

## CLIFFORD ODETS AND THE MOVIES

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### **ABSTRACT:**

This essay contends that Clifford Odets's film-related work carried out in many trips to Hollywood is important for a complete understanding of his career. The essay offers a new perspective on Odets, who has conventionally been seen as an artist of great promise and social commitment who was corrupted by the money on offer from the film industry and spoiled as a writer by the seemingly easy formulae of the Hollywood movies he had to write. The essay traces Odets's indebtedness to Hollywood film form through an analysis of *Golden Boy* (1937), and offers thus a way of understanding Odets's claims about the movies as a "folk theatre". Odets is seen as a conflicted artist, torn between a sense of responsibility to society and a need to be responsible to himself, and the essay offers a way of understanding Odets's final, seeming failure as an artist as an expression less of the destructive power of Hollywood and more as an expression of artistic frustration.

**KEYWORDS:** Clifford Odets; American theatre; American cinema; Hollywood; gangsters; genre.

### **RESUMEN:**

Este ensayo argumenta que el trabajo relacionado con el cine que Clifford Odets llevó a cabo en muchos viajes a Hollywood es importante para una comprensión completa de su carrera. El ensayo ofrece una nueva perspectiva sobre Odets, a quien se ha visto convencionalmente como un artista muy prometedor y de gran compromiso social, que fue corrompido por el dinero que ofrecía la industria del cine y arruinado como escritor por las fórmulas aparentemente fáciles de las películas de Hollywood que tuvo que escribir. El ensayo traza la deuda de Odets con el formato del cine de Hollywood mediante un análisis de *Golden Boy* (1937), y de este modo ofrece una manera de comprender las afirmaciones de Odets con respecto al cine como "teatro popular." Se concibe a Odets como un artista en conflicto, desgarrado entre su sentido de responsabilidad social y su necesidad de ser responsable frente a sí mismo, y el ensayo ofrece un modo de comprender el aparente fracaso final de Odets como artista como una manifestación no tanto del poder destructivo de Hollywood como de una expresión de frustración artística.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Clifford Odets, teatro americano, cine americano, Hollywood, gangsters, género literario.

## I

The final scene of Clifford Odets's *Clash By Night* (1941) is set in the projection booth of a movie theatre with a movie playing in the background. The movie is described as "a typical Hollywood 'product'" and snatches of movie dialogue and the laughter of the audience are heard throughout the scene (226). In the scene, Joe comes to confront Earl, the projectionist, a friend who has betrayed him by taking his wife and child. The two fight, with Joe eventually murdering Earl. As the killing takes place, "the movie dialogue is coming through, so stupid, so crude, so fraudulent in the face of the present reality" (239; emphasis added). The final scene of the play sets the fraudulence of the movies against the "present reality" of the murder; the movie dialogue offers an ironic commentary on the events taking place in the real world. However, the scene also realises something noted by Joe earlier in the play: there is a sense in which the murder is in part a product of this kind of fraudulence. The longest speech in *Clash by Night* has Joe make an explicit link between movie-inspired dreams and violence:

Earl, Jerry, Mae, millions like them, clinging to a goofy dream—expecting life to be a picnic. [...] Who taught them that? Radio, songs, the movies—you're the greatest people going. Paradise is just around the corner. Shake that hip, swing that foot—we're on the Millionaire Express! Don't cultivate your plot of ground—tomorrow you might win a thousand acre farm! What farm? The dream farm! [...] Am I blue? Did you ask me if I'm blue? Sure, sometimes. Because I see what happens when we wait for Paradise. Tricky Otto comes along, with a forelock and a moustache. Then he tells them why they're blue. "You been wronged," he says. "They done the dirt. Now come along with me. Take orders, park your brains, don't think, don't worry; poppa tucks you in at night!" [...] And where does that end? In violence, destruction, cripples by the cartload! (217-8)

For Joe, movies inevitably lead to violence, as is borne out in the play. The reference to "Uncle Otto" is, of course, a reference to Hitler—*Clash By Night* was written during the Second World War and Odets in the speech links Fascism with the fraudulence of popular culture, like the movies.

In some ways, Odets himself is the very best example of "murder" by Hollywood, at least of the metaphoric kind. For George Jean Nathan, Odets, when he first emerged as a major talent, "possessed an inexpugnable probity and even a boiling ardor when it came to the business of sitting himself down and writing his ideas into drama." However, Nathan continues, "then came Hollywood beckoning with its easy money and warm skies and flattering flunkies and facile veneer of grandeur," and suddenly Odets expressed "a sneering contempt for the theater and drama" so taken was he with "movie baboonery" (68). Odets's career, in this sense, may be taken as a prime example of what Richard Fine calls the "Hollywood-as-destroyer legend":

Novelists and playwrights of acute sensibility and talent, so the legend goes, were lured to Hollywood by offers of huge amounts of money and the promise of challenging assignments; once in the studios they were set to work on mundane, hackneyed scripts; they were treated without respect by the mandarins who ruled the studios; and they were subject to petty interferences by their intellectual inferiors. In the process, they were destroyed as artists. Hollywood was a loathsome and demeaning place which invariably corrupted writers. Although writers prostituted themselves by accepting Hollywood paychecks, the film industry itself was the true villain of the tale. (3)

The facts seem to bear this out—Odets's story is one of a largely unsettled writer who never realised his talent. After initial success in the theatre in New York, Odets was recruited by Paramount Pictures and went to Hollywood, where he wrote *The General Died at Dawn* (1936), for which he was paid \$27,500 (Miller 62). He also wrote an historical film, *Gettysburg*, which was never produced (Weales 113), and *The River is Blue*, later to become *Blockade* (1938), a film about the Spanish Civil War. Thereafter, Odets did not leave Hollywood for any significant period. He tried to continue writing plays while also writing movies, but found it difficult—throughout his time in Hollywood he struggled to write the play *The Silent Partner*, a play which the Group Theatre eventually refused to produce because it was unfinished (Smith 378-81). While Odets returned East in 1937 and had a great hit with *Golden Boy* (which opened in November 1937), he had little further success in New York—his plays *Rocket to the Moon* (1938) and *Night Music* (1940) failed, the failure of the latter early in 1940 leading to the dissolution of the Group Theatre. *Clash by Night* was also unsuccessful, and Odets moved back to Hollywood full-time in 1943. Back in Hollywood, he worked on a number of film projects, amongst them *Sister Carrie*; *Rhapsody in Blue*; *The Greatest Gift*—later to become *It's A Wonderful Life*; *All Brides are Beautiful*; *Sister Kenny*; *Notorious*; *The Whispering Cup*; *April Shower*; and *The Children's Story*. Most of the films he worked on were unproduced (Miller 145). He also wrote and directed *None But the Lonely Heart* (1944), and wrote the screenplays for *Deadline at Dawn* (which was directed by Harold Clurman of the Group Theatre in 1946) and *Humoresque* (directed by Jean Negulesco, also 1946). Odets again returned to New York in 1948. On his return he promised great things—"twenty-five or thirty plays before I'm done" (qtd. Peck X1). The three plays he actually managed to write were *The Big Knife* (1949), *The Country Girl* (1950), with which he had some popular success, and *The Flowering Peach* (1954). Odets returned to work in Hollywood, where he co-wrote *The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957), *The Story on Page One* (1959), a film he also directed, and a vehicle for Elvis Presley, *Wild in the Country* (1961), as well as contributing—mostly uncredited—to a number of other screenplays, including *High Rendevous*, *Joseph and His Brethren*, *The Way West* and *Walk on the Wild Side*. Late in life, Odets began to work for television, a medium he hoped would "hone me sharp, be something that pulls me out of my sloth, that lays down

gleaming tracks for my future more serious work” (qtd. Brenman-Gibson 4-5). Only two of his scripts for television were ever produced, however, and Odets died in Hollywood in 1963.

Odets recalled in 1948 how he went to Hollywood, determined to use the industry for his own ends.

I went to Hollywood and found much of interest there. [...] The cinema medium itself, as the platitude goes, is a very great one: why not explore its possibilities? Why not mingle with and learn from some of the world’s shrewdest theatre technicians, including writers? (“On Coming Home” 1)

John Schultheiss places Odets within the coterie of “Eastern” writers who went to Hollywood in the 1930s, many of whom were recruited to write the dialogue necessitated by the move from silent to sound films. By the mid-1930s, “Hollywood was gorged with famous dramatists, novelists, critics,” Odets amongst them (Schultheiss 17). Schultheiss adds, however, that, “somehow, Odets had a deeper, distinctive maturity which separated him from other writers who got side-tracked” (37). The idea that Odets was “side-tracked” by working in the movies implies that his work in Hollywood was incidental to his development as a writer. This gives Odets little credit; his engagement with the movies was more complex than this, in two main respects, both of which will be treated in this essay. First of all, for Odets, the movies reached an audience that the theatre did not reach, and he treated it seriously for this reason—at the very least it opened up to him audiences that simply were not accessible through working for the stage. And secondly, Odets saw also in Hollywood a technical accomplishment that he did not see on Broadway. He frequently praises the craftsmen of Hollywood films. Hollywood taught him many technical lessons, not least how to overcome his difficulties in constructing plots. In particular, it did so through the formula film or the genre film, and *Golden Boy*—a dramatisation, in one reading, of Odets’s own struggles, for it tells the story of a talented artist who betrays his talent for money—borrows heavily from the genre of the gangster film. There are ways, then, in which one can map a continuity between Odets’s work on the stage and his work on the screen, and in this context his work in Hollywood is not negligible in any consideration of his career. It is far too simple, in other words, to dismiss his Hollywood sojourns as simply money-grabbing exercises that led to his artistic destruction.

## II

Some proof of the seriousness with which Odets engaged with the movies is visible in the ways in which *Golden Boy* clearly borrows from film technique. The play was Odets’s first produced play after his 1936 trip to Hollywood, and it displays the influence of film first of all in the number and variety of scenes. According to

Susan Sontag, one of the features that distinguishes the cinema from the theatre is that, in the cinema, space is discontinuous; in the theatre, space is bound more continuously (367). The discontinuity of cinematic space realises itself in the variety of scenes in which films take place—very rarely do films confine themselves, as plays frequently do, to one or two settings. From the 1920s, more radical theatre practitioners began to see the discontinuity of cinematic space as offering attractive possibilities for the stage. The influential theorist and theatre director Kenneth MacGowan, one time collaborator with Eugene O’Neill, suggested in *The Theatre of Tomorrow* (1921) that “the facilities of the screen will aid the [theatre] artist” because “the artist of the photoplay has thirty, fifty, eighty scenes of different compositions to create, compared to the three or four of a play” (181). He suggests that “the poetry of action” is facilitated by multiple scenes and setups (182). Odets embraces this idea in *Golden Boy*. While in *Awake and Sing!* and *Paradise Lost* (both 1935), the two long plays written by Odets before he went to Hollywood, the action is confined to one scene—the Berger home in the former, the Gordon home in the latter—in *Golden Boy* the action moves from setting to setting. The five scenes in Act One of the play, for instance, see the action move from Tom Moody’s office (scene 1) to the Bonaparte home (scene 2), back to the office (scene 3), to a park bench (scene 4), and finally back to the Bonaparte home (scene 5). Later, the action moves to a gymnasium and to the dressing room of the boxing arena. Gabriel Miller sees the use of multiple scenes by Odets as paralleling the theme of the play when he suggests that, in the play, “the proscenium, emphasised in earlier plays, seems to disappear here, along with any suggestion of permanent walls” and that “this liberation of setting heightens the audience’s sense of exhilaration in Joe’s journey of discovery” (66). If the proscenium disappears in the play, it is replaced by something more filmic.

*Golden Boy* displays filmic influence also in the transitions between scenes. Odets uses fadeouts (with which each scene ends) in the way that a film editor would, drawing on the flexibility the film medium has when it comes to the representation of space and time. In *Golden Boy*, the transitions between scenes compress time—as Bordwell and Thompson note in *Film Art*, “editing can create a temporal ellipsis” in a film, which involves “story” time passing more quickly than real time, with “cuts, fades, dissolves, and wipes [...] crucial in eliding such time” (162). Odets also varies the pace of his fadeouts to vary the length of time the audience is to imagine passing. At the end of I.i, Odets specifies a “*Quick Fadeout*”. The next scene happens later in that same night, and the quick fadeout is used to establish the passing of a few hours. I.ii, in contrast, ends with a “*Slow Fadeout*”. The next scene takes place two months later—the slow pace of the fadeout therefore indicates the passing of a longer period of time. The same happens in the transition between I.iii and I.iv, where a slow fadeout is used to indicate the passing of a number of nights. The pace in *Golden Boy* may be mapped by way of the relative speed of the fadeouts between the scenes. The first fadeout in the play is identified as “*quick*,”

but thereafter most of the fadeouts are described as “*slow*”. In Act III, however, the fadeouts speed up slightly: the fadeouts between III.i and III.ii and between III.ii and III.iii are both described as “*medium*”. There is, therefore, a speeding up of the action of the play indicated by the pace of the fadeouts. This speeding up of the action is paralleled by a shortening of both the acts and the scenes: the first act has five scenes; the second act has four and is approximately one hundred and fifty lines shorter; the third act has three scenes and is about half the length of the first act. Bordwell and Thompson note that “the lengths of the successive shots [in a film] contribute considerably to what we intuitively recognize as a film’s tempo” (*Film Art* 158). The wait for the audience between scenes in *Golden Boy* gets progressively shorter, then, and the scenes themselves get shorter as the death of the hero, Joe Bonaparte, gets nearer. Joe Bonaparte dies in a car crash at the end of the play, and, notably, he dies celebrating speed. He says in his last speech:

When you mow down the night with headlights, nobody gets you! You’re on top of the world then—nobody laughs! That’s it—speed! We’re off the earth—unconnected! We don’t have to think! That’s what speed’s for, an easy way to live! (316)

The rhythm of the play established by the fadeouts and the length and number of scenes therefore supports the play’s main action.

Clurman’s *The Fervent Years* records the difficulties Odets had in finishing plays: he was still writing the third act of *Paradise Lost*, according to Clurman, three weeks into rehearsals, while the third act of *Rocket to the Moon* did not arrive until ten days before the play was due to open (165, 234). Wendy Smith notes that “Third acts were a chronic problem for Odets, who once said, ‘Show me a playwright with third-act trouble and I’ll show you a man who cannot make a commitment’” (342). Hollywood offered Odets formal solutions to his “third-act trouble”. In 1936, Odets argued that writers “have a better conception of story structure here [in Hollywood] than on the stage,” and he suggests that “every playwright should come to Hollywood at least once and learn this technique of story telling” (“Mr Odets is Acclimated” 4). Odets is not only speaking about narrative in his remarks here. Rather, Odets is suggesting that Hollywood offers ready-made forms to the writer through which the writer’s own stories can be told. His suggestion is that Hollywood provides generic templates to the serious writer who can take these structures and adapt them to his own ends.

This may account for the striking resemblances between *Golden Boy* and the classic 1930s gangster film. Odets himself described the play as “a craftily engineered melodrama” (qtd. Brenman-Gibson 466), suggesting an indebtedness to the workmanship of Hollywood, where most of the play was written—and indeed some critics described the play as resembling “a melodramatic motion picture” (qtd. Brenman-Gibson 485). There is no doubt that Odets drew on elements in the Hollywood gangster genre to construct the play. Edward Buscombe suggests ap-

proaching film genre in literary terms, in terms of “outer” and “inner” forms. Taking as his example the Western, Buscombe suggests that “outer” forms include the film’s setting, the kinds of clothes the characters wear, the fact that they use a certain kind of weaponry, the appearance of horses, trains, general stores, wagons and so on. “All these things operate as formal elements,” Buscombe says, “That is to say, the films are not ‘about’ them any more than a sonnet is about fourteen lines in a certain meter” (15). Following Buscombe, a number of “outer” forms or conventions to the gangster film may be identified, conventions that “provide a framework within which the story can be told” (15). These conventions are listed by John Gabree, and many of these “outer” forms are visible in *Golden Boy*. Gabree points out, for instance, that clothes “are a mark of social standing [in the gangster film], and the rising gangster uses them to show off” (17): by the third act of *Golden Boy*, Joe’s success has “*changed his clothing to silk shirts and custom-made suits*” (304). Also, “the automobile,” Gabree notes, “like clothes, is a way the rising mobster demonstrates his success” (17). Joe, in *Golden Boy*, has an obsession with cars: he indicates to Lorna in the first act that he wants to buy a car like Gary Cooper’s (266). (Gary Cooper played O’Hara in *The General Died at Dawn*, the film Odets wrote before returning to the theatre with *Golden Boy*.) For obvious reasons, guns are also important in gangster films. The gun is “the image of his unbridled power” for the gangster, and “his instrument of self-expression, his way of controlling people and events and of making his dreams come true” (Gabree 18). “You use me like a gun!” Joe Bonaparte yells at Eddie Fuseli at one point in the play, “Your loyalty’s to keep me oiled and polished!” (309). Fuseli is associated with guns from early on—he kept the gun he was given while in the army—and Fuseli draws a gun on Lorna in III.ii (311). Gabree notes that classic gangster films are always set in the city which “serves as both the actual background for the gangster and as a symbol of the desolation that produced him and extension of his brutality” (20). For Robert Warshow, likewise, “The gangster is the man of the city, with the city’s language and knowledge, with its queer and dishonest skills and its terrible daring, carrying his life in his hands like a placard, like a club” (“Gangster as Tragic Hero” 131). *Golden Boy* is clearly set in the city. The only non-urban environment in the play is the park where Lorna and Joe chat privately in I.iv and II.ii., but even here “*Cars ride by in front of the boy and girl in the late spring night. Out of sight a traffic light changes from red to green and back again throughout the scene and casts its colors on the faces of the boy and girl*” (262). When, at the end of the play, Lorna comes to wish for an alternative life, she does not imagine a new, more rural life. “Somewhere there must be happy boys and girls who can teach us the way of life!” she says, “We’ll find some city where poverty’s no shame—where music is no crime!—where there’s no war in the streets—where a man is glad to be himself, to live and make his woman herself!” (316). Gabree further argues that “the gangster’s oversized ambition and aggressiveness, including his preoccupation with his gun, seem to be the result of confused sexuality. At the least, sexual deviations crop up

in most gangster films” (22). At one point in *Golden Boy*, Lorna hints that she will sleep with Joe in order to persuade him to do what Tom Moody wants (261-2). Lorna is like the gangster’s “moll” in the classic gangster movies, and Eddie Fuseli describes her in less than complimentary terms: he calls her a “nickel whore” (311). In addition, one can draw attention to some other resemblances between *Golden Boy* and classic gangster films. The name Joe Bonaparte, for instance, recalls—in its reference to power and empire—Rico “Little Caesar” in *Little Caesar* (1930). And the ethnic backgrounds of the characters are the same in the play as in classic gangster films—many of which were set within the Italian community. Fuseli makes much of his ethnicity: “I’m Eytalian too—Eytalian born but an American citizen” (278).

It is interesting to note that the deaths in *Golden Boy*—indeed, all the violence, including the boxing matches—happen off-stage. Writing of film genres, Thomas Schatz argues that “the genre exists as a sort of tacit ‘contract’ between filmmakers and audience,” and a “genre film is an actual event that honors such a contract” (642). One may suggest that the audience’s set of contractual expectations allows it to imagine more powerfully the violent incidents described but not shown in *Golden Boy* because it has seen them before in countless gangster movies and can, as it were, project what happens onto the empty stage. The fact that audiences will have seen James Cagney smash a grapefruit into the face of Mae Clark in *The Public Enemy* (1931) and die twice (once following his reformation) in the same film; or Edward G. Robinson as the title character dying in a hail of bullets (uttering, “Is this the end of Rico?”) in *Little Caesar*; or Paul Muni massacre his foes in *Scarface* (1931)—that these films and the myriad others that made up the genre in the early 1930s informed the cultural imagination allowed Odets to take certain short-cuts in depicting violence in his plays, or not depicting it, as is the case with *Golden Boy*.

### III

The concept of genre provides also a useful way of thinking about Odets’s notion of the movies as “folk theatre,” an idea he unveiled in a short article for the *New York Times* in 1937 called “‘Democratic Vistas’ in Drama”. Odets opens the article by quoting Whitman’s “Democratic Vistas.” For Whitman, Odets says, “among writers and talented speakers, few or none have yet really spoken to this [American] people, created a single image-making work for them, or absorbed the central spirit and the idiosyncrasies which are theirs—and which, thus, in the highest ranges, so far remain entirely uncelebrated and unexpressed.” Odets goes on, in this context, to talk about the movies. “Let us, for once, give the movies some credit,” he says. “They have spoken to this people. The movies have explored the common man in all his manifestations. [...] The movies are now the folk theatre of America.” Odets acknowledges the movies’ success and suggests that the theatre can follow. It is

time, he says, that the American playwright “began to take the gallery of American types, the assortment of fine vital themes away from the movies.” He concludes that “Great audiences are waiting now to have their own experiences explained and interpreted for them. Walt Whitman’s plea is still unrealized” (1).

Though dismissive at times of the play, Odets said in 1966 of *Golden Boy*, “There’s something written into it—a quality of American folk legend—that I really had nothing to do with. It was a much better play than I thought it was” (“How a Playwright Triumphs” 88). Odets suggests here that the play is an example of “folk theatre.” It is perhaps in the manner in which the play draws on the “outer forms” of the gangster film that the play resembles “folk theatre.” Central to the relationship between audience and genre film is a sense of familiarity: a genre film involves “familiar characters performing familiar actions which celebrate familiar values” (Schatz 646). This sense in which a genre film enacts the familiar prompts some critics to think of a genre film as a kind of ritual in which the audience is involved. As Ira Konigsberg suggests, “Genre films often evoke some aspect of our cultural heritage by presenting mythic patterns of character and action endemic to our country’s history, patterns that embody the nation’s moral values and moral conflicts” (164).

When Odets talks about the movies as “folk theatre,” then, he means that the movies can be seen, in certain instances, to relate to their audience in this ritualistic way. It is this ritualistic relationship between art-work and audience that Odets tries to borrow from Hollywood genres. Thomas Schatz writes: “In its animation of basic cultural conflicts, the genre film celebrates our collective sensibilities, providing an array of ideological strategies for negotiating social conflicts” (650). In Robert Warshow’s reading, the Western, for instance, is a means by which a community examines violence and the place of violence in culture. Of the gangster film, Warshow writes:

The gangster movie, with its numerous variations, belongs to [the] cultural “underground” which sets forth the attractions of violence in the face of all our higher social attitudes. [...] [The gangster film] is anti-social, resting on fantasies of irresponsible freedom. If we are brought finally to acquiesce in the denial of these fantasies, it is only because they have been shown to be dangerous, not because they have given way to a better vision of behaviour. (“Movie Chronicle” 152)

Within this analysis of the gangster film lurks a dilemma, the dilemma for the artist associated with the notion of “irresponsible freedom”; it is this that makes *Golden Boy* a clear commentary on Odets’s own struggles and frustrations as an artist, and not simply in its story of a talented artist “selling out” for money and fame. The gangster seeks to express his individuality but is reined in by society. In the end he is destroyed. Odets likewise sought at once freedom—personal as well as artistic—and felt the imprisonment of responsibility, just like Joe Bonaparte in

the play feels the tug both of responsibility to his talent and freedom to do as he pleases. Odets too felt drawn repeatedly to his own responsibilities to serve his country, his friends—particularly Harold Clurman—and the ideals of the Group Theatre. “I have a role to play in America today,” writes Odets in his 1940 journal, “I am irresponsible in relation to it. It is possible for me to flood the country with fresh progressive ideas, ideas to lead the people to a richer and fuller life.” He urges himself on: “You are strong, as healthy as a pig! To work, pig, to work! Blow the clover out of your nose! To work!” (“*The Time is Ripe*” 172). But while he was compelled to fulfil this role, he also was compelled to act against its demands. It is interesting in this regard that he came to think of his submission to Hollywood as a kind of sin—Harold Clurman’s recollections of Odets’s decision to go to Hollywood uses the term.

One evening when I was discussing some now forgotten subject with Stella Adler, she sailed into the conversation with the astonishing reflection: “I feel that I need to sin, and you make me feel I have no right to.” Odets, pacing about the room to his own rhythm, stopped suddenly, turned, and fairly shouted: “She’s right! She’s right!” I looked up and found a faint smile on his face and an accusing finger pointed at mine. For Odets at this time Hollywood was Sin. (170)

Odets’s decision to go to Hollywood and to write movies was a sin, one he freely committed—thus, Odets was “the revolutionary playwright who quit making revolutions, the promising playwright who never kept his promises” (Weales 14).

#### IV

The idea of a folk theatre contains also a version of this dilemma—between submission to form and the individual artistic consciousness and will. “The rock-bottom trouble with the movies,” Odets says in his journal, “is their ideal of complete ACCESSIBILITY” (“*The Time is Ripe*” 287). The accessibility of the movies has in part to do with the technical expertise of the craftsman constructing them. He describes his experience of reading the screenplay to *It Happened One Night* in “*The Time is Ripe*”:

A series of small beads of scenes, all good-natured, simple, and “human” (American human), is strung on a long line of plot. Each scene serves the purpose of advancing the story and winning the audience. Never of deepening or enriching the characters. [...] YOU CAN ONLY THINK & FEEL THE WAY THE WRITER WANTS YOU TO. In short, you are shrewdly manipulated every second the picture is in play. Nothing to lead you astray, in other words. You are on a railroad track, the wheels rolling, and never once does the train derail or stop: from terminal to terminal with not so much as a blocked signal in the way. (266)

Odets describes well here the continuity of the classical Hollywood film: “Each scene should make a definite impression, accomplish one thing, and advance the narrative a step nearer the climax,” one screenwriting manual put it (qtd. Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, 17). Elsewhere in “*The Time is Ripe*,” Odets suggests that one of the problems he has in writing is finding a form and then “adjusting that form so that it is acceptable to a typical American audience—that is, a completely enjoyable and understandable play from start to finish” (58). Such forms Hollywood offered him. While in the comments above Odets clearly rejects the primary colours of Hollywood’s forms, he realised “that however corny the images of beauty and contentment circulated by popular culture, they at least provide a language through which the inarticulate can express their desires” (Willett 74).

Brenham-Gibson quotes some of Odets’s remarks about Beethoven are illuminating at this point:

Bach was willing to serve the forms of his time. But Beethoven *began to make the forms serve him*. A fugue was no longer something to fill with content. Now, with him the fugue was shaped, pounded into serving his purpose in relation to a bigger thing—to the expression of his own individuality. (qtd. Brenman-Gibson; emphasis added 171)

Odets goes on to call Beethoven “the first of the destroyers”—someone who opened “the first gates of an evolution towards the spiritual destruction that faces the world today”—because he was “the first great individualist in art”. He was a “destroyer of music,” Odets says, because composers after him “were no longer integrated with a social body”: because Beethoven had transcended the established forms, composers after him got “too far away from the roots and the nourishing earth of social form and life.” It is important for an artist to accept a form, Odets suggests, because “acceptance of a social form does something else, informs the artist’s work with a feeling of life and love, gives him a sense of building up.” Odets goes on:

Today we are locked in a death grip with our individualities and coming back to a social thing again. Call it Communism, call it Group Theatre, call it the life of farms, but artists are coming back to the truth of root things, fundamentals again. [...] Russia has helped many of us see with clearer eyes. Today we can do one of two things—go the way of the social trend—the communal way—or be dead in life while we feebly sing the ego and pains of living with neurotic insistence on the fact that the world is doomed to death. (qtd. Brenman-Gibson 171-2)

Odets suggests a number of things here. Of greatest importance is the suggestion that there are two ways for an artist to proceed: “the communal way” and the “individualist” way. It is essential, Odets argues, to pursue the communal path, because otherwise the artist will be “dead in life,” expressing nothing other than

personal neuroses—“Any time you find an expression purely an individual one you may be sure that quick death is not far behind,” he says. To take this communal way, however, requires writing in what Odets calls “social form”—forms of art that in some way link the individual artist with the larger community. Hollywood provided Odets with these “social forms”—that is, forms that reached and influenced a mass audience. At the same time as Odets outlines the necessity of finding a “social form,” however, he also cannot disguise his enthusiasm for Beethoven, whom he argues was the first “destroyer” of social form and therefore the one who began the disintegration in social form evident today. Beethoven re-made art to express his own individuality rather than allow his individuality be re-made to fit social form. Beethoven, then, was not a prisoner of social form at all. Odets in these paragraphs is unsure whether to identify himself with Bach or Beethoven. He is unsure, in other words, whether to identify himself as someone who “serves the forms of his time” or someone who is a “great individualist in art”. Odets’s movement between the worlds of cinema and theatre can best be seen in this light.

Odets plays out the dilemma between wanting to be “a great individualist” and adhering to “social forms” through a consideration of success in *Golden Boy*, and later in *The Big Knife*, both plays written—significantly—“on coming home” from Hollywood. In both plays, the tension in the individual is between pursuing some inner truth or seeking success. In *Golden Boy*, Joe Bonaparte, a wonderful violin player, rejects music for boxing: while he says “My nature isn’t fighting,” he becomes a boxer, urged on by Siggie, who says “My god is success” (264, 270). In the end, Joe dies, crashing deliberately in the car that is a symbol of his (material) success. In *The Big Knife*, a famous actor, once the “Van Gogh of the American theatre,” has become “common trash,” “coarsened down” because of his time in Hollywood. His wife, Marion, accuses him: “You’ve taken the cheap way out—your passion of the heart has become passion of the appetites” (223). In the end, Charlie—overcome with self-revulsion—commits suicide. Odets himself shared the affliction of both Charlie Castle and Joe Bonaparte: his sense of artistic responsibility compelled him to write for a mass audience; his experience of writing for the mass audience, in the forms that mass audience would engage with (the movies), compelled him to retreat to the theatre and necessarily lose that audience. The violent suicides of Joe Bonaparte and Charlie Castle suggest that, for Odets, the dilemma could never be resolved. His own restlessness, his failure to commit either to Hollywood or Broadway, is also a symptom of the same lack of resolution. His artistic exhaustion and the unfulfilled promise of his career may not be the expression of the destructive force of Hollywood but more an expression of the frustrations that an artist, seeking at once to write for himself and his community, comes to feel.

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