator notes, they are “comic” (262). Unlike Faye

14 Veitch, 130.
15 West would have appreciated the wordplay on his assumed name. His familiarity with Spengler is evident in Chief Israel Satinpenny’s speech in A Cool Million: “The day of vengeance is here. The star of the paleface is sinking and he knows it. Spengler has said so; Valéry has said so; thousands of his wise men proclaim it” (233).
Greener, he appears unable to laugh at himself (cf. 316). Throughout the novel, his escape into art becomes more and more desperate and intense: He searches for clues in the form of symbols (282); he regards the dissociated fragments that make up the reality of a Hollywood studio back lot in the light of Italian man-nerist painting (352); he envisages his painting as a “release” (321), himself as a “prophet” of “doom and destruction” in “the role of Jeremiah” (335); he visits various churches and cults, equating Los Angeles with “decadent Rome” (366), anticipating the destruction of “civilization” (366). Finally, his vision of a Fascist movement led by the “raw-foodist” cult of the unlikely “Dr. Know-All Pierce-All” (361-62, 420) offers a brief glimpse of the dystopian social prophecy of *A Cool Million*, although now this vision is relegated to the apocalyptic – and somewhat delusional – imagination of one of the characters.

The difference between Tod’s apocalyptic imagination and the actual riot cannot be accentuated enough. In the actual riot, there is no release, no renewal, no transformation. It is not a phenomenon for the benefit of art, but rather for the media. The role of the priest or prophet is played by the radio reporter, whose “rapid, hysterical voice was like that of a revivalist preacher whipping his congregation toward the ecstasy of fits: ‘What a crowd, folks! [...] Can the police hold them? Can they? It doesn’t look so, folks …’” (409-10). Tod realizes that the “boredom” and “resentment” (411) in the mob, nurtured by a “daily diet” of media violence (“lynchings, murder, sex, crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, war,” 412), cannot be transformed by an outbreak of violence into something other than violence: “Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies” (412). Their desire for transformation is bound to remain unfulfilled. In order to protect himself amongst the mob, which does not allow him to escape either physically or spiritually because he cannot establish the necessary distance of a detached observer, he has to remember to laugh with the crowd: “He knew enough to laugh with them” (410). Only later on, when the riot subsides and the mob begins to disperse, does he find an occasion to “escape” (420) again into his painting, which he is finishing in his mind when the police pick him up. The ekphrasis of the painting is now significantly different from previous descriptions. Tod now depicts himself and the other main characters (Faye, Harry, Homer, Claude) escaping from the mob; he clearly no longer celebrates the idea of destruction to the same extent as before, no longer sadistically imagines Faye’s “complete, unthinking panic” as she is stoned by the mob in the earlier version (321), but imagines her running “proudly” and himself throwing a stone back at the mob (420). Like Faye, he may now have learned to laugh not only at or with others, but also at himself. His imitation of the “scream” of the siren which he first confuses with his own voice and which “[f]or some reason” (421) makes him laugh, can be read as the laugh of one who has realized the limitations of apocalyptic thinking and learned
to accept, if not to appreciate, the ‘comic’ aspects of modern reality – instead of wanting to use art as a final escape from it.\(^\text{16}\)

III.

In \textit{A Cool Million}, West uses a parody of the picaresque novel to present a darkly comic array of depression-era ideologies, apocalyptic movements, and chiliastic visions. With deadpan seriousness, an ostensibly omniscient and obfuscat ing narrator leads the reader through the misfortunate journey of poor Lemuel Pitkin, a young man forced to make his fortune in 1930s America who pursues the promises of the American Dream and encounters nothing but fraud, failure, injustice, sheer bad luck, and successive stages of physical dismemberment, losing first his teeth, then his right eye, his thumb, his scalp, and a leg before he is finally shot dead. Significantly, the narrator does nothing to provide a counterweight to the ideological forces that continuously act upon and propel Lemuel forward on his journey. On the contrary, the narrator appears to underwrite and assert the validity of those hegemonic forces. The comic effects that West achieves by having Lemuel’s story told by a bigoted and pretentious narrator are mainly the result of a discrepancy or clash between the story and its telling, between the gruesome events that befall young Lemuel and the uplifting moralistic tone of the narrative. The result of this clash is a gap in the text that highlights the vacuity of the narrator’s pretentions and, by implication, the questionable validity of the ideological precepts upon which his narrative is constructed.

In what, compared to West’s previous novels, seems on the surface to be a more conventional literary effort, the author pursues the same routine or \textit{spiel} with his readers that he employed in \textit{The Dream Life of Balso Snell} and \textit{Miss Lonelyhearts}: the construction of a literary form that actively invokes the readers’ participation and forces its readers to modify, expand, or indeed abandon their expectations and conventional responses to a literary text. In these texts, ‘the novel’ itself has finally joined the ranks of those simulacra of American cultural and political life that West ‘dismantles’ or rather forces the reader to dismantle by reading beneath, against, or through the surface text and to realize that, underneath this surface of convention, there is a ‘pandemonium’ of literary, historical, and political signifiers.

\(^{16}\) For a more detailed analysis of West as a comic writer, see Pichon-Kalau v. Hofe, 199-214, who reads West’s description of a mechanized and medialized visual culture as a prerequisite for establishing a comic attitude to the “life-world” insofar as the experience of mechanization and medialization serves to check “the immediacy of emotions” (202), enabling laughter as a constructive situational intervention that can be experienced as “natural” (201; my translations). Although this interpretation may seem too ‘optimistic’ in reducing West to anthropological and ultimately humanist categories, reinstating the ‘sovereignty’ of the subject (if only in transitory instances, cf. 209), it is extremely valuable in its analysis of the negativizing function of West’s “reflexive” comic strategies (209) vis à vis ideological constructions and mediations, strategies that transcend a ‘modernist’ literary agenda and anticipate the ‘postmodernism’ of Pynchon, Hawkes, and Coover.
The essential and haunting difference between West’s last two novels is that, in *A Cool Million*, the surface is still transparent and, as it were, filled with holes that allow direct glimpses of what lies underneath, whereas in *The Day of the Locust* the surface has become opaque, absolute, and near impenetrable. The turmoil of competing significations, rampant in *A Cool Million* on virtually every page, has given way to a muted and restrained stillness in the later novel with its eerie atmosphere of an imminent catastrophe that never quite manages to break loose. In the story of Lemuel Pitkin, disaster is physical and immediate but also, in its grotesque absurdity, abstract and vaguely harmless, stylized, superficial and satirical, without any real horror for the reader. In *The Day of the Locust*, however, Homer Simpson’s furious outbreak of brutality at the end is all the more shocking because, significantly, nothing else really happens and the great conflagration of Los Angeles remains an apocalyptic fiction by the artist, Tod Hackett. Whereas *A Cool Million* stylizes violence to achieve a comic effect, and to illustrate drastically (but somehow ineffectively) the impact of social forces on a powerless and gullible individual (Lemuel Pitkin), *The Day of the Locust* is all the more effective in the end as a portrayal of the same forces because it shows their utter disconnection from, and disinterest in, the powerless and gullible individual (Harry Greener, Homer Simpson). When the individual finally reacts to a series of insults and acts of injustice from various parties with a sudden eruption of violence, by trampling on a child like Stevenson’s Mr Hyde, this act only intensifies Homer’s powerlessness and isolation and, by transforming him into a mere monster, excludes him all the more effectively from the impenetrability of the symbolic social order as embodied in the mob, whose members do not know and have no control over what they are doing. The mob’s activity is “demoniac” (409) because there is no way of controlling it and no perspective from which to observe it at the idealizing distance that would be necessary for the artist who could depict the riot as a socially liberating ‘happening.’ The artist finally has to include himself in his picture, physically defending himself against the crowd who are not united by a common cause, but dissociated in manifold ways and for numerous reasons.

By developing the story of Tod’s painting as a kind of artistic *bildungsroman* against the backdrop of what Adorno and Horkheimer would only a few years later call ‘the culture industry,’ West achieves an interrogation of the purposes and possibilities of art, including literature, under the conditions of an increasingly simulacral modernity. The result of this interrogation is the recognition that modernity can no longer be sufficiently described or explained in apocalyptic terms and patterns of thought. But as long as new terms and patterns have not yet been developed, it seems inevitable to refer back to the traditional language of apocalypse – though these acts of reference cannot remain within the traditional mold, but will assume a different, a simulacrally inflected character: fragmented, incomplete, ironic, constructed, deconstructive, comic.