

FILM

The Day of the Locust (1939)

Nathanael West

(1904-1940)

adaptation by Waldo Salt (1974)

ANALYSIS

The Day of the Locust is aesthetically the best novel about Hollywood in the 20th century, despite its absurd leftist portrayal of elderly Christians as dangerous revolutionaries. This adaptation is one of the best examples of how Communists have insinuated anti-American propaganda into movies since the 1930s. West was too cynical and independent to join the Communist Party, but he sympathized with the movement and shared its Atheist contempt for Christians.

Waldo Salt was a prominent Communist leader in Hollywood and he turned West's novel into a more overtly vindictive assault on Christians and on capitalist America, taking revenge against the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities for exposing him and hundreds of other Communists in the movie industry during its hearings. In both 1947 and 1951 Salt was one of the Communists who took the Fifth and refused to cooperate with Congress. The only screenwriting school in Hollywood was run exclusively by Communists. As screenwriters both West and Salt belonged to the Screenwriters Guild, which also was controlled by the Communists. The Guild newsletter was edited by the celebrated Communist Dalton Trumbo. "Waldo Salt and a number of his comrades worked in the Office of War Information, and Party scribes came to control the Hollywood Writer's Mobilization which included the Screen Writers Guild, the Radio Writers Guild, the Screen Publicists Guild, the Screen Cartoonists Guild, the Story Analysts Guild, and the Los Angeles branch of the American Newspaper Guild. The organization became a kind of clearinghouse for scripts and suppliers of materials for speeches and various troop shows." (*Hollywood Party*, Kenneth Lloyd Billingsley, 1998: 96) Robert Redford gives an annual Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award every year at his leftwing Sundance Film Festival.

Salt frames his movie with a symbolic image: The protagonist Tod Hackett moves into a shabby old apartment in Hollywood with a handbill on one cracked wall that reads "Thank you God for calamities..." The rest of the handbill is darkened by a shadow and we are only allowed a quick glimpse, barely enough to register the word *God*. Tod (German for death) takes down the handbill and replaces it with an oversized artificial red flower. Hollywood represents hyper capitalism. Communists kept predicting the collapse of capitalism, which is prefigured in this plot by the collapse of a huge movie set. In the meantime we see the decay of capitalism imaged as a cracking wall. The big red flower symbolizes (1) the artificial Romance of Hollywood embodied in the floozy Faye Greener, the aspiring bad actress Tod never succeeds in taking down. In the last scene of this movie, Tod is gone, the apartment is empty, but the artificial red flower is still hanging on the wall. Faye comes in and gazes sadly at the red flower as if she misses Tod, played by an actor with reddish hair. Since everybody referred to Communists as Reds, (2) the oversized red flower also represents the Romance of Communism that still flutters hearts in Hollywood. Salt's first screen credit was for *The Bride Wore Red*. Faye is shown once in a red dress, but Salt does not overstate the red motif. This political symbolism is for the benefit of Hollywood insiders like Robert Redford and Jane Fonda for whom it would have been obvious. Salt is not a literary writer like West. His thinking stops at the political point he wants to make. Marxists use "art as a weapon." Salt does not seem aware that his double symbol equates Communism with artificiality, a false vision, and bad acting.

West introduces Hollywood to Tod with a chaotic scene of many different movies being made at once in a phantasmagoria of conflicting dreams. Salt instead selects only Napoleon's dream of conquest defeated at Waterloo. Napoleon is the iconic imperialist and his defeat in 1815 is intended here to symbolize the ultimate fate of capitalism—the Communist dream. Throughout the 20th century Communists accused all

capitalists of imperialism while overthrowing governments, spreading revolution around the world, and murdering over 100 million people. Throughout the production of Salt's *The Day of the Locust* leftists were delighting in the Waterloo of President Richard Nixon—the scandal called “Watergate” led by the Communist reporter Carl Bernstein. To them Nixon was like Napoleon because he had led the fight against Hollywood Communists while on the House Committee. Stalin was out to conquer the world, but Nixon was out to expose Communist propagandists like Waldo Salt. Nixon was also ending the Vietnam War against Communism in defeat—another Waterloo being celebrated by the Reds. In Salt's revenge movie, not only does Napoleon lose at Waterloo, the capitalists making the movie about him suffer a Waterloo when their huge set collapses like the administration of Nixon. This implies that whatever capitalists have built—like all of western civilization—is so faulty that the whole production will collapse. Throughout this movie Tod participates in the production of *Waterloo*.

Tod with the reddish hair points out that warning signs have not been put up by the evil capitalists. His boss the Art Director Claude Estee (a screenwriter in the novel) represents all capitalists when he fails to protect his workers, cares nothing for their demise, covers up his incompetence, forbids Tod from mentioning it, and remains unaffected because his insurance will cover everything. All this is absurdly implausible at the literal level—Claude is at fault because he did not warn his workers about his incompetence. The implausibility is heightened when Claude is complacent rather than firing people as a real director would do when his whole set collapses. Claude also is supposed to represent all capitalists when he exploits women, goes to a brothel, and bets on a cockfight, yet these behaviors were common to Reds in Hollywood, as Salt well knows. Tod with the reddish hair tries to rape Faye. The Communist Party in Hollywood was rigidly patriarchal and exploited “useful idiots” of both sexes. Ring Lardner the Communist screenwriter coined the slogan, “The most beautiful women in Hollywood join the Communist Party.” In Salt's movie, virtually the only woman is the “dumb blonde.”

The cockfight is an allegory of the Communists fighting the capitalists in Hollywood. Claude the capitalist buys the red cock for sport and for possible financial gain, just as Reds were hired by studios to work in the movie industry. Communist screenwriters like Salt considered themselves labor exploited by capitalist producers. Tod buys into the cockfight. He is already in a “cock” fight with two other men over the favors of Faye that is eventually won by the Mexican cockfighter. The sexual innuendo is strong when Abe licks the beak of the red cock, associating sex with power, as demonstrated by Claude's exploitation of women. The red cock is defeated by the bigger white cock and falls limp. Abe finds that the red cock lost because his beak is split. Communists in Hollywood had split over the impending alliance between Stalin and Hitler in 1939, the same year *The Day of the Locust* was published. They also split into Trotskyites like Mary McCarthy and Stalinists like Lillian Hellman, who hated each other.

In West's novel it is possible to identify somewhat with Tod. But the Tod in this movie is a snob from Yale with two degrees who corrupts himself to advance his career and lusts after a bimbo. The actor who plays him is not appealing. There are no appealing characters in the movie at all, except perhaps for Harry Greener, the pathetic old vaudevillian now reduced to selling a “solvent” door to door in the Hollywood Hills. Burgess Meredith gives the only memorable acting performance as a comedian who has completely lost his soul and goes on clowning even while dying of a heart attack. The child actor Adore—ironically named—is a monster who runs around mocking and kicking everybody including his horrible stage mother, the probable model for Baby Igor in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) by Thomas Pynchon. In this movie Salt has the heartless Adore imitate Harry Greener, reducing the old man to a bad influence. Abe the dwarf is similarly reduced to an obscene eccentric. Tod reduces himself in being influenced by Abe, indicated when he uses Abe's term “fingeroo.” Neither West nor Salt are able to create a sympathetic character because they feel superior to common people. The same year that *Locust* was published, John Steinbeck expressed a deep love of common people in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Homer Simpson the Christian patriot, a shy retired accountant, is the only character who might have been appealing, but he is retarded and becomes a murderer. Communists consider Christians retarded. Played by an actor who looks retarded and is known for his hatred of America, Homer sings the national anthem. Hollywood enjoys perverse casting that mocks its enemies, as when the Communist Sterling Hayden was cast by Stanley Kubrick as an insane U.S. Air Force commander modeled on Senator Joseph McCarthy in *Dr. Strangelove*, and when Jane Fonda got cast as Nancy Reagan. Ironically, at one point Tod

the snob calls Homer “a bible-thumping snob.” For his part Homer calls Tod “Toddy,” an alcoholic drink. Homer is so shy he fixates on his own hands, which fumble around aimlessly but then do form the “church with a steeple”—“open the doors and out come the people.” Homer advises Faye, “If you help yourself, then God will help you find your bread and butter.” Homer calls upon Jesus for help, “Oh Jesus, oh Jesus!” But of course the Atheist screenwriter gives Homer no help from Jesus. Homer takes Harry to a faith healer modeled on the famous real evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson. Salt depicts her as a loud, crass, bullying fraud. All the believers in the large audience are portrayed as stupid fanatics. Harry looks half dead but appears to revive only because he has a chance to perform on stage again. Soon afterward he dies. According to the Atheist, this proves that Jesus is of no help. What is worse, the failure of Christianity to save Homer leads to his turning into a Satan. Adore hits him in the forehead with a rock, recalling the stoning of Christian prophets and the abuse of Jesus. Homer stomps up and down on Adore and we are inclined to cheer him on because the kid is such a monster, but now so is Homer.

The final episode is a movie premier for *The Buccaneer* (1938), produced by Cecil B. DeMille, known for producing biblical epics. The buccaneer is the pirate Jean Lafitte, who helped Americans win the War of 1812 against the British. Implicitly, DeMille is himself a capitalist pirate. Although defeating the British made possible the capitalist system in America, the eventual defeat of imperialism would be symbolized soon afterward in 1815 with the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo. Salt sees the Americans as the imperialists for defending themselves rather than the British. This is the warped historical background for Salt’s vision at the end of the movie: A huge throng mobs the entrance to the theater, which was not allowed at real premiers. These fans are so desperate to get close to movie stars they riot. These are fans of movies written by the likes of West and Salt, who depict them only as an ignorant mob--the masses. The emotional scene recalls the faith healing and suggests that these are the same people, dumb Christians whipped up into a rage of disappointment that, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, life did not turn out for them as it does in the movies. West implies that they are elderly retired Christians who have come out to California to die. His title in reference to locusts is an allusion to the plague of locusts in the Old Testament, implying that Christians are now the locusts plaguing California. If they were affluent enough to retire in California elderly Christians had no reason to be rioting from economic disappointment. They were more likely to be playing golf and lounging under beach umbrellas.

This unlikely riot is a Communist wish fulfillment. Elderly Christians who had come out to retire in California had prospered under the capitalist system. Salt is indulging the old Communist fantasy that the Christian majority in America will join his movement. The riot is his metaphor of a Communist revolution. The retarded Christians represented by Homer are provoked into rebellion. Homer becomes a mock Christ-evoking figure when he is “crucified” by the rioting mob. Salt is predicting that Christians will reject God and crucify Jesus all over again. Except that Christians did not crucify Jesus in the first place, it was a Jewish mob incited by nonbelievers like Waldo Salt. Atheists like Salt cannot believe that believers really do believe and will remain true to their faith. West and Salt both knew very well that the real threat of revolution was coming from the Communists, not from elderly Christians or shy retired accountants like Homer. Equally implausible is the hysteria of Tod. Throughout the movie he has been making sketches of people with white death mask faces and in the end he seems merely to be overwhelmed by fear of death rather than moral horror. Atheists have reason to fear death.

In the last shot of Tod he is slumped against a curb in the street after the riot. His expression gives no clue as to whether he is insane or what the riot has meant to him or whether he quits Hollywood or what. West and Salt both felt that as screenwriters working in the capitalist system of Hollywood they had sold out, making both of them hypocrites. Both of them mock characters like Faye for their materialism, yet Communism is based on “dialectical materialism.” Christians are the ones with spiritual and moral values. As an Atheist, Salt has no moral ground to stand on, merely a political position.

Four years after *The Day of the Locust* Salt wrote *Coming Home* for the Communist traitor Jane Fonda, the most anti-American propaganda movie in the history of Hollywood, full of lies, historical omissions, smears, and incitements to desertion: Captain Hyde as Capitalist America commits suicide by swimming out too far in the direction of Vietnam. In another Communist dream come true, he disarms and terminates himself, while Fonda is out shopping. “*Coming Home* expressed the dominant politics of Hollywood so well that Fonda and Salt were giving Oscars... Her movie was given a total of eight nominations, making it

one of the most honored in motion picture history.... Salt was honored in order to continue inflating the Blacklist myth and the reputations of [Reds] to justify on the basis of alleged talent Hollywood's history of supporting Communists." (*Hollyworld*, 2006: 186)

Michael Hollister (2015)