

The Day of the Locust-1975: In Hollywood, the unholy swarming never stops.

I saw this movie, at a cinema, when it was released. I came away from it, horrified and subdued. Now, thirty-five years later, my assessment hasn't change: this is one of the most horrific stories ever to hit the screen and, in my opinion, vies with Mullholland Drive (2001) as the definitive statement about Hollywood - the Dream Factory as someone once said.

What makes this story all the more horrible is that some of the fictional characters were based upon real people. Hence, one can only speculate the extent to which some events have a basis in fact.

The story, published in 1939 from the mind of Nathanael West (ex-Hollywood screen writer), pulls no punches about the trials of Faye Greener (Karen Black, in her finest role, as a green-horn actress) to claw her way into the glitzy world of Hollywood, showing in vivid detail how would-be stars – both sexes – prostitute themselves, literally and figuratively, in their bids for stardom. In sum, the story is about how people sell themselves, and not only in the business of making movies. To that extent, it's also a modern metaphor for all the stories about how all of humanity sells itself to the devil of money everyday, in order to survive.

The difference with the rest of humanity, of course, is that we can keep our sins private.

So into this mix of horror enters naïve Tod Hackett (William Atherton) as an aspiring art director to a Hollywood mogul. He lives in the same apartment block as Faye and is smitten; but he makes no headway, because she's on the make for somebody to make her a star. So Tod – arguably West's alter ego for the story – is reduced to being an observer to all that transpires between Faye and all those she encounters. One of whom is Homer Simpson (Donald Sutherland), a mild-mannered bachelor and accountant who just likes to mind his own business; in today's psychological parlance, he'd be labeled as extreme passive-aggressive personality type. So, like Tod, he's also bowled over one day when he meets Faye through his association with Faye's father, Harry Greener (Burgess Meredith, in his finest role), a has-been vaudevillian who does old tricks as he goes about as a door-to-salesman, in the Hollywood hills, a pathetic caricature of what all actors must do to survive.

And, like the passing parade that begins the story, the viewer, with Tod, goes on to meet a succession of unsavory dead beats, in high and low society, who pull and push at poor Faye to do their bidding, all with the promise of rich dreams and dreams of riches. Faye is a lost soul, however, devoured by desires she can't stop or ignore: but she can do what it takes – she can hack it. But can Tod? Well, yes and no, as the viewer learns.

For my money, the most unsavory of all characters, and stunningly played, is the child actor Adore (Jack Earle Haley) who continually torments Homer at and near his home, and who meets Homer for the last time at a back street, off Vine, where a Hollywood

premier opening is, ironically, the last major scene in this movie. Anybody who sees this movie will forever remember that scene between Homer and Adore. Not to be forgotten also is Adore's utterly obnoxious and evil mother, played by Gloria LeRoy (I think).

But it is the transformation of Homer in that back street – infatuated with Faye and tormented by his inhibitions laid bare by a child – that is, without doubt, one of the finest pieces of acting ever. Why Donald Sutherland didn't get even a nomination is beyond belief.

(As an aside, I can't help wondering whether the developers of the long-running TV cartoon of The Simpsons used the name Homer Simpson as some kind of back-handed reference to Locust.)

The mise en scene, photography and soundtrack are exemplary. The direction by Schlesinger is so astute, it's invisible to this viewer. And the script faithfully follows the story to the last line of the novel; the only significant exception is the omission of the back story about Homer, before he came to Hollywood.

Has much changed in Hollywood since 1939? Has human nature changed? Whatever your opinion, do see also Mulholland Drive (2001), David Lynch's take on the same basic story: young girl wants to be in pictures and gets what she wants – or does she?

If Locust sucks you in, Drive will swallow you whole into an even worse nightmare. Both movies have my highest recommendation. Enjoy.

29th August, 2010

Rating: 8

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