

# **Consumer Society and its Discontents: *The Truman Show* and *The Day of the Locust***

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Any consideration of consumer society has to begin with recognizing its enormous success, including the exponential expansion of the middle-class and the extension of mass-produced cultural products in global markets. Yet despite its practical success, consumer society, and the market economy that makes it possible, has never been without its critics. The paradox here is that an economic system dedicated to fulfilling desire still generates substantial dissatisfaction, even from those who benefit the most from this system.

Modern critiques of consumerism and the mass media can be found in the recent popular movie *The Truman Show* (1998) and Nathanael West's novel *The Day of the Locust* (1939). Both these works express, in very different ways, the cultural anxieties created by consumer society. But while *The Day of the Locust* offers us valuable insights into the problems posed by mass culture, *The Truman Show* gives a mythic perspective that fundamentally distorts our modern situation. I present here an anthropological analysis of consumer culture that will reveal the limitations of the neo-Marxist critique of consumerism expressed in *The Truman Show*. *The Day of the Locust*, on the other hand, poses the more serious question of whether consumer society is capable of containing the violent resentments that it generates, a question which the second half of this essay will consider at more length.

## **1. *The Truman Show***

While Marx criticized capitalism as an impersonal machine that consumes labor and then discards workers, the more recent criticism is that consumers are manipulated by huge corporations into buying an endless stream of trivial products that must be soon discarded when the next hyped item for consumption arrives. In this view, the freedom and prosperity we enjoy, incredible by almost any historical standard, are illusory, for we remain enslaved to multi-national corporations.

This critique of consumer society finds its paradigmatic allegorical expression in the popular movie *The Truman Show*. The main character, Truman Burbank, played by Jim Cary, lives literally in a giant bubble, a climate-controlled dome where every moment of his life is secretly filmed and broadcast as a reality show to a world-wide audience. Life in the bubble appears to Truman as free but is actually governed by the show's producer Christof. Truman's day-to-day life is in reality a series of advertisements: his friends and family (all actors of course) are constantly touting the benefits of various consumer products to the show's audience while they simultaneously play their roles in Truman's life. Truman believes that his desires are freely chosen, but in fact they are scripted, predetermined by the producer, including his choice of wife, career, friends, and so on. We find out, through a series of flashbacks, that as a teenager he met a woman Lauren who offers him the possibility of true love, but because she has not been scripted as his future wife, she is whisked off the show despite anything they can do. A more conventionally beautiful blonde named Meryl is chosen as his wife, but she only pretends to love him.

The movie portrays Truman's discovery that a world outside his bubble exists, a world which the movie suggests is more authentic or "real," free from the manipulations of Christof, the show's producer, whose name suggests the biblical Antichrist. If Truman could only get outside the bubble, outside the mimetic manipulation of Christof, he could desire authentically, find his true love, and live a real, unmediated life. The movie ends with Truman leaving the dome, refusing the safe yet empty fantasy world offered by the producer.

*The Truman Show* is a modern *Pilgrim's Progress*. In John Bunyan's classic allegory, Christian, an everyman, discovers with the help of the Bible that he lives in the "City of Destruction" and is accordingly doomed. He must leave his friends and family and set out on the pilgrim pathway, where he encounters various obstacles, temptations, and setbacks. He perseveres, however, and finally arrives at the Heavenly City. The book ends with him crossing the "River of Death" and entering heaven. Likewise, Truman lives in a fool's paradise until he discovers that his life is a mere sham. He sets out to leave his friends and family and encounters various obstacles; but he perseveres, and the movie ends with him stepping outside the dome to a brave new world of unmediated desire.

The movie has been universally interpreted as an allegory of the sinister influence of the media upon our lives. According to a website devoted to the movie, "It is a story that reveals an essential truth about what is happening to society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, . . . [i.e.] how the media and corporations have begun to surround us with a universe of illusions" (Sanes). In this reading, Truman Burbank is an everyman, a "true man," analogous to each one of us. As the website puts it,

Thus does the movie offer us a metaphor for our own situation. The fake landscape Truman lives in is our own media landscape in which news, politics, advertising and public affairs

are increasingly made up of theatrical illusions. Like our media landscape, it is convincing in its realism, with lifelike simulations and story lines, from the high-tech facsimile of a sun that benevolently beams down on Truman to the mock sincerity of the actor he mistakenly believes is his best friend. (Sanes) In this allegory, "the producer-director of this stage-set world, who blocks Truman's effort to escape, is the giant media companies, news organizations, and media politicians that have a stake in keeping us surrounded by falsehood, and are prepared to lure us with rewards as they block efforts at reforming the system" (Sanes).

If the movie is criticized at all, it is for being insufficiently radical in its critique of the mass media. René Girard's theory of mediated desire, however, suggests a rather different interpretation. Truman thinks his desires are his own, but he discovers that in fact they are all mediated by his mimetic rival, Christof, the show's producer, who is mythically demonized as virtually all powerful and evil, a tempter figure comparable to Milton's Satan. (When Truman tries to escape the dome by boat, Christof ruthlessly risks Truman's life in a terrible storm which almost drowns him.)

## 2

René Girard, in his seminal theory of mediated desire, argues that human desire (as distinct from mere appetite) is essentially imitative; that which we hold most private and personal, our desires, are not really our own: we imitate the desires of others. Put crudely, we want what others want, *because* they want it. Rather than a spontaneous expression of selfhood, desire is *mediated* by the model. The mediation of desire, however, remains generally unconscious; the stubbornly held belief that our desires are our own, and that the desired object or person is the key to our transcendent happiness, is what Girard call the *mensonge romantique*, the romantic lie or illusion. In Eric Gans's analysis of this relationship, the repression of the mediation of desire is the origin of the so-called Freudian unconscious, not some repressed "event or fact" (*Signs of Paradox* 124). Rather than expressing our deeply held needs and wants, desire actually reflects our competitive and conflictual relationship with others; for this reason, desire is never really satisfied, as our mimetic relationship with others is an on-going given of our condition as social animals. Desire leads to conflict with the other, because the self and model both desire exclusive possession of the same object. Girard characterizes the desiring subject as the "disciple" and the mediator as the "model." Describing the ambivalent relationship between disciple and model, he writes,

The impulse toward the [desired] object is ultimately an impulse toward the mediator; in internal mediation [i.e., the mediator belongs to same group or social sphere as the subject] this impulse is checked by the mediator himself since he desires, or perhaps possesses the object. Fascinated by his model, the disciple inevitable sees, in the mechanical obstacle which he puts in his way, proof of the ill will borne him. Far from declaring himself a faithful vassal, he thinks only of repudiating the bonds of mediation. But these bonds are stronger

than ever, for the mediator's apparent hostility does not diminish his prestige but instead augments it. . . . The subject is torn between two opposite feelings toward his model—the most submissive reverence and the most intense malice. This is the passion we call *hatred*. Only someone who prevents us from satisfying a desire which he himself has inspired in us is truly an object of hatred. The person who hates first hates himself for the secret admiration concealed by his hatred. In an effort to hide this desperate admiration from others, and from himself, he no longer wants to see in his mediator anything but an obstacle. The secondary role of the mediator thus becomes primary, concealing his original function of a model scrupulously imitated.

Now the mediator is a shrewd and diabolical enemy; he tries to rob the subject of his most prized possessions; he obstinately thwarts his most legitimate ambitions. (10-11)

Since the mediator competes with the self for the same object or person, the model becomes an "obstacle," a hated and feared rival who blocks the fulfillment of desire. Despite the hatred that emerges between self and rival, the self remains ambivalently attached to the rival, since it is he who gives value or "authenticity" to the self's desires. The rival is akin to the "other" in psychoanalytic terminology. An "internal" mediator is essentially comparable to the self, but the self's vanity requires that his desires remain authentic, his "own"; therefore the rival is often demonized as an all-powerful obstacle that blocks the paradise of fulfilled desire. This distorted version of the mediator is the portrayal of *The Truman Show*.

In *The Truman Show*, the original role of the mediator as model has been obscured, "concealing his original function of a model scrupulously imitated," as Girard puts it. The movie rather begins with the premise that Christof, the mediator, is "a shrewd and diabolical enemy." The movie therefore functions in exactly the opposite way from the realist novels of Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, and Dostoevsky, whose works form the original framework for Girard's theory (see *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*). These novels *reveal* the mystifications of mimetic desire; the reader is able to witness how and why the revered model is transformed into a "diabolical enemy." At the end of these novels, the protagonist typically undergoes a quasi-religious conversion which creates a new and revelatory understanding of his past for both reader and protagonist.

*The Truman Show* recognizes on some level the anthropological truth that human desire is mediated, but the mediator of desire is mythicized as all-powerful and evil, rather than a human being similar to ourselves. Rather than accurately representing media influence, the movie misrepresents the media as the all-powerful controller of our desires. The portrayal of Christof reflects the distortions of mimetic rivalry rather than the actual power of the media in our lives.

Life outside the bubble is also mystified as the realm of authentic desire. Most readers of this journal will recognize that life outside the bubble is just as mythic as life inside. The

movie's fantasy is that we can somehow get outside the situation of mimetic desire. The movie therefore has to end before Truman actually faces the reality of life outside the bubble, or the movie would degenerate into either bathos or a simplistic fantasy world easily recognized as such. A charming fairy tale the movie may be, but not a serious critique of consumer society.

The disturbing part of the movie's ideology is not its childish fantasy of being the universal center of attention, but the projection of responsibility onto a demonic other. Instead of helping people to take responsibility for their use of the media, the movie encourages a regressive projection of blame that evades the true issue.

The problem of mimetic rivalry is real, constitutive in fact of the human species. What distinguishes the human species is that the main threat to our existence is other humans, not the environment (Gans, *OT* 2). In Gans's "originary hypothesis" language first emerged to mediate (and ameliorate) our relationship to other humans—not, as commonly thought, to mediate our relationship to the environment, that is, to describe the world. The threat of mimetic conflict is therefore ongoing as a function of the social nature of our existence. The potential for human violence must be continually deferred; this is the "work" of language (and by extension culture), its original, ethical function. All solutions to the problem of human violence are therefore temporary, since mimetic desire is the phoenix which is continually reborn from the ashes of satisfaction. Gans, therefore, rejects all utopian solutions, including those of the quasi-Marxist critics of the mass media.

Girard, in contrast, takes a religious perspective on the problem of human violence; in Girard's view, the only answer to our dilemma is to make God or his incarnation our model of desire, to choose absolute love over sacrificial desire. This can be a satisfying solution at the level of the individual, but it doesn't work at the level of society. Girard fails to recognize the constructive role of consumer products in ameliorating mimetic conflict, a point to which I will return.

The leftist critique of consumer society is based on a similar fantasy as *The Truman Show*. Christof, the show's producer, is a Hollywood version of what Theodor Adorno calls the "culture industry." He writes, "The more strongly the culture industry entrenches itself, the more it can do as it chooses with the needs of consumers: producing, controlling, disciplining them" (115). Consumers are completely passive in this model: "Capitalist production hems them in so tightly, in body and soul, that they unresistingly succumb to whatever is proffered to them" (Adorno 106). Just as in *The Truman Show*, Adorno seems to believe that if we could only get rid of these huge corporations, we could desire authentically and, hopefully, more tastefully. Certainly we would devote more money to the study of great literature, music, and art (as defined by Adorno and his colleagues). As Gans writes, "Esthetes object to the reign of money: wealth does not guarantee good taste, neither individual wealth nor the aggregate wealth of the masses" (*Chronicles* #25).

The neo-Marxist critique of consumerism depends upon a false distinction between authentic desire and the inauthentic desires created by a consumer culture. But what, we must ask, distinguishes between them? Most of the daily goods we take for granted in America, people living in third world countries manage to do quite well without. In fact, all of culture could be classified as superfluous. As Shakespeare pointed out long ago, culture is by definition that which exceeds "true need." "Our basest beggars / Are in the poorest thing superfluous. / Allow not nature more than nature needs, / Man's life is as cheap as beast's" (*King Lear* 2.4.266-269). The superfluous is the essential when it comes to culture. But culture is superfluous only in the sense that the ethical is superfluous. What King Lear recognizes is that the existence of the human community may be humanly necessary but is not inevitable, "natural." Culture, as the *basis* of civilization, is contingent upon our continual efforts to renew and reaffirm it. The human community is always in danger of extinction. This is the moral imperative that authorizes mass culture, however distasteful we may find its products.

What is at the root of the academic hostility to consumerism, the media, and the market in general? In part, as I've argued above, this hostility is based on the mystification of desire. Our vanity requires that our desires remain our own, even if we must demonize the rivals of corporate advertising. Contemporary psychoanalytic theory is in agreement with mimetic theory that the perceived integrity of our identity always requires an "other"; capitalism, consumerism, and the mass media are all versions of that "other" by which intellectuals often define and defend themselves.

Capitalism is an inevitable outgrowth of a free market. Gans points out that the market is not a thing, but the collective result of the individual decisions of all of its participants (*Chronicles* #8 and #34). "Reification" has become the bogeyman of recent literary theory, yet the reification of capitalism is still accepted without hesitation. There is no evil demiurge of capitalism, no "producer": the system expresses the choices of individuals. When we criticize consumer society, what we are really criticizing is the consumer choices of our fellow citizens. At bottom, this is an aesthetic issue. The academic hostility to the market is fundamentally aesthetic. My point here is not original: Gans argues insightfully that "culture" is hostile to the market because traditional culture requires "effective mimetic models, good shows. The market is not about shows, but about the organization of human efforts toward satisfying our desires and generating new ones, in the unceasing, and, we hope, unending effort to stay a step ahead of the resentments it generates" (*Chronicles* #25).

Intellectuals want people to consume more tastefully, in ways closer to themselves. But this criticism misses the whole point of consumption, which is to distinguish oneself. We cannot all be the best, but we can each be different; this is the meaning of the modern valorization

of self-expression, the omnipresent aestheticization of our existence.

Virtually every personal decision is on some level an aesthetic decision, from the clothes we wear, to the food we buy, to our choice of career. Our very identity is the subject of aesthetic self-fashioning. Our ability to be different, if not the best, is the key to modern culture. As Girard has pointed out, humans are essentially mimetic, which means competitive and conflictual. What each of us requires fundamentally is an arena in which we can successfully compete and be recognized as such. The aesthetic is one such arena available to virtually every modern individual. As it was recognized long ago, *De gustibus, non est disputandum*. In matters of taste there is no dispute. The primary ethical function of consumer society is to aestheticize our daily existence, thereby deferring the resentments created by social/economic inequalities.

Consumerism, and the mass culture that accompanies it, is a necessary evil of a mass democratic society. All societies require some structuring principle to prevent unrestrained conflict and competition. Past societies, ancient, medieval, and Renaissance, were structured along more hierarchical lines. One's place in the hierarchy was maintained in part by sheer force, as exemplified by drastic punishments for minor thefts. Public, communal rituals and ceremonies were also effective in creating a powerful sense of divine awe for political and ecclesiastical authorities. But Protestant iconoclasm, in collaboration with Enlightenment rationality, has eroded our sense of "divine" authority. In modern democratic societies, power is relatively decentralized, and authority, always vulnerable to suspicion and resentment, is limited by market forces. As Adam Smith recognized, a free market incorporates widespread competition as a positive force, rather than limiting it by rigid hierarchical distinctions. The modern world defers the potential violence of unrestrained competition by allowing each person to create individual difference, which is to say, sacrality.

If we are unique, then nobody can compete with us. The post-modern drive for diversity is built on this principle. We need as much diversity as possible to defuse the competition that threatens to destroy us. We advocate accepting each person as he or she is. Each person is special, unique, and uniquely valuable. It becomes imperative to believe this in a world without the sacral guarantees of religion. Girard underestimates the contribution of consumerism in deferring violence. The constructive function of consumerism is in facilitating individuation, or differentiation, apart from open conflict, which when unrestrained results in rigid hierarchies ruled by the most powerful and violent. Instead of killing others, we recognize their difference, asking them to recognize us in return. Consumer products, which enable this differentiation on a mass scale, are what make a mass society possible. To argue against a consumer society is to argue against a mass society. And to argue against a mass society is to dispute the legitimacy of the modern world as such.

In pragmatic terms, we don't want to do away with our consumer society; we want to buy the things we want at the cheapest possible price. That's why so much of the leftist criticism of the consumer society is hypocritical, since the critics themselves enjoy the fruits of this society. Furthermore, they don't offer any realistic alternative. Corporations can and should be regulated, and of course they are already are. But these political corrections to the free market can be handled within our existing political framework. The advantage of our system is that it allows these kind of corrections to be made peacefully, through political negotiation.

From an anthropological perspective, if we can truly understand the workings of mimetic desire, we can also rationally ameliorate its destructive potential. Of course, we can never completely step outside the mimetic circle, but realizing that we live within it can transform our social interactions. The postmodern era brings an increasingly widespread self-awareness of the mediated nature of desire, even apart from the influence of Girard's mimetic theory. In fact, consumerism is often celebrated in the postmodern world, despite the efforts of humanities professors.

Recent critics, even on the left, have recognized that consumption is an active process. Michel de Certeau argues,

In reality, a rationalized, expansionist, centralized, spectacular and clamorous production is confronted by an entirely different kind of production, called "consumption" and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless and quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products (where would it place them?) but in an art of using those imposed upon it. (31)<sup>4</sup>

There is an "art" or a "Practice of Everyday Life," as Certeau puts it. While Certeau seems to romanticize consumption as potentially "subversive," Jean Baudrillard sees it as more sinister, while still recognizing its active nature:

consumption is surely *not* that passive process of absorption and appropriation which is contrasted to the supposedly active mode of production, thus counterposing two oversimplified patterns of behavior (and of alienation). It has to be made clear from the outset that consumption is an active form of relationship (not only to objects, but also to society and to the world), a mode of systematic activity and global response which founds our entire cultural system. (199) Baudrillard recognizes insightfully that consumerism is not really "about" acquiring physical objects, but rather making a positive, aesthetic statement to the world (see below). As a neo-Marxist, he characterizes both consumption and production as forms of "alienation," but the historical failure of Marxist economics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century places the burden of proof on him to offer a better system. Despite his hostility to the market, Baudrillard recognizes how consumerism transforms traditional expressions of social and economic competition:



That same ideology of competition which formerly, under the banner of 'freedom,' constituted the golden rule of production has now been transposed without restriction into the realm of consumption. Thanks to thousands of marginal distinctions and the often purely formal diffraction of a single product by means of conditioning, competition has become more aggravated on every plane, opening up the immense range of possibilities of a precarious freedom—indeed, of the ultimate freedom, namely the freedom to choose the objects which will distinguish one from other people. (182). It is quite possible for each person to feel unique even though everyone is alike: all that is needed is a pattern of collective and mythological projection—in other words a model. (183-4)

Moreover, the ideology of competition is now giving way everywhere to a 'philosophy' of personal accomplishment. Society is better integrated, so instead of vying for possession of things, individuals seek self-fulfillment, independently of one another, through what they consume. The leitmotiv of discriminative competition has been replaced by that of personalization for all. (184)

Baudrillard recognizes that individualized consumption restructures the ideology of competition, the attempt to be the "best." He emphasizes, however, the paradox that we distinguish ourselves by the consumption of mass produced products. But it is debatable that "everyone is alike," as he puts it. On one level this is true, because we are all subject to mediated desire. But on another level, people really are different. Even something as seemingly trivial as the car we choose to drive is ethically significant to the extent that this choice is recognized as significant by others. What matters is not that all people are on some deep level unique, but that this system works to defer resentment and violence, even within the pressure cooker of a mass society. Baudrillard's critique is founded on the utopian presupposition that freedom from mediated desire is possible.

From the perspective of Gans's "Generative Anthropology," the paradox of consumer society is the basic paradox of the sign. The same sign which defers desire by substituting for the desired object also stimulates desire, by making the represented object more attractive. The products we consume are all "signs" that both defer and stimulate desire. Because desire is mediated by the other, it can never be completely satisfied. When we achieve the object of our desire, we are often ambivalent or even resentful towards it because it fails to resolve the mimetic situation which created our initial desire (see Girard, *DDN* 88-89). Rather than recognizing that it is not the poor object's fault, we tend to blame the object itself, discarding it in favor of some other object. The ultimate object of desire is to be the center of everyone else's desire, but even this satisfaction is unstable, because once we achieve centrality, we immediately become the object of the others' resentment and hostility.

The resentment felt towards the object is articulated at the origin of the human in the moment which Gans calls the "sparagmos" (*Signs of Paradox* 133-36). We destroy and consume the object, not out of simple appetite or even desire, but out of resentment towards

its failure to deliver the promised transcendence. We *consume* the object, thereby destroying or sacrificing it. We cannot eliminate sacrifice, but we can make it more rational in expression. And consumerism is perhaps the most rational form of sacrifice.

## **2. *The Day of the Locust***

Nathanael West's novel is addressed to the problems created by the mass media rather than consumption as such. If, however, we consider that the images and slogans of the mass media are themselves objects of consumption, then this novel indeed falls within the subject of this essay.

The question raised by West in this novel is whether the resentments created by consumer society can continue to be contained and deferred by the system which creates them. The paradox of the sign is exacerbated in modern society because signs are proliferated endlessly. A general cynicism, a disillusionment with the promise of transcendence emerges.

*The Day of the Locust* tells the story of a young artist, Tod Hackett, who comes to Hollywood to work as a set designer. The novel is rather picaresque in structure, narrating Tod's various adventures with the outsiders and hangers-on of the movie industry, and taking us to a variety of Hollywood locations; it does come to a climax, however, in a riot that erupts at a Hollywood movie premiere and which provides the apocalypse promised by the novel's title.

Hollywood as West describes it is a hodgepodge of cheap and tawdry appearances which hide an inner emptiness rather than corruption as such. The homes are an incongruous jumble of "Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages, and every possible combination of these styles, "all composed of "plaster, lath, and paper" (61). The residents of Hollywood are similarly surreal:

A great many of the people wore sports clothes which were not really sports clothes. . . . The fat lady in the yachting cap was going shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and Tyrolean hat was returning, not from a mountain, but an insurance office; and the girl in slacks and sneaks with a bandana around her head had just left a switchboard, not a tennis court. (60) The rococo homes and clothing, no matter how tasteless and absurd, reflect the basic human desire for romance and adventure, the need to transcend the mundane banality of everyday life; this desire however has assumed monstrous form due to the mediation of the movies and radio. As West comments in another novel,

Men have always fought their misery with dreams. Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio and newspapers. Among many betrayals, this one is the worst. (*Miss Lonelyhearts* 39)5

In *Day of the Locust*, everyone is essentially an actor, and virtually everyone Tod comes into contact with is literally an aspiring actor or actress. Hollywood or mass culture deforms people into grotesque forms. Harry Greener, for example, an old vaudeville performer trying to adapt to Hollywood, is literally a face with no head:

Harry, like many actors, had very little back or top to his head. It was almost all face, like a mask, with deep furrows between the eyes, across the forehead and on either side of the nose and mouth, plowed there by years of broad grinning and heavy frowning. Because of them, he could never express anything either subtly or exactly. They wouldn't permit degrees of feeling, only the furthest degree. (119) As a result of mass culture, people are severely alienated, not so much from their environment, which they faithfully mirror, but from themselves as whole human beings. Homer Simpson, a middle-aged man directed by his doctor to retire to California for his health, is brilliantly described as disconnected assemblage of human parts:

He lay stretched out on the bed, collecting his senses and testing the different parts of his body. Every part was awake but his hands. They still slept. He was not surprised. They demanded special attention, had always demanded it. When he had been a child, he used to stick pins into them and once had even thrust them into a fire. Now he used only cold water.

He got out of bed in sections, like a poorly made automaton, and carried his hands into the bathroom. He turned on the cold water. When the basin was full, he plunged his hands in up to the wrists. They lay quietly on the bottom like a pair of strange aquatic animals. When they were thoroughly chilled and began to crawl about, he lifted them out and hid them in a towel. (82)

Tod, the protagonist, is the closest thing in the novel to a whole human being. He has compassion for others and seems capable of real love; but he is surrounded by a culture in which love is not really possible. As an artist, Tod tries to resist the allure of Hollywood, but he is finally caught up in it.

The foremost object of Tod's desire is the 17-year old aspiring actress Faye Greener, who epitomizes the ephemeral glamour of Hollywood.

Tod grunted with annoyance as he turned to the photograph [of Faye]. In it she was wearing a harem costume, full turkish trousers, breastplates and a monkey jacket, and lay stretched out on a silken divan. One hand held a beer bottle and the other a pewter stein.

She was supposed to look drunk and she did, but not with alcohol. She lay stretched out on the divan with her arms and legs spread, as though welcoming a lover, and her lips were parted in a heavy sullen smile. She was supposed to look inviting, but the

invitation wasn't to pleasure. . . .

Her invitation wasn't to pleasure, but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than to love. If you threw yourself on her, it would be like throwing yourself from the parapet of skyscraper. You would do it with a scream. You couldn't expect to rise again. Your teeth would be driven into your skull like nails into a pine board and your back would be broken. You wouldn't even have time to sweat or close your eyes. . . .

If she would only let him, he would be glad to throw himself, no matter what the cost. But she wouldn't have him. She didn't love him and he couldn't further her career. She wasn't sentimental and she had no need of tenderness, even if he were capable of it. (67-68)

The men of the novel all compete for Faye's favor in classic Girardian fashion, and they come to blows in two scenes (117, 170). Even though Tod understands the nature of Faye's appeal, he is unable to govern his desire for her rationally. As the above description of Faye's sexual "invitation" indicates, underneath Faye's contrived appearance lies a curious violence, and the relationship between violence and mass culture can be considered as the main subject of the novel.

The problem with mass culture as described by West is that it consists of images and figures that promise everything, but which continually frustrate by their inability to deliver any satisfaction. Hollywood thus incites to violence, and the ending reflects the supposed inability of mass culture to defer the (desiring) violence that it feeds upon. West's description of the crowd which gathers at a movie premiere makes this point explicit:

All their lives they had slaved at some kind of dull, heavy labor, behind desks and counters, in the fields and at tedious machines of all sorts, saving their pennies and dreaming of the leisure that would be theirs when they had enough. Finally that day came. They could draw a weekly income of ten or fifteen dollars. Where else should they go but California, the land of sunshine and oranges? Once there, they discover that sunshine isn't enough. They get tired of oranges, even of avocado pears and passion fruit. Nothing happens. They don't know what to do with their time. They haven't the mental equipment for leisure, the money nor the physical equipment for pleasure. . . .

Their boredom becomes more and more terrible. They realize that they've been tricked and burn with resentment. 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. (177-178)

The anthropological content of West's novel is that he reveals the underlying violence of consumer desire. Desire is fraught with violence; this insight is not exactly new, but West applies it to a modern context in which this message is not always apparent. In the movie theater, at home watching TV, and so on, we feel ourselves insulated from the threat of violence. West warns us that the potential for violence remains real, hidden behind the images that surround us.

The unstated problem of *The Day of the Locust* is the lack of any sacred which would defer the violence of desire. West elaborates on this lack in his earlier novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, about a newspaper advice column writer. Miss Lonelyhearts (the only name given him in the novel) has an "ivory Christ" hanging on his wall, and he reads Father Zossima's sermon on unconditional love from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Miss Lonelyhearts wants to offer this message to his readers, but he is unable to believe in it himself. Surrounded by absurd suffering undignified by any tragic pathos, he finds himself incapable of true faith. Miss Lonelyhearts lives in a modern world in which faith or love have become impossible. The very idea of absolute love is absurd and doomed to failure.

## 6

At the end of the novel, the protagonist seemingly undergoes a Dostoyevskian conversion in which he dedicates his life to God. In his first act of Christ-like love, he attempts to embrace a cripple: "He would embrace the cripple and the cripple would be made whole again, even as he, a spiritual cripple, had been made whole again" (57). But the attempt to express Father Zossima's unconditional love ends only in more violence, as the cripple misinterprets the gesture and shoots him in a farcical struggle. *Miss Lonelyhearts* thus embodies the failure of religion to provide meaning and happiness in the modern world. This failure results in violence. *The Day of the Locust* continues West's critique of modernity, but he turns from the failure of religion to the failure of art as a means of transcendence.

In traditional culture, high art teaches the deferral of desire as well as providing diversion: "to teach and delight" in classical aesthetics. But modern art, like Tod Hackett, has been prostituted to the movie industry. At best, serious art can only record the failure of mass culture, as Tod records "The Burning of Los Angeles" in the painting he works upon, and West records the same in *The Day of the Locust*. Mass culture exists on the model of pornography, much as Faye, as a figure for mass culture, attracts through her mediated sex appeal. As such, mass art teaches the wrong message, that desire can be satisfied. It makes the consumers impatient for more and more. At the same time, through the very repetition and juxtaposition of its messages, the promise of culture is revealed as empty because the ubiquitous images have lost their potency even as promise. West's favorite technique is to juxtapose the various images of mass culture, thus revealing the arbitrary and illusory nature of cultural representation (see for example Tod's surreal journey through a Hollywood movie lot, 130-35). As a result the consumer becomes jaded and cynical,

impatient. The images which are meant to substitute for reality have lost their believability; at the same time, there is nothing to take their place. The main function of culture, to transcend the violence of desire, is thus frustrated.

West's critique of modernity agrees in many respects with Girard's. In Girard's interpretation of Western history, the revelation of the Gospel text places humankind in a unique predicament. The Passion story confronts us with our own violence; we can no longer blame the sacrificial victim. The sacrificial mechanism can work only as long as it is disguised and mystified. According to Girard, "the effect of the gospel revelation will be made manifest through violence, through a sacrificial and cultural crisis whose radical effect must be unprecedented since there is no longer any sacralized victim to stand in the way of its consequences" (*THSFW* 203). In an increasingly secular world, without the protection afforded by myth and sacrificial religion, humans are in imminent danger of destroying themselves. Because of the Gospel revelation, we can no longer plausibly believe in the sacrificial myths that traditionally protect society from its own violence. We are forced to choose between "apocalypse now" or unconditional forgiveness. As Guy Lefort puts this point,

In a world where violence has been truly revealed and the victimage mechanisms have ceased to function, humans are confronted with a dilemma that is extraordinarily simple: either they renounce violence, or the incalculable violence that they set off risks annihilating them all, 'as in the days of Noah'. (qtd. in Girard, *THSFW* 201). For Girard, this situation constitutes the crisis, but also the challenge and opportunity of modernity.

The ending of *The Day of the Locust* presents a classic Girardian crisis of undifferentiation, complete with angry mob and scapegoat victim (Homer Simpson). A woman in the crowd claims that the riot began because "A pervert attacked a child," and the crowd "agreed vehemently" (183). Ironically, this same group of people then goes on to demonstrate just how they perverted they themselves are, when one of the men takes advantage of the crunch to start groping a woman with the group's approval. In other words, there is no meaningful difference between victim and crowd, just as in Girard's description of the sacrificial crisis. The lack of any organized rituals of sacrifice in the modern world results in a crisis of undifferentiation which threatens the community with self-destruction. The main difference between Girard and West on the problem of modernity is that West does not apparently see Christian love as offering a viable solution.

It might be argued that West's novel is anachronistic, since he wrote at the dawn of consumer society, in the late 30s, before the post-war economic boom. But in many ways, his novel is prescient; although consumerism delivers more now, it also promises more, so that dissatisfaction always stays one step ahead of satisfaction.

The most obvious problem with West's critique is that consumerism marches on, becoming

more and more efficient in both creating desires and recycling consumer discontent into more consumerism. Dissatisfaction is recycled back into the system as a positive force. There is no shortage of products available to express one's dissatisfaction with consumerism. Like Marx, West failed to consider the efficiency of the free market.

But West's point is not just that the system doesn't work, but that it works in ways which should be rejected. Consumer culture focuses on appearances at the expense of inner reality, thus distorting people and making them into less-than-whole human beings. In some ways West's critique harkens back to the traditional distrust of appearances in favor of inner reality. The locus classicus of such criticism is Hamlet's rejection of "seeming":

Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not "seems."

'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good Mother,

Nor customary suits of solemn black,

Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,

No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,

Nor the dejected havior of the visage,

Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,

That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,

For they are actions that a man might play.

But I have that within which passes show;

These but the trappings and suits of woe. (1.2.76-86) For Hamlet, then, the inner reality is incommensurable with any form of representation. No one can "pluck out the heart of [his] mystery" (3.2.364-5).

West goes beyond Shakespeare however, because in *The Day of the Locust* there is no inner reality with which to oppose the superficial appearances. The charge is that consumer culture focuses on appearances so drastically that inner reality is emptied out. There is no true substance to turn to. Even Tod's ideals, or Miss Lonelyheart's, are arguably self-delusions. People are deformed, incapable of love or faith, and capable only of violence, or at best an artificial life of romantic illusion, as we see in Faye's romantic fantasies which seems to satisfy her (104-5). This is a charge which is more specific to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and typical of literary modernism, as for example in T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. To make this point, however, West gives us, for the most part, caricatures rather than realistic characters. It's not clear that modern individuals are really as bad as West makes them out to be. In any case, it's not safe to generalize. The other problem is that this criticism assumes the existence of some prior golden age when people were whole and complete, which is not a safe assumption. The prosperity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century arguably allows more freedom for love and faith.

The problem that West points to is real, but the solution is in this case would be worse than the problem, since any cure must trample on the freedom we rightly hold as our highest value. It's not at all clear that there is any alternative to consumer society that would be more hospitable to morality and beauty, not to mention personal freedom.

### **3. Conclusion**

West's critique of mass culture shares the problem of the neo-Marxist critique: they both exaggerate the problems of mass culture, and they both implicitly assume that some viable, utopian alternative exists. The only alternative to consumerism is an oppressive government that drastically limits personal freedom, telling people what they *should* desire. Girard's mimetic theory should alert us to the impossibility of regulating desire. The claim of *The Truman Show* that a free market enables a repressive regime of corporate media power is based on an unjustified distortion of media power. The products of consumer society are not always beautiful and elegant, but they effectively serve to differentiate individuals, enabling the human community to continue. Any political/economic system can be justified only as the lesser of two evils. Giving up utopian dreams is a sign of maturity that effectively forestalls the appeal of autocratic politics.

The anthropological problem posed by consumer society is, how can a society exist without an absolute sacred? In historical terms, modern society is anomalous. But the sacred has not disappeared; it has rather been integrated into the fabric of our culture, integrated so profoundly that we hardly recognize it as such. We don't have any overarching, generally accepted, public sacred, but we do have a whole host of private sacreds. Each individual creates his or her own sense of the sacred, in part through consumer products. The great advantage of this system is that it differentiates people without the need for rigid hierarchies, thus maximizing personal freedom.

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