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# Myth-making and Uchronia: The Advent of a Fascist America in Nathanael West's *A Cool Million* (1934)

*Mythopoétique et uchronie : l'avènement d'une Amérique fasciste dans A Cool Million (1934) de Nathanael West*

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« I have no particular message for a troubled world  
(except possibly "beware")<sup>1</sup>. »

## 1. Introduction

Nathanael West (1903-1940) has held a unique place among American novelists. In the wake of the publication of *The Complete Works of Nathanael West* in 1957<sup>2</sup>, literary critics and scholars hailed him as the precursor of black humor, as the prophet of the Jewish American novel of the 1950s, while others considered him the critic of consumerism and mass culture, and the master of the comic-apocalyptic tone<sup>3</sup>. Notwithstanding the posthumous reappraisal of his work, most reference books still dismiss West as a minor writer.

Yet, West's insightful and visionary narratives reveal his real significance in the context of 1930s America and beyond. West rejected both naturalism and social realism as being unfit to represent the « idiomatic » violence of American society<sup>4</sup>. For him, the American novelist needed to adapt his art of writing and find appropriate ways to handle the ever-increasing, violent pace of reality. In the « Introduction<sup>5</sup> » to the 1946 French edition of

*Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) – West's second novel –, French Surrealist Philippe Soupault acknowledged West's particular take on contemporariness, describing him as « *un voyant* », a witness of his time. The apocalyptic description of Hollywood and Los Angeles on fire in *The Day of the Locust* (1939) remains his enduring artistic legacy.

When Nathanael West published *A Cool Million* in 1934, the Depression was at its height. In this fable, he imagined the coming to power of fascism in America as both originating in and resulting from the phoniness of the American Dream. The novel tells the story of young Lemuel Pitkin's thwarted rise to success and of fictional ex-President Nathan « Shagpoke » Whipple's victorious fascist revolution in Depression-era America. The novel has been largely viewed as a parody of the « Rags to Riches » myth, but critics have treated West's parody of the American myth and the satire on American fascism separately<sup>6</sup>. In this paper, my contention is that there is an organic relation between the two: Nathan Whipple's fascist ideology and stereotype-ridden discourse of self-making argues in favor of ultra-nationalist measures to defend and redeem the original myth, thus positing a natural and self-evident kinship between native fascism and the American Dream. Indeed, for Whipple, the anti-American conspiracy of Jews and Communists is responsible for the defectiveness of the myth. In the course of the story, Lemuel Pitkin gradually loses parts of his body while Whipple collects fragments of nationalist grievances, legitimates fascism, and – as Lemuel Pitkin gets fixed along the way – eventually fixes the defective myth. I show how West mocks the self-proclaimed dictator's rhetoric of myth-making which transforms innocent Lemuel Pitkin – « the bad joke of a clichéd vaudeville act<sup>7</sup> » – into the martyr-hero of a nascent fascist America, presented as an alternate history.

## 2. Nathanael West: the Myth-Buster

Nathanael West was as much a myth-buster as Horatio Alger was a myth-maker. Unlike Alger who conjured up old-fashioned morals in a context of ruthless, unbridled capitalism, West showcased washed-out myths and cheap fallacies in a Depression-era America. Alger felt a sincere nostalgia for « an idealized antebellum world of mercantile capitalism that is imagined as organic, ordered, stable<sup>8</sup> », whereas West cynically looked at the cultural inheritance and the exploitative nature of American myths left up for grabs. For him, the gullible adhesion to the myth of individual success through honest effort could only end up in disappointment and disillusionment.

Though written in 1934, *A Cool Million* does not reflect the massive class struggle of the time, and does not advocate the need for social programs to remedy a dysfunctional economy.

Many Americans of the thirties envisaged fascism as a tempting fantasy through which the American Dream would blossom again, bringing order back in the land and the antique faith in its symbol. For West, the Horatio Alger myth had become an exploitative system of stereotypes, invading the spheres of language, pollinating popular imagination, and transforming the readers into consumers totally enslaved within a fascist system of ready-made myths. Lampooning the ideals of success was thus merely a stepping-stone to a broader criticism of the American society of the thirties at large in which West saw connections between fascism and mass entertainment<sup>9</sup>.

Under the guise of an anti-success story, West's cynical message to the world is that the American Dream has become an empty sign<sup>10</sup>, a failure that any homegrown dictator

might reverse to his own benefit, somehow bringing American society to a point of bifurcation that would change the face of the present. West's uchronic tale jumps on the demagogic bandwagon of depression-born proto-fascism, and his « comedy of reversal<sup>11</sup> » also reads like a parody of reversion: « [in] a time which critically threatened their traditions, Americans were more likely to revert to antique ideals than to overthrow them<sup>12</sup> ».

## 2a. *A Cool Million* as Alternate History

*A Cool Million* should therefore be considered as an alternate history of sorts, illustrated by its two main characters' peculiar trajectory. On the one hand, Lemuel Pitkin does not stand for the anti-Horatio Alger myth of success, but rather for an alternate version of it. Pitkin's story challenges the norms established by the rags-to-riches myth, eventually questioning the nature of history and causality: « the alternate history rewrites history and reality, thus transforming the world and our understanding of reality<sup>13</sup> ». On the other hand, Nathan Whipple's second rise to power after his first presidency reads like an alternate political success story, fueled by Lemuel Pitkin's exemplary punishment, giving further legitimacy to Whipple's native fascist Party which, in turn, uses Pitkin's martyrdom as the official grammar for a new myth of the Resurrection<sup>14</sup>: « Why is Lemuel Pitkin great? Why does the martyr move in triumph and the nation rise up at every stage of his coming? [...] Because, although dead, yet he speaks<sup>15</sup> ».

As alternate history, *A Cool Million* makes its readers « rethink their world<sup>16</sup> ». It also makes them call into question the myths and dreams that compose it and which often mask a more nightmarish reality. West combined critical commentary with a fiction writing. As genre, the alternate history – also termed uchronia – « alters historical reality and posits a new reality based on the historical alteration<sup>17</sup> ». What makes a good alternate history is the probability of what is happening. The credibility of such an alternate scenario legitimates the unfolding of the events and frames them in a logical bind. Woven into the story of *A Cool Million* is the symbolic probability that the elusive American Dream might become an unescapable fascist nightmare.

A number of counterfactual narratives had already been published by the time West began the book. They were usually called counterfactual histories because they were written by historians concerned mainly with historiography. They would raise questions that addressed the making of history, and the role played by the reader in (re)constructing the meaning of historical facts<sup>18</sup>. Such issues would also bring some novelists to take an interest in exploring the way history wrote itself, as well as the agents involved in its creation process. They would also consider how fantasies could control popular imagination so much as to envisage the possibility of new directions bound to alterations in the chain of events. Even if West had no such historiographic pretensions, nevertheless he recorded the signs of his time and transcribed them in dark comedy. He would repeat or write to his friend that he was just an observer pointing to an already existing bitter reality:

I'm like the guy who stands on the outside and observes. I like to observe. It really makes little difference to me. I want to interpret, I want to understand. I'm not going to be able to change the course of anything, I just want to know<sup>19</sup>.

Authors of counterfactual histories usually start from a pivotal historical event. Critic Éric B. Henriot<sup>20</sup> listed a number of recurring themes developed by the uchronists

worldwide. According to Henriot, one-third of all uchronias written in the second half of the 20th century takes the outcome of the Second World War as their point of divergence. The works involving an American setting select the period of the American Revolution up to the Civil War, or the modern period marked by such events as John Fitzgerald Kennedy's assassination, the Cuban missile crisis and the Cold War, as their subject matter.

In American literature, alternate histories seem to rise in popularity in times of cultural and political unrest. The early 1930s has offered a series of points of divergence to some modern uchronias (for example Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* in 1962 or Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* in 2004). If authors of uchronia usually take a date of divergence from which they write the alternate history, in *A Cool Million*, no such date is ever precisely alluded to, though the indirect reference to the Depression added to Whipple's desire to run against the incumbent Democratic President might suggest that West is referring to the future presidential elections of 1936. This was also the date chosen by Sinclair Lewis for *It Can't Happen Here*, published a year after West's novel. Lewis's alternate history takes the upcoming presidential election of 1936 as the pivotal event marking the beginning of a dictatorship. Both novels are descriptions of a fascist America, though different in tone and aesthetics; while Lewis's lengthy novel follows more in the traditions of social and political satire, West's novella draws from the slapstick and grotesque traditions. West concentrated on the explosive reasons leading up to the breaking point, what Karen Hellekson calls the « nexus event », the crucial point in history « in which something different happens that changes the outcome<sup>21</sup> » with no possible return to normalcy. The narrative of *A Cool Million* is thus comprised of several minor nexus events (the episode of the foreclosure of Lemuel Pitkin's family house, the meeting with mentor Nathan Whipple, the creation of Whipple's revolutionary party), all leading to the major nexus event that caused the revolution to escalate – Lemuel Pitkin's assassination.

*A Cool Million* presents both serious and trivial matters in the same farcical tone, undermining the credibility of what is actually narrated. Eventually, cultural facts and fictional outgrowths have coalesced and created a nascent alternate reality in which the dying American Dream has been resurrected only to become the founding myth of a fascist regime.

*A Cool Million* raises questions about the real issues of fascism in America and the timeliness of the radical changes it would bring about during times of crisis. The early stage of the Depression was indeed an era of racist discourse of pure blood and of nativist resurgence. The collapse of the banks, which were once the indestructible bastion of triumphant capitalism, initiated a chain of events that gradually undermined the people's faith in the validity of the American way of life. The crash and the ensuing Depression strengthened anti-capitalist movements in early 1930s' America. Discontent and frustration gave rise to a desire for some authoritarian government that would rescue the economy.

## 2b. Lemuel Pitkin as Mythological Apparatus

The collapse of the economy also triggered a devaluation of old models and myths. It would take more than one Horatio Alger's success story to escape from the hard times of the Depression. The American Dream has become a linguistic sign emptied out of its

glamorous ethos. Lemuel Pitkin is a follower whose self-confidence is fragile and fueled only by the motivating patriotic aphorisms that his ideological master delivers all along:

It is needless to say that the words of the ex-President encouraged our young hero just as similar ones have heartened the youth of this country ever since it was freed from the irksome British yoke. He vowed then and there to go and do as Rockefeller and Ford had done<sup>22</sup>.

Though Lemuel Pitkin's story is a reversed success story, Nathan Whipple manages to turn it into the greatest American story. The young man's name has acquired performative function similar to a speech act. Literally and symbolically dismantled in the course of the novel, the Algeresque-like character gradually emerges as a mythological apparatus, a tailored idol of myth consumption.

Pitkin's unlikely progress from the rags of ignorance and prejudice to the riches of full exposure and myth-making conveys the impression that West's uchronia is both true and unreal. The myth forged by Whipple is an expression of what Barthes calls the « mythical signifier »: as a reader/spectator the crowd « consumes » the myth according to the very ends built into its structure: the reader lives the myth as a story at once « true and unreal »<sup>23</sup>. Lemuel Pitkin serves a twofold function inasmuch as he is first the « empty signifier », a symbol for the American Dream, and later becomes the « mythical signifier », the real presence of the American Dream within Whipple's nationalist rhetorics. In both cases, the American Dream appears as a fallacy.

Nathan Whipple's rise from bankruptcy to political power again reads like an avatar of the « Rags to Riches » story, eventually overshadowing Lemuel Pitkin's. The ex-President who had retrained as a bank director ends up in jail. On the day he is set free, he tells Pitkin that he no longer shares the Democratic Party's current platform which he deems inappropriate to save the country, and refuses to seek another mandate. His decision leads him to live a success story of his own. Persuaded that a Jewish and Communist conspiracy is responsible for his personal economic setback and for America's plight, he sets out to create the National Revolutionary Party and enrolls Lemuel Pitkin in his new paramilitary organization, then informs him that he has decided on a uniform:

The time for a new party with the old American principles was, I realized, overripe. I decided to form it; and so the National Revolutionary Party, popularly known as the 'Leather Shirts', was born. The uniform of our 'Storm Troops' is a coonskin cap like the one I am wearing, a deer-skin shirt and a pair of moccasins. Our weapon is the squirrel rifle<sup>24</sup>.

The recognizable dress code of fascist partisans was a stereotype in the 1930s boiling nationalist America. William Dudley Pelley's Silver Shirts provide West's model for Whipple's National Revolutionary Party<sup>25</sup>. Like his real counterpart, Whipple adopted the symbols of militarism (uniforms, military titles, command structures). By supplying his fascist troops with what amounts to a traditional trapper clothing, Whipple perverts the original destination of the dress. The anachronistic use of the uniform is a token of the farcical displacement of history orchestrated by West, which results in unexpected tragedy on stage of a theatre.

### 3. Staged Martyrdom: Clothing the Myth

West intersperses Lemuel Pitkin's mock-epic and Nathan Whipple's radicalization, until both storylines find a common dénouement and a tragi-comic fate. On account of his

physical defaults resulting from a series of mishaps, Lemuel Pitkin has been hired by a duet of comic actors to play a stooge for their vaudeville act during which he gets frantically beaten. This actually marks the conclusion of his mock-Algeresque experience of the American Dream:

Our hero's employers congratulated him on his success, and although he had a headache from their blows, he was made quite happy by this. After all, he reasoned, with millions out of work he had no cause to complain<sup>26</sup>.

On the night of his assassination, Lemuel Pitkin is approached by one of Whipple's accomplices who hands him a written speech, after ironically propheticizing his impending martyrdom:

We of the party know how your wounds were acquired. In fact one of our prime purposes is to prevent the youth of this country from being tortured as you were tortured. Let me add, Commander Pitkin, that in my humble opinion you are well on your way to being recognized as one of the martyrs of our cause<sup>27</sup>.

When Lemuel Pitkin comes back on stage alone, dressed in the National Revolutionary Party's uniform, he is welcomed with roars of laughter. But the scene suddenly takes on more solemn note when the orchestra starts playing the national anthem. In the blink of an eye, the spectators are presented with a *fait accompli*, which instantaneously turned them into an audience attending a political meeting. When the orchestra has finished playing, they reseal themselves waiting for Pitkin to begin his speech:

« I am a clown », he began, « but there are times when even clowns must grow serious. This is such a time. I... »

Lem got no further. A shot rang out and he fell dead, drilled through the heart by an assassin's bullet<sup>28</sup>.

By virtue of the fascist party's uniform coupled with the national anthem playing, Lemuel Pitkin is no longer an anonymous comedian « from the program<sup>29</sup> », but acquires a political status. This produces an uncanny rupture in the codified vaudeville act; political activism has displaced the slapstick performance as Lemuel Pitkin's *raison d'être*. Once the theatre stage has turned into a political platform, the *coup de théâtre* precipitates the *coup d'état*, and propels West's text into an alternate history.

Pitkin's assassination generates mythical soil which will produce other Pitkins who, in turn, will swell the ranks of the Dictator's legions and marks the mythical tipping point in the fascist revolution, opening the first chapter of an alternate history in the making. Through the literal death of Pitkin-the-clown, his once devalued body acquires figurative legendary status and worth. Whipple transfigures a hard-luck story into political martyrdom and Lemuel's insignificant life takes on national and historic importance.

## 4. Fascist Ideology in the American Grain

Fascist ideology often draws on nostalgia for an ideal past. Perverting the Wild West traditional outfit of the 1820s is a token of Whipple's intention to rewrite America's history along the lines of nativist movement:

We must drive the Jewish international bankers out of Wall Street! We must destroy the Bolshevik labor unions! We must purge our country of all the alien elements and ideas that now infest her!

America for Americans! Back to the principles of Andy Jackson and Abe Lincoln<sup>30</sup>!

On the incumbent President's decision to close all banks, « Shagpoke » Whipple calls for immediate dictatorship. History then speeds up, as shows the concise narrative following



Whipple's heated address to the crowd of Southerners in which he has designated Jews<sup>31</sup>, Catholics and Communists as age-old enemies:

Another section of Shagpoke's audience, made up mostly of older men, had somehow gotten the impression that the South had again seceded from the Union. Perhaps this had come about through their hearing Shagpoke mention the names of Jubal Early, Francis Marion and Jefferson Davis. They ran up the Confederate flag on the courthouse pole, and prepared to die in its defense.

Other, more practical-minded citizens proceeded to rob the bank and loot the principal stores, and to free all their relatives who had the misfortune to be in jail.

As time went on, the riot grew more general in character. Barricades were thrown up in the streets. The heads of Negroes were paraded on poles. A Jewish drummer was nailed to the door of his hotel room. The housekeeper of the local Catholic priest was raped<sup>32</sup>.

In his racist platform, Whipple encourages the grassroots across the Southern cities to help him rewrite America's history by reaching back to the time of the American Revolutionary War (Francis Marion, hero of the American Revolutionary War) and Civil War heroes, a nexus event which he sees from the vantage point of the Confederate troops, hence the many references to Jefferson Davis whom he finally substitutes for Abraham Lincoln. Whipple also appeals to the memory of Jubal Anderson Early, a Confederate general in the American Civil War, and outspoken admirer of the white supremacy.

West parodies the recycling and reappropriation of untimely demagogic clichés, formulas and recipes that he considers as both dangerous modes of mass control and parasitic limitation of public access to critical judgment. To exercise total control over the masses, the American myth has to be used as a repetitive narrative formula. Whipple's speeches are so much laden with success-myth clichés that Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller are no longer presented as exceptions but as typical cases of the « Gospel of Wealth ». By addressing the problems of irrational mass movements and the fragility of democratic institutions, West's cautionary tale illustrates Adorno and Horkheimer's argument about « mass deception ». Quoting from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Christopher Brookeman writes: « The tendency of a mass society to accept 'the deceitful substitution of the stereotype for the individual' [...] had been a visible characteristic of Nazism<sup>33</sup> ». Lemuel Pitkin's martyrdom serves as a blueprint for Whipple's standard army of Pitkins. While parodying the cultural stereotypes of American myth, West satirizes the political manipulation and the American people's susceptibility to propaganda, and ultimately mocks the stupidization of the masses. Not only does West present Nathan Whipple as a grotesque demagogue, an apostle of agitation whose unsophisticated style and simplistic rhetoric of power relies on easy stereotypes and racist prejudices, but his relentless orchestration of the boy's faith and self-determination transforms him from a harmless clown into a real political menace.

The narrative showcases the gradual dismantling of Lemuel's self-awareness paired with growing subservience to Whipple's fascist idealism. By digging up folk memories, and changing the course of history, Whipple designs to return to the true American identity and to redeem the American Dream by appealing to paligenetic nationalism<sup>34</sup> which « locates the source of nationalist identity in the vigor of the mythic past<sup>35</sup> ». Instead of recovering the American mythic past to combat the rise of fascism in modern America, West reveals its « idiomatic » violence<sup>36</sup>. The more Lemuel Pitkin's body gets dismantled along the way, the more Whipple's discourse on success story turns into a farrago of America's most radical ideas and nativist agendas, making the reference to the « monster

mass meeting<sup>37</sup> » a particularly ironical one since Whipple is the real monster, a synthesis of all fears and hatreds, a homegrown American Super-dictator who exterminated all enemies from America, inaugurating fascism right in the American Grain.

*A Cool Million* therefore dramatizes the emergence of an alternate (hi)story which is to be continued as shows West's choice to shift from story-telling to eye-witnessing, thereby giving the uchronian process initiated in the diegesis a narratological consistence as well, by shifting from an omniscient point of view to that of a man in the crowd; as if the omniscient narrator had surrendered his power of storytelling to an authoritarian all-seeing « I », in the person of America's first dictator, thereby recasting himself as a voiceless character as well as an anonymous man from the crowd.

The overthrowing of the narrator as official storyteller is further echoed in Whipple's authoritative speech. The sentence « Why are we celebrating this day above other days<sup>38</sup> ? » is taken from the Passover, the Jewish service which celebrates the Jews' deliverance from Egyptian slavery. In the final scene, Whipple has turned the tables on all myths, including the enemy's traditional myths, thus teaching his worshippers about the all-embracing meaning of that glorious day which saw Lemuel Pitkin's martyrdom deliver America from its torturers and the American myth from its disease:

Simple was his pilgrimage and brief, yet a thousand years hence, no story, no tragedy, no epic poem will be filled with greater wonder, or be followed by mankind with deeper feeling, than that which tells of the life and death of Lemuel Pitkin<sup>39</sup>.

His discourse, couched in hyperbolic terms, highlights the regenerative ethos of the new sense of community born out of the fascist revolution, and uncontaminated by un-American forces. Selecting a few features from Lemuel Pitkin's biography, Whipple distorts and reconfigures them so as to make the myth of the American Dream fit into the monolithic fascist ideology served to the next generation of subjugated myth-consumers.

Whipple's specific discourse of transcendent nationalism redefines Lemuel Pitkin's identity whilst offering him permanence through myth and making him an idol of the masses in uchronic, post-revolution America. He has turned Lemuel Pitkin's failure to his own advantage by transforming a vernacular anti-hero into a folklore hero; but the myth is as delusional as the archetypal mold of the American character it informs since it serves only as the vindication and the bedrock of the fascist regime.

## 5. Conclusion

Behind the biblical underpinnings of Whipple's concluding address, lies a more secular warning: citizenship has given way to mass acknowledgement. Whipple substitutes one flawless myth for a defective reality. His use of eugenicist aesthetics applied to myth-making and political propaganda points to the remodeling of a monolithic American identity: « Through the National Revolution its people were purged of alien diseases and America became again American<sup>40</sup>. »

The repurposed mythology that concludes *A Cool Million* transforms Lemuel Pitkin into a role model and turns his apocryphal epic into a homegrown fascist manifesto. The Lemuel Pitkin song at the end of the novel is a parody of the Nazi's *Horst Wessel* soldiers' song. In the very last scene of the novel, the words yelled by an ecstatic younger American generation and modeled on Nazi mass rallying slogans reverberate through time and space:

« Hail the Martyrdom in the Bijou Theatre! » roar Shagpoke's youthful hearers when he is finished.  
 « Hail, Lemuel Pitkin! »  
 « All hail, the American Boy<sup>41</sup>! »

## NOTES

1. Nathanael West, *Novels and Other Writings*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch, New York, The Library of America, 1997, p. 794.
2. *The Complete Works of Nathanael West*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957.
3. For an insight on West's influences on American novelists of the 1950s, see Marcus A. J. Smith, Jr., *The Art and Influence of Nathanael West*, Madison, University of Wisconsin, 1964.
4. See Nathanael West's short essay « Some Notes on Violence » in Nathanael West, *Novels and Other Writings*, p. 399-400.
5. Philippe Soupault, « Introduction », *Mademoiselle Cœur-Brisé*, [1933], Marcelle Sibon (trad.), Paris, Éditions du Sagittaire, 1946.
6. See T. R. Steiner, « West's Lemuel and The American Dream » in David Madden (ed.), *Nathanael West: The Cheater and the Cheated. A Collection of Critical Essays*, Deland, Florida, Everett/Edwards, Inc., 1973, p. 157-170. In this article Steiner argues that West was less interested in denouncing the dangers of demagoguery than exposing the role popular imagination played in facilitating the expansion of ultra-nationalist ideas. For further reading about American fascism, see Joseph Blotner, *The Modern American Political Novel: 1900-1960*, Austin & London, University of Texas press, 1966.
7. Jay Martin, *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life*, 1970, New York, Carroll and Graf, 1984, p. 239.
8. Jonathan Veitch, *American Superrealism. Nathanael West and the Politics of Representation in the 1930s*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997, p. 95.
9. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue that the American society is proto-fascist and that fascism is the suitable expression of monopoly capitalism. Adorno's argument focuses notably on the manipulation of audiences by the culture industry.
10. According to Roland Barthes' essay « Myth Today », every semiological system requires the relationship between a signifier (the form) and a signified (the concept), resulting in the construction of a *sign*. He gives the example of a rose; the rose is the signifier, passion is what is signified, the sign is the rose meaning passion. The myth takes up the final element or *sign* of an existing system which in turn becomes a signifier in the new one. In Barthes' system of myth, the form loses its meaning; one chooses the form in relation to a mythical concept which fits in. Barthes' analysis is helpful in understanding the way West handles the « Rags to Riches myth ». He first takes Lemuel Pitkin's story as the signifier for the « Rags to Riches » familiar concept. As Lemuel Pitkin loses body parts along the way, his *form* is gradually filled with the perverted concepts drawn from Whipple's fascist ideology. The « Rags to Riches » myth dissolves in favor of another mythical concept, Lemuel Pitkin's martyrdom for the fascist cause thus links both elements in a new relationship in which Lemuel Pitkin (the signifier) and the fascist ideology (the signified) produces the new *sign* and myth (Pitkin fascized, or fascism 'pitkinized').
11. Jay Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 239.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 231.

13. Karen L. Hellekson, « Refiguring Historical Time: The Alternate History », Mount Oread, University of Kansas, 1998, p. 9. ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing, 1998, Order No. 9903059.
14. Westian critic has largely commented on Lemuel Pitkin as a Christ-like figure.
15. Nathanael West, *Novels and Other Writings*, p. 238. The term « great » applied to Lemuel Pitkin may constitute a reference to the Great Man theory of history popularized by historian Thomas Carlyle in the 19th century. To sustain the myth, Whipple is suggesting that Pitkin's biographical details themselves account for the reshaping of American history.
16. Karen L. Hellekson, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
18. In 1931, for instance, John Collings Squire published *If It Had Happened Otherwise: Lapses into Imaginary History*, a collection of essays revisiting various historical events.
19. Jay Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 220-221.
20. Éric B. Henriët, *L'Uchronie*, Paris, Klincksieck, 2009.
21. Karen L. Hellekson, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
22. Nathanael West, *Novels and Other Writings*, p. 137.
23. Roland Barthes, « Myth today » in John Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, [1994], New Jersey, Pearson Educational Ltd, 2006 (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), p. 293-302, p. 299.
24. Nathanael West, *Novels and Other Writings*, p. 172.
25. Jay Martin goes back over the myth created by Pelley around the formation of the Silver Legion: « One night in April 1928, according to his own account in 1933, Pelley died seven minutes, during which he learned, from 'The Oracle', of the international Jewish conspiracy and of his own mission to return America to Americans in the form of a giant corporation, with Pelley as president and all '100 per cent Americans' as stockholders [...]. After reading of the appointment of Hitler to the Chancellorship of Germany on January 30, 1933, he announced, 'Tomorrow, we launch the Silver Shirts!' » (Jay Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 233-234).
26. Nathanael West, *Novels and Other Writings*, p. 233.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
31. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer explain how myths about Jews were used by fascism and liberal democracies to create an outsider group that would be held responsible for all problems.
32. Nathanael West, *Novels and Other Writings*, p. 229.
33. Christopher Brookeman, *American Culture and Society Since the 1930s*, London, Macmillan, 1984, p. 84.
34. Marvin J. Severson, *op. cit.*, p. 14. The term is quoted from George Griffen's essay *The Nature of Fascism*, London, Routledge, 1991.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 14-15.
36. See Nathanael West's short essay « Some Notes on Violence » in Nathanael West, *Novels and Other Writings*, p. 399-400.
37. Nathanael West, *Novels and Other Writings*, p. 252.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 255.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 255.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

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## ABSTRACTS

Nathanael West's *A Cool Million* (1934) has been largely viewed as both a deadpan parody of the «Rags to Riches» success story popularized by Horatio Alger and a satire on nascent fascism in Depression-era America. In the novel, two storylines cross-pollinate: ex-President Nathan «Shagpoke» Whipple's successful fascist revolution and young Lemuel Pitkin's thwarted Algeresque success story. As young Pitkin gets dismantled and eventually assassinated, the retrained politician sets out to create his own Revolutionary Party to save his country from decay. This paper will re-articulate the two trajectories and show how they actually inform an American fascist myth. I will argue that in the context of the Depression, *A Cool Million* emerges as a uchronia, an alternate history dramatizing the advent of a dictator who decides to exterminate all that is un-American, seizing upon Lemuel Pitkin's martyr to forge and enunciate the official mythology of the new political regime.

Écrit en 1934 par Nathanael West, *A Cool Million* se lit à la fois comme une parodie cynique du mythe du « Rags to Riches » popularisé par les *success stories* d'Horatio Alger, et comme une satire de la montée du fascisme dans l'Amérique de la Dépression. Dans le roman, deux récits se déploient de façon croisée : la révolution fasciste menée à son terme par Nathan « Shagpoke » Whipple et l'échec de Lemuel Pitkin dans sa *success story* « algérienne ». Tandis que le jeune Pitkin est graduellement dépouillé et finalement assassiné, l'homme politique reconverti se lance dans la création de son propre parti révolutionnaire pour sauver le pays de la décadence. Dans cet article qui combinera les deux trajectoires et montrera qu'elles façonnent en fin de compte un mythe fasciste américain, je défends l'idée que *A Cool Million* apparaît comme une uchronie sur fond de Dépression, une histoire alternative qui met en scène l'avènement d'un dictateur qui prend la décision d'éradiquer tout ce qui n'est pas américain, allant jusqu'à s'emparer du martyre de Lemuel Pitkin pour fonder et énoncer la mythologie du nouveau régime politique.

La novela *A Cool Million* (1934) escrita por Nathanael West se considera como una parodia socarrona del famoso cuento «Rags to Riches» popularizado por Horatio Alger, y también como una sátira del fascismo emergente, en tiempos de la Gran Depresión americana. En esta novela corta, dos relatos se van desplegando y cruzando: por una parte, la revolución fascista llevada hasta su desenlace por el ex-presidente Nathan «Shagpoke» Whipple y, por otra parte, el fracaso de la *success story* argelina de Lemuel Pitkin. Mientras el joven Pitkin se encuentra progresivamente despojado y finalmente asesinado, el político reconvertido se dispone a crear su propio Partido Revolucionario para salvar a su país de la decadencia. En este artículo en el cual se estudiarán conjuntamente las dos trayectorias, demostrando que forman un verdadero mito fascista americano, intentaré probar que, en el contexto de la Depresión, *A Cool Million* aparece como una ucronía, o sea una historia alternativa que dramatiza el advenimiento de un dictador deseoso de exterminar todo lo antiamericano, apoderándose inclusive del martirio de Lemuel Pitkin para forjar y enunciar la mitología oficial del nuevo régimen político.

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