THE AMERICAN DREAM: REPRESENTATIONS IN LITERATURE AND THE HOLLYWOOD DREAM FACTORIES

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America first came into existence out of European writing and then went on to demand a new writing which fitted the continent’s novelty and strangeness: the problems of its settlement, the harshness and grandeur of its landscape, the mysterious potential of its seemingly boundless open space. But “America” existed in Europe long before it was discovered, in the speculative writings of the classical, the medieval and then the Renaissance mind. American literature began, and the American dream existed, before the actual continent was known. This place which was *terra incognita*, outside and beyond history, pregnant with new meaning for mankind, existed first as a glimmering, an image and an interpretative prospect born from the faith and fantasy of European minds. Out of the stock of classical and religious tradition, out of vague historical memories and fantastic tales, an identity had already been given to the great land mass on the world’s edge which waited to be summoned into history and made part of the divine plan. So Utopian expectations were already attached to this new land - here might be found Atlantis or Avalon, the Garden of Hesperides, the Seven Cities of Antilla, Canaan or Paradise Renewed, great cities made of gold, fountains of eternal youth. Its wonders would be extraordinary, its people strange and novel. The idea of America as an exceptional place somehow different from all others endures to this day, but it is not a myth of modern American nationalism or recent political rhetoric. It is as old as Western history itself.

The America that was opened up by exploration and discovery from the fifteenth century on was therefore a testing place for the imagining Europeans long had it. Columbus expected to find the East in the West and carried a complex vision to interpret what he found. It, in turn, confirmed some of his expectations and disproved others. Thus, there were wonders, cities of gold, pristine nature, strange civilizations, unusual savages, the stuff of Eden. There was also danger, death, disease, cruelty and starvation. Myth mixed with actuality, promise with disappointment and that process has continued too. In effect, America provoked Utopian social hopes, millenarian vision of history, new scientific inquiries, new dreams of mercantilism, profit and greed, new funds for the artistic imagination. This point of view professed itself through the literature of the continent as well - such wonders, such promises from the new golden land, entrenched it firmly in the European imagination, where it was to remain; very few travellers from Europe who afterwards crossed the Atlantic were without some sense of expectation or wonder as they encountered the strange New World.

If literature is to be a mirror of society, this concept of the American dream changed with time. Thus, Thomas More’s famed *Utopia* (1516), which drew on Amerigo Vespucci’s recorded voyages to picture an ideal future world, underwent a great change when we come to the fiction writers of the twentieth century. Success, as one of the stock ideas of the American dream, became a recurring theme and where could it be best
revealed than through the glittering, glamorous celluloid-world of make-believe? So we see an emergence of Hollywood and the mode of the film in general on the American scene. Hollywood, while representing the structure of capitalist ethos on the one hand, depicts on the other, a shift in our very conception of reality, and serves as a very suitable vehicle for expressing the romantic quest of novelists.

Hollywood has always fascinated and lured Americans. It is more than a background; it is an important cultural phenomenon, an active and influential force in the imagination and moral lives of its inhabitants. During the twenties of this century, the movies - then just in their teens - and their sunny Californian town, represented glamour, fame, success to become the last stronghold of the American Dream that had been shattered for most people in 1929. It was an exotic decade when the silent stars appeared as extravagant creatures living in a make-believe world of incredible affluence and instant gratification. Their behaviour on and off the screen made them objects of the wish-fulfilment drives of society and it was hard to tell what was fantasy and what was fact. This was the kind of world that F.Scott Fitzgerald’s earlier works like ‘This Side of Paradise’, ‘The Beautiful and Damned’ displayed. In them, both the movies and the tinsel-town are associated with the world of glamour, make-believe, illusion and fantasy-existence. It should not be assumed of course that the American Dream pursued through works of fiction during this time was devoid of its drawbacks. Works like Theodore Dreiser’s ‘An American Tragedy’ or F.Scott Fitzgerald’s ‘The Great Gatsby’ are tales of the American Dream gone wrong; both turn on figures who seek to enjoy the success American society seem to promise; both characters construct a dream with women at their emblematic centres; both these dreams lead to tragedy and death. Clyde Griffiths’s dreams take him through the contradictions of American society to the electric chair, a victim of chance and system. Fitzgerald also narrates a story of a careless, materially privileged society built on a sterile world, and through Gatsby, an extraordinary illusion. His easy corruptions are hidden in his own glow and justified by his love for Daisy and the timeless dream he hopes to fulfil with her. Gatsby floats in his “ineffable gaudiness”, on the everlasting American dream, while beneath him a confusing, surreal record of economic and social facts unravels. Two worlds of modern writing here intersect; the apocalyptic world of modern sterility and fragments and the transcendent world of the symbol where time can become a myth. The tension lasts into the famous ending where Fitzgerald re-creates the American Dream of a wondrous pastoral America, but also the world of the modern history which has displaced it.

During the thirties, the attitude towards Hollywood and the motion-picture industry underwent a general change, clearly evident from the significant body of fiction that grew out of this southern-Californian region. After the Great Depression, writers became much more critical and satirical in their attitude. In Horace McCoy’s ‘They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?’, young people are drawn to Hollywood by the hope of succeeding in the movies but fail utterly. Nathanael West’s ‘The Day of the Locust’ offers a startling satire of the perverted values of Hollywood, declaring it a ‘dream-dump’. John O’Hara’s ‘Hope of Heaven’ has as its central themes the ideas of dissolution and confused sexuality. In most of these novels, Hollywood becomes a powerful metaphor for expressing falseness and
cynicism. Budd Schulberg’s ‘What Makes Sammy Run?’ Depicts Sammy Glick’s meteoric rise to the position of a motion-picture tycoon and exposes the falseness and corruption of the motion-picture industry in the process. In most of Fitzgerald’s later work, especially in the Pat Hobby stories and ‘The Last Tycoon’, Hollywood is a glittering, unreal ‘dump’ representing the death of the great American Dream. A growing sense of futility at the loss of hope and an increasing awareness of chaos becomes marked. Paradoxically born of promise on the one hand and of disappointment and spiritual emptiness on the other, Hollywood both reflects and caricatures the myth of the American dream. Thus these writers show us both the splendour and the glitter as well as the concealed horror of things, the disenchantment behind the bright mask-like faces.

Unlike their fictional counterparts, American films do not always depict the darker side of the American dream. Speaking in a generalized tone, American films, of the Hollywood kind, with exceptions of course, is primarily a medium of entertainment, an economic venture - a business-oriented project like any other industry mainly targeted at profit-making. It resides on the opposite pole of those films made by avant-garde filmmakers, who are more interested in the filmic medium as expression of “art”. Making movies is a business project demanding calculating minds of the producers and directors to turn a profit by appealing to a large, diverse audience in search of a few hours escape from the routine tedium, wear and tear of daily life. As such, it is rare that we see a Hollywood film consciously intended as social criticism. If we take into consideration the various genres of popular Hollywood films, namely, “gangster” films, “the musicals”, “Black” experience films, the “romantic comedy” films, or even “science fiction” films, we see that however authentic their story might seem, they always avoid the direct implication of social criticism. An interesting phenomenon that should be kept in mind is that although American film is rarely an instrument of social criticism, it is a very remarkable mirror of social life: of styles, pre-occupations, fantasies and fears; of the strategies of personal relations, of family life, courtship, sex, friendship and recreation.

Let us begin with the example of the classical American genre of the “gangster film”. It is virtually ‘pure’ entertainment. Other than the typical outcome in which the bad guys are usually punished, “gangster” films show no interest in social criticism. Nonetheless, these films and their large popular reception reveal the spirit of the age. The golden years of gangster films coincide with the Depression of the 1930s: a period of enormous national anxiety; mistrust of government authority; a time when the American Dream of unlimited opportunity was shaken to its roots; an era of that impossible Puritanical project - Prohibition, which spawned a network of criminal operations and led, in turn, to the criminal as celebrity: someone who was free, prosperous and powerful. To America’s powerless masses, Hollywood’s vision of criminal life provided an extraordinary psychological outlet during those difficult years. From the classic gangster film of Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney, we see the genre evolve into dark, brooding plots like The Big Sleep and The Maltese Falcon- where pure action, violence and brutal male toughness of the early era yield to existential crises in which the hero,(Humphrey Bogart is the classic example) probes his environment trying to figure out what’s going on - who did what to whom? Why are people doing what they do? Who
can I trust? This sense of undermined reality, of brave solitary struggle in the face of corruption and cruelty - expresses American apprehension as it approached World War II. Jumping ahead to more recent times, we have *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Godfather* (1972). Presenting a new and original variation on the traditional gangster theme, thousands of young American people saw themselves in Bonnie and Clyde. The furore arose because older people termed it immoral, charging Arthur Penn for presenting amoral characters as sentimental romantics and reviewers objected that these outlaws who robbed and killed remained attractive and sympathetic. Penn was further accused of treating them as American folk legend, rather than showing them as ruthless, amoral people against society and its rules. Another variation of the theme arose when in the film *The Godfather*, Francis Ford Coppola seamlessly joined the great American dream of success to the gangster genre. With its poignant rendition of a mafia family’s struggles, its immigrant origins, its tragedies, its guiding dream, its fierce family loyalties, the film touched the same emotions, the same universal sympathies as Alex Hailey’s *Roots*. The majority of the people in America are all immigrants - and during the 1970s, with the Vietnam catastrophe, Watergate, OPEC’s sudden effect on energy supplies and financial markets - with all these humiliations and uncertainties concerning America’s power and the future course - there was an enormous sentimental upsurge of interest about family origins, roots, a personal identification with the great American Dream of rising from ‘rags to riches’ that so many American families recapitulated with varying degrees of success. Yet it is ironical that, as the Corleone family integrates itself into American life and makes its way up the socio-economic ladder, its representatives become more violent, more self-interested, less honorable, more corrupt - so that as these immigrants achieve respectability, as they become influential American citizens, they become soulless, unloving creatures, instruments of unbounded ambition.

It must be mentioned once again that since American films rarely attempt social criticism, it is up to the intelligent viewers to make critical use of what Hollywood does give them. Apart from gangster films transforming the events, anxieties and dreams of the age into melodramatic fantasy, another example of this process - what psychologists call ‘displacement’ - is when films give us extraordinary information about American life by appearing to ignore reality altogether. The best example of this is probably revealed through the ‘musicals’ and romantic ‘screwball comedies’ of the 1930s. With workers losing their jobs, factories shut down, businesses and banks failing, the gospel that the U.S. preached in the earlier decade was lost altogether. While the dark days of the Depression were reflected in the plays of Clifford Odets and others, while Steinbeck immortalized the Oakies in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the American Dream faced the most serious challenge since the Civil War, Hollywood fed its audience with films like *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Zeigfeld Follies*. Apart from getting to know about the New Deal reforms and social programs introduced by President Roosevelt to get the nation back to work, the dream factories churned out romantic comedies where the heroines were seen engaged in combative love affairs instead of in the more problematic arenas of business deals and social status. Films like Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* (1934) heralded the figure of the runaway bride: self-assured, stubborn, witty, intelligent, proud, and in an unprecedented way, pivotal to the course of the movies action and emotion. By the end of
the 30s, when the Depression was in full form, movies like *Ladies of Leisure, My Man Godfrey, Swing Time, Mr. Deeds Goes to Town, The Gay Divorcee or Flying Down to Rio* (1933) (where Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers danced together), entertained the Depression audience and responded in their own way to their loss of faith in things that had always seemed basic to their lives.

Hollywood economics exclude whole sections of American reality. If there is no money in a subject, we are not likely to see it in film. A good example of this is the Black experience - what we see and what we don’t see. Think of the Civil Rights movement in America: a great historical upheaval, full of drama, violent episodes, brave leaders and noble speeches. It is indeed great stuff for film. Yet this era has been virtually untouched by Hollywood (unless we include melodramatic potboilers like *The Sundowners* and *The Cardinal*). It seems that the struggle of Black Americans to achieve basic human rights is simply not an appealing subject for Hollywood. Yet black urban experience enjoyed a great deal of attention during the same period. The wave of Black exploitation movies like *Shaft, Superfly, Cotton Comes to Harlem*, which are characterized by a flaunting of black street style, lively urban slang, mockery of whites, fast adventures in the forbidden night world of black neighbourhoods, and by soundtracks of black soul music created a fantasy world for the Blacks to love and dream along with the heroes of these films. In other instances, charming comedies like Bill Cosby and Sidney Poitier’s *Uptown Saturday Night* and *Let’s Do It Again* brought in something healing, extremely positive in the fun and goodwill of these films but kept silent about the grave issues that confront their race: poverty, bitterness, violence, drugs, ignorance and psychic wounds. Eddie Murphy’s action-detective films and a social comedy *Trading Places* is what passes for social comedy in the film industry. The serious issues that affect women - child abuse, abortion, wife-beating, the ordeal of women living on welfare who raise their children in the midst of urban decay - these are not the kind of things Hollywood is likely to invest its money in. Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989) which portray the violence that takes place in a black neighbourhood of Brooklyn, or Steven Spielberg’s rendering of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* serve more as intimate reflections of black society per se than on any direct social criticism. Even the prize-winning film *Driving Miss Daisy*, which gives a romantic deception of the bond of understanding that develops between the aged Jewish lady and her black chauffeur avoids issues of living in a society which is still unofficially segregated from one another.

Of all the facets of life subject to the camera’s interpretation, none is more horrible and more awesome to an audience than war. The studios during the 1940’s, in trying to capture this horror, turned out more pictures on this subject than at any other time of film history. Treatments of war ranged from actual documentations of overseas conflict to light-hearted portrayals of life on the home front to studio reproductions of the heroics if land combat, aerial bombing and ocean warfare. D.W.Griffith’s monumental melodrama *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), concerning the Civil War and its tragic aftermath did not give us the entire story. Lewis Milestone’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) was a scathing condemnation of war that focused on the dreadful waste of human life. By the end of the decade however, another war was looming and Hollywood seized the historical moment. Even before the United States entered the conflict in 1941,
anti-Nazi films were being churned out by the studios. These films ranged from documentaries about the European conflict to light-hearted portrayals of life on the home front to studio reproductions of the combat. For most part, Hollywood ‘meaningful’ war films degenerated into sloppily sentimental love stories or glamorized versions of events. America’s potential to produce a truly great film about World War II was limited by the national obsession for heroics, adventure, and romance. Hollywood seemed unwilling to study the totality of actual warfare, and was thus unable to distinguish between “the real thing” and the well-meaning but overly professionalized and overly expressive imagination of it. The stereotypes in most Hollywood war films miseducated the American public, leaving viewers with a distorted concept of “the enemy” and of historical events. Germans and Japanese appeared to lack any vestiges of humanity; cruelty was depicted as a national trait. Of course, such propaganda was designed to reassure the public that the American were the “good guys” and that God was on their side. But the false, synthetic image of Germany and Japan did a great deal of damage when the postwar era arrived and the cinema vision no longer reflected reality. The problems of postwar readjustment in a radically changed world could not be solved as easily as they were in war films.

Science fiction films of the 1950’s authorise our thesis further that Hollywood films always avoid the other side of the American Dream. The fifties decade was a time when Americans were extremely anxious about Communist subversion at home and the fear of Communist expansion abroad. And with the McCarthy prosecutions it seemed that the most ordinary American fellow might, in fact, be serving evil forces abroad. Hollywood was too scared of McCarthy to even imagine making film about the issues at hand. But science fiction of those years, The Day the Earth Stood Still, Invasion of the Body Snatchers, and many others - dramatize all the fears of those times - simply by displacing the international situation to one of extra-terrestrial strife. During the 1970’s, a period often regarded as a narcissistic phase of American life - when people turned their backs on social issues to become absorbed in their own emotional and material well-being - during these years science fiction films such as Scanners and Aliens used gory special effects to show monstrosities emerging from within one’s physical self rather than from some distant galaxy. The immense popularity and the amazing financial success of the Star Wars and Indiana Jones adventure films is eloquent evidence why social criticism has so little place in American films. They are simply pure entertainment - people go to see them possessed by a great yearning for diversion, to put side unresolved and pressing matters, to relax and get away from it all. One can keep on naming such films endlessly - Close Encounters of the Third Kind, Terminator 2, Judgement Day, E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial, Star Trek and so on.

As for adventure thrillers, social criticism has the last word. Films like Jaws, The Towering Inferno, The Poseidon Adventure, Airport are as far removed from social reality as are highly successful commercial ventures like Rocky, Beverley Hills Cop, Speed or M*A*S*H. Even recent films narrating the immigrant experience resort to the melodramatic vein, offering fairy tale like conclusions. Coming back to the topic of avoidance of social reality it must be mentioned that avoidance is its own form of revelation. If the Hollywood film industry rarely gives us works that stand in critical
tension to American life - the industry **does** give us film after film that can be made to release *unintentional* content if we look “off the movie screen” to take in the historical and cultural context in which the film was made and to understand those issues which the film fantasy displaces. In doing so, we are merely acknowledging two of the essential qualities of film itself: the spirit of **fantasy** and film’s dependence upon the **real world** as seen and recorded by the camera eye. Psychologists would have us believe that our dreams are precious resources that no matter how silly, how obscene, how fantastic, or how irrelevant they appear - if we examine them with imagination, feeling and critical intelligence they will lead us to valuable insight about ourselves. I think something like this is also true of film. If we use our imagination and critical intelligence, even the most trivial products of Hollywood can be coaxed to yield up useful glimpses of America’s inner life.

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