

Hollywood as a Degenerate Reality: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon**

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This article, the second part of research on *The Last Tycoon*, attempts to show that Fitzgerald defines the function of Hollywood and its relation to society, almost in the same manner as Louis Marin illustrates his own idea of the function and the permanence of Disneyland as a Utopian space. Just as Hollywood takes reality and refashions it in a state of unlikely perfection, so Disneyland or Utopia, as Marin has put it, is a "fantasmatic projection" of the historical and social reality of the American nation. And as a result, the function of Disneyland, and, it can be argued, Hollywood, too, is to show "the *differences* between social reality and a projected model of social existence". But since both tend to see the function of Hollywood and Disneyland within the confines of entertainment and pleasure does this indicate that these ideal places relegate meaning to the arena of entertainment and therefore our sense of historical awareness is undermined?

When Stahr reveals to Boxley, the English writer, that those people who are "of Hollywood" "have to take people's own favorite folklore and dress it up and give it back to them" (1965, 128), he defines the function of Hollywood and its relation to society, almost in the same manner as Louis Marin illustrates his own idea of the function and the permanence of Disneyland as a Utopian space. Just as Hollywood takes reality and refashions it in a state of unlikely perfection, so Disneyland or Utopia, as Marin has put it, is a "fantasmatic projection" of the historical and social reality of the American nation. And as a result, the function of Disneyland, and, it can be argued, Hollywood, too, is to show "the *differences* between social reality and a projected model of social existence" (in Davis, 1994, 286; italics in source).

That Hollywood and Disneyland are reminiscent of the world of, what Richard Lanham calls, the "*homo rhetoricus*" is doubtless. However, when Marin says that Disneyland cannot transgress completely "the codes by which people make reality significant, by which they interpret reality" (in Davis ed., 286) we understand that Hollywood and Disneyland spring from and depend on the dominant system of values, codes and symbols adopted

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by certain people in a given time in its history. Thus, paradoxically we are in the realms of the "*homo seriosus*". But this meeting of Lanham's polarized concepts is negatively held. Like Stahr, who sees the function of art within the confines of entertainment and pleasure, Marin believes that Disneyland relegates "meaning to the sphere of entertainment and therefore undermines historical awareness" (286-287).

A careful examination of those who are "of Hollywood" shows that their behavior, worldviews, moral codes and symbols are not essentially different from Marin's model or Stahr's interpretation. The Hollywood coterie claim to present and represent the ideal of social reality. They have extreme power, money, success, fame, glory complemented by their apparent possession of high moral standards. By virtue of these privileges they become "the rulers", the playwright-actors who have the right to act as they wish when they wish and therefore they lack the ambition to convince others outside their power group of anything except their right to do as they please when they please. They adopt a strict system of ideas and values which change their ideal representation, as Marin's model shows, "into a myth or a collective fantasy" (286). In order to assure the success of their show the Hollywood clan also practice a number of defensive measures, to use Goffman's thesis (1959, 212). They tend to remain together and are interested in keeping their circle locked before strangers. Thus, when Kathleen and Edna are discovered in the back lot after the quake, Robby wants disgustedly to "give them hell" for their intrusion. And describing his own experience in a garden party before he joins Hollywood, Wylie White defines Hollywood as "a mining town in lotus land" led by "toughies" and "beautiful felines" (14), ready to attack strangers. Knowing the manners of Hollywood clan, Cecilia considers that Wylie's experience can happen: "We don't go for strangers in Hollywood ...unless they're a celebrity" (15).

The make-believe element of Hollywood life only works when one is successful. There is no acting part for those who are excluded. Manny Schwartz used to be very successful but when he fails he is no longer wanted; he commits suicide. Monroe Stahr fires some of his employees for failing to photograph Colbert's beautiful face despite their past experience.

And he carries out dirty work against his employees when his policy of absolute authority is threatened.

What intensifies the sense of the "collective fantasy", the kind of life that characterizes people who fit into Hollywood, is the fact that it is exercised by a team of real actors and actresses, producers, directors, photographers and technicians. This means that they are a degenerate class whose ideal representations and functions are at two or three removes from reality. Worse, their solidarity, co-operation and moral conduct are only a front which they present towards the outside world to mask their hypocrisy, artificiality, deception, crime and the general corruption which typifies the people in power also described in *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*. Like the Buchanans and the Warren sisters and Tommy Barban, the management in Hollywood wreck Stahr's life because they cannot put up with his plans and conduct. One such figure is Brady, Stahr's partner, whose physical appearance, habits and traits are akin to Tom Buchanan and Tommy Barban. Despite his magnetic appearance, he looks bulky and appears ashamed of himself. In addition, he lacks intellect and moral stability. Most of his accomplishments in Hollywood are ascribed to luck and shrewdness; he is in complete ignorance of the motion picture industry but to assert his belonging to it he depends on "make-believe":

Of course, he talked that double talk to Wall Street about how mysterious it was to make a picture, but Father didn't know the ABCs of dubbing or even cutting. Nor had he learned much about the feel of America as a bar boy in Ballyhegan, nor did he have any more than a drummer's sense of a story. (35)

Brady also has a large office in which he displays a big painting of Will Rogers, a signed photograph of Minna Davis, Stahr's dead wife, and other photos of different studio celebrities all to suggest his essential kinship with Hollywood people. Unlike Stahr, Brady has no concern for the standard of art despite his claims to the contrary. He is interested in producing moving pictures only insofar as they will swell his bank account. Nor does he care for the contentment of his employees. He carries out a large percentage pay cut using deceit and lies. Worse, in order to get his goals, he is ready to use

criminal methods. He attempts to blackmail Stahr, his friend and partner, when he finds out about Kathleen's relation to him and has a hand in the death of a man with whose wife he has been in love.

Wylie White is a scriptwriter who uses all kinds of tricks to advance himself. He, for example, plots to win Cecilia's admiration hoping to get a better chance in Hollywood once he recognizes her. He pretends to be civilized and voluble and pretends to admire Stahr although he is overwhelmed by jealousy and hatred for him. In spite of his calm appearance, resoluteness and popularity, John Broaca is caught by Stahr making the same scenes over and over again. With his exaggerated nose and flattened body, Mr Schwartz seems in a sort of dream. Believing that Stahr has turned against him he commits suicide. And Reinmund is a handsome young opportunist who practices devious ways of acting and thinking. He imitates Stahr and seems to have manifested "an almost homosexual fixation" (46) on him. But as a development upon *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*, in *The Last Tycoon*, Fitzgerald, through his narrator, focuses on what Goffman calls the "back stage", where performers construct and fabricate the illusions and impressions they wish to give for their audiences (1959, 112-113). There, the actor's masks are taken off and each performer is seen for what he really is. Readers, therefore, are able to see many characters stripped to reveal their essential vulnerability. When Brady, for example, is unmasked the readers experience a moment of shock and terror on seeing him engaged in sexual play with his naked secretary, taking advantage of his employees and blackmailing his partner. And Wylie White is an opportunist who often exploits female characters in order to advance himself. So the act of unmasking signifies the return of reality as a degenerate fantasy. However, the same act of unmasking exposes other characters who are engaged in responsible and accountable actions. The readers are given the chance to see a business world where people are productive and creative and work for a living. Stahr, to offer an example, is shown as a "paternalistic employer" (155) who wants his employees to be content and who is morally committed to the standard of cinematic art. If the world of theater is represented by Stahr, this would suggest that this world is one where responsibility and obligation can reside. More important,

the fact that the theater image is here represented by Stahr, who is himself not an actor, calls for a revising of Goffman's thesis. In Goffman's opinion, people in society divide themselves into audiences and performers, the former responding to the acting codes of the latter (156). It seems there is a function in the world for a person who does not act.

Amid this atmosphere of falsity, evil and hostility Stahr finds it difficult to fulfill his desires. His plans to produce quality films do not endear him either to the management interested in making money or the unions dominated as they are by the communists. As Fitzgerald's "outline" to the novel reveals, Stahr's experience in Hollywood is a reflection of Fitzgerald's. As it is for Fitzgerald, who is rejected from Hollywood because of bouts of alcohol (Rapf, 79), so it is for Stahr, who will be ejected from the studio and afterwards destroyed by a joint conspiracy of the conservatives who see him as a Red, and of the Reds who identify him with capitalism:

The split between the controllers of the movie industry, on the one hand, and the various groups of employees, on the other, is widening and leaving no place for real individualists of business like Stahr, whose successes are personal achievements and whose career has always been invested with a certain personal glamor. He has held himself directly responsible to everyone with whom he has worked; he has even wanted to beat up his enemies himself. In Hollywood he is 'the last tycoon'. (158)

Clearly Stahr's successful career in Hollywood has come to an end. He deteriorates into a life of violence and crime, giving up his moral values which constitute the core of his authenticity. In a meeting which, Rapf assumes, Fitzgerald took from Harry Rapf's experience with a Communist Party Organizer, named Stanley Lawrence (79), Stahr is supposed to be friendly and warm. Instead he physically attacks Brimmer, the communist. Worse, fearing that Brady will murder him, Stahr decides to get his partner murdered, letting himself be degraded to the same plane of gangsterism as Brady does. As Fitzgerald's notes show, Stahr arranges a trip to New York in order to be away from the scene of the crime. On the plane he intends to

prevent the murder but the plane crashes; Stahr is killed and the murder takes place, leaving Stahr's intention to change towards the better an unfulfilled task.

So on which side of the fence does the book fall? On the more superficial level, both Stahr and Brady, who represent the Hollywood establishment, taste of the “*homo rhetoricus*” and the “*homo seriusus*”. Each claims to represent the good aspects of the serious man and accuses the other of behaving according to the impositions of the negative qualities of the “*rheticus*”. In other words, they are playwrights who require of the actors, directors and stage hands strict dramaturgical discipline in order to produce a play which is pushed by an impulse affirming what is objectively and absolutely true and so they appear to stand for the “*homo seriusus*”. However, when the masks fall, both Stahr and Brady are false and hypocrite – negative version of the rhetorical man. They seem to inhabit a world so disposed to evil that they destroy each other's life. Yet why does Cecilia have a strong sympathy for Stahr?

Cecilia sees in him a dreadfully obsessed seeker after great goals, vast desires and colossal hopes. Unlike Brady and the other Hollywood movie controllers whose performance, interpretation of reality is based on acts of calculation, intimidation, deceit and crime, Stahr plays the role of an unsleeping shepherd whose loyalty to ideals, faith in goals and personal integrity make him suffer. Here lies his greatness.

At the risk of a slight digression, Stephen J. Greenblatt's theory provides the basis for an interpretative model that we can use to understand Stahr's role, especially his greatness. In his essay, "Invisible Bullets", (1988), which is a revision of an earlier essay "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion" (1981), assumes that texts are linked to the network of institutions, practices and beliefs that shape a certain community (Davis ed., 1994, 472-526). To prove his point, he assumes that the defiant impulses of Elizabethan society are related within the cultural formations, institutions and codes of that culture. He examines Thomas Harriot's *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* and argues that Harriot, perhaps unintentionally, presents theology as a collection of tricks that allows the civilized, the whites, to rule the savages, the Indians. Here the interests of

power meet the interests of theater because both depend upon the imposition of practices and beliefs on actors, (people) and compel obedience. This notion of religion, which is Machiavellian in nature, rises from the fact that Harriot, as Greenblatt maintains, is a vigilant representative of a colonial culture that defines itself in opposition to Indian voices, the other, the inferior, the less civilized actor in the script of the colonist. In pursuing such an analysis also in some of Shakespeare's plays, Greenblatt implies that texts are true replications of the mechanisms that mould the apprehensions of an entire community.

According to Greenblatt's theory, Stahr's conduct is dictated by his position. He is a ruler and as such he has to pay for his high post. "The rulers," as Greenblatt's model shows, "earn, or at least pay for, their exalted position through suffering, and this suffering ennoble, if it does not exactly cleanse, the lies and betrayals upon which this position depends" (495). Like Gatsby, Stahr is ennobled and dignified despite his faults, vulgarity and criminal acts which are dictated by his exalted position rather than intentionally committed.

And the questions to be dealt with are: Does what Hollywood project as reality have any meaningful relation to the culture on which it is based? Is Hollywood a text, to use Greenblatt's model, that replicates mechanisms that make up the apprehensions of the American reality? Since Hollywood, the copy, rests on reality, the original object, is not the latter's authenticity and authority, to use Benjamin's terminology, jeopardised (221)? If so, are we alienated from history - are we actors of a mythic drama on the stage of Hollywood? Or should the Hollywood's projected version of reality, as Marin suggests, be considered as an amusing, "fantasmatic" projection, which is to be taken lightly in terms of its relation to the reality of the "*homo serius*"?

Fitzgerald adopts the two approaches without letting the polarity between them interfere with his notions of life and theater. He assumes that people are condemned to acting, yet their acting can become positive when they reflect truth, honesty and integrity in their every day behavior. By contrast, he maintains that actors on the theater stage need not respond emotionally and directly to the situations they are involved in. Rather, their

chief aim is to entertain, to burlesque "the correct emotional response - fear and love and sympathy". This means that Hollywood should be meant to amuse us; it should not be taken seriously. But since Fitzgerald does not see the real world as an orderly stage on which people show their humanity and express their sympathy with their fellows, Hollywood and life intermingle and people come to regard life as a kind of theatrical show; they offer up a Hollywood reality which signifies a regression from authenticity to falsity, from nobility to savagery and from "responding" to "burlesquing". This suggests that for Fitzgerald the world stage tends to become a false theater, Hollywood-like, and human conduct is reduced to artificiality and pretence.

To render the novel, and, thus, his conception of reality, convincing, to expose the images of ugliness, horror and alienation and, paradoxically, to portray the novel as more realistic, Fitzgerald pays special attention to his narrative techniques and how these set up a particular relationship between text and reader. His choice of Cecilia, who has in her a great deal of Fitzgerald's own daughter, Scottie (Matthew J. Bruccoli 1972, 20), as his narrator is very successful. Although critics, notably, Brian Way (1980, 161-162) and Michael Millgate (in Kenneth E. Eble, ed., 1973, 129) criticize Fitzgerald's decision to use Cecilia as a narrator, others, like James Miller (1967, 151-154) and Sergio Perosa (1961, 170-171) regard her as a perfect choice. Like Nick, the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, Cecilia functions as repelled and fascinated "audience" of the rhetoric of both Stahr and Brady, i. e. to the "performances" they have written and are trying to produce. And she fulfills this role once as an actor-audience who is involved in the events when she comes to know them and another time as a playwright-narrator who tells the story retrospectively, from the viewpoint of one who knows how the story ends and is familiar with the truths of the roles played and values revealed. As such Cecilia produces her own interpretation, or "performance", which is addressed to a large audience: the audience of readers.

It is obvious that Fitzgerald provides Cecilia with certain traits. She, as Fitzgerald writes in his notes to the novel, "is *of* the movies but not *in* them... She is, all at once, intelligent, cynical, but understanding and kindly toward the people, great or small, who are of Hollywood" (166; italics in

source). When Fitzgerald says that Cecilia is "of the movies", he means that she is linked with all the main characters. Cecilia, thus, gives the novel a unity of structure. She is the daughter of Brady, a Hollywood producer and is in love with Stahr and, therefore, she may embody elements of Louis B. Mayer's daughter, Irene, who admits in her biography that she was fond of Thalberg (Rapf, 78). She is the friend of Wylie White, Jane Meloney and prince Aggie and the acquaintance of many people who are "of Hollywood". So she is a member of the Hollywood community and, therefore, has access to the Hollywood world, the social and moral world which she has been raised as "*homo seriosus*", to be predisposed to admire and defend. So Cecilia's positive opinion of the Hollywood clan and her intense passion for Stahr provide Fitzgerald with the tool to mix his objective presentation of events with Cecilia's emotional notations. His notes show how he carefully worked out this method of telling his story: "I shall grant myself the privilege, as Conrad did, of letting her imagine the actions of the characters. Thus, I hope to get the verisimilitude of a first person narrative, combined with a Godlike knowledge of all events that happen to my characters" (168). Thus, Chapters I, II and some episodes of Chapter V and VI, in which Cecilia has been present, are coloured with her subjective presentation and moral judgements due to her participation and intense love for Stahr. But because she is not in the movies, Cecilia achieves a detached vision and writes of the main events from a critical, objective perspective. In chapters III, IV, and V Cecilia is almost entirely omitted. Hence the events described are apparently objective. The events of Chapters III and IV are partly drawn from a paper she writes in college and partly from her imagination. From her father she learns about Stahr's illness; Prince Aggie is her authority for the luncheon in the commissary and motivated by a mixture of jealousy and admiration Wylie White tells her a lot about Stahr. Yet, as events develop, Cecilia watches the performance of the people who are 'of Hollywood' over and over again and learns more about their behavior, actions and opinions. Consequently, her impressions become more and more critical of her father and his circle and more supportive of Stahr. Eventually her intense passion, infatuation and attraction for Stahr and her revulsion from her father's practices make her

emerge as a judge, a critical audience and both a detached and involved narrator, giving praise and blame in the present, the time of the narration. So once again we as readers are placed in the sphere of acting. The readers are at a third remove from the events, having to interpret the dramatizing rhetoric of Cecilia, functioning in their turn as the “audience” of her acting. What helps increase the sense of acting is Fitzgerald’s complete reliance on the qualities of the “dramatic novel”, in a more progressive way than in *The Great Gatsby*. Structurally, *The Last Tycoon* is written in dramatic scenes which, through dialogue, represent the internal and the external aspects of the characters and their situations, with the character of Stahr always serving as a center. So rather than depend on narration and analysis, Fitzgerald makes use of dramatic scenes and dialogues to let readers find out about his characters and their engagements: "ACTION IS CHARACTER" Fitzgerald writes in his notes to the novel (196). In line with these ideas, it is clear that Chapter One characterizes the narrator and introduces White, Schwartz and Cecilia who all bring us near Stahr. Chapter Two presents Brady, Kathleen, Robinson and some secretaries in relation to Stahr, and shows the latter at the top of his professional success. In Chapters Three and Four, which follow Stahr through a typical day at the studio, readers learn more about his character, his attitudes and relations, his conflicts, his points of greatness and his weaknesses by virtue of the dramatic intensity of the dialogue. In his notes Fitzgerald points out the advantages of the dramatic dialogue he expects to get out of Stahr's work day. He writes,

This chapter must not develop into merely a piece of character analysis. Each statement that I make about him must contain at the end of every few hundred words some pointed anecdote or story to keep it alive. I do not want it to have the ring of an analysis. I want to have as much drama throughout as the story of old Laemmle himself on the telephone. (177-178)

Chapter Five centers on Stahr's love affair with Kathleen, who is gradually developed as a character through their successive meetings. It also gives us another chance to learn about Brady's character through Cecilia's

discovery of him with his nude secretary. And Chapter Six presents the first emblems of Stahr's decay through his fight with Brimmer.

In addition, each scene is divided into episodes which disclose only the core of an incident and its culmination point. When Fitzgerald wrote down the general framework for the episode of the aeroplane crash, for example, he planned that it should concentrate mainly on the effect of the crash instead of describing its gradual development. He wrote:

Consider carefully whether if possible by some technical trick it might not be advisable to conceal from the reader that the plane fell until the moment when the children find it. The problem is that the reader must not turn to Chapter X and be confused, but, on the other hand, the dramatic effect, even if the reader felt lost for a few minutes might be more effective if he did not find at the beginning of the Chapter that the plane fell. (187)

The emphasis is put on the “dramatic effect” obtained by exploiting the utmost degree of dramatic concision.

The language, often breaking into dialogue, is precise, simple, direct and almost empty of syntactical subordination such as adjectives and adverbs and thus Fitzgerald is able to convert language into a medium of exhibiting the represented events, rather than reporting or describing them. This use of language, as Perosa notices, not only gives Fitzgerald the capacity to achieve a high degree of intensity and objectivity but also puts him into the front row of modern writers alongside Eliot, Pound, Sherwood Anderson, Hemingway and others (1961, 175).

Chapters Three and Four best illustrate the point being made here. In them Cecilia makes a chronicle of Stahr's working day and records a real business world with the maximum degree of dramatic concision and with the objectivity of a reporter. Fitzgerald indicates in his diagram of the novel that these two chapters “are equal to guest list and Gatsby's party. Throw everything into this, with selection” (170).

Owing to Fitzgerald's adoption of the properties of the dramatic novel, each individual reader, on the theoretical level, can observe the events and produce his own interpretation. But since the events are told retrospectively from the perspective of Cecilia, the experienced character and the narrator

with high moral standards who has already established her attitudes, views and judgements of the events and the characters, the readers are not “absent-minded”, as Benjamin thinks, though they are constrained by her performance or her interpretation of the Hollywood life, and therefore are invited but not compelled to adopt her revision of reality as their own.

But in telling Stahr's story, emphasising his greatness as opposed to the criminality of her father and his group, Cecilia is perhaps pretending to be “*homo seriosus*”, claiming to have responsibility for truth and reality, but is in fact masking her own failure to recapture Stahr's love. More important, Fitzgerald perhaps is telling the story of both Cecilia and Stahr to justify his own failure to fulfill his grandiose attempt to turn time backwards, to recapture lost youth, love, innocence, his ideals, his interpretation of the life of the Hollywood clan. Fitzgerald is also legitimizing his own surrender, his failure to be realistic or “*homo seriosus*” by blaming the Hollywood reality where people have lost their historical awareness and relegate human relationships to the sphere of fantasy.

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ملخص

يحاول هذا المقال أن يبين أن فيتزجيرالد يعرف وظيفة هوليوود وعلاقتها مع المجتمع بنفس الطريقة – تقريبا – التي يوضح فيها لويس مارين فهمه لوظيفة ديزني لاند بوصفه مكانا مثاليا. وكما أن هوليوود تقوم بتشكيل الواقع من جديد وتظهره كمكان كامل هكذا أيضا بالنسبة إلى ديزني لاند كما يعتقد مارين. إن هذه الأماكن تثير المشاعر المتخيلة للواقع التاريخي والاجتماعي للشعب الأمريكي. لذا، فإن وظيفة ديزني لاند وهوليوود هي إظهار الفرق بين الواقع الاجتماعي وبين نموذج المشاعر الخيالية للوجود الاجتماعي. وبما أن كليهما يميلان إلى النظر إلى وظيفة هوليوود وديزني لاند في إطار الترفيه والمسرات، فهل يشير ذلك إلى أن هذين المكانين ينقصان من فهمنا لصالح الترفيه، فهل يصيب ذلك ويضر بوعينا التاريخي؟

תקציר

מאמר זה מנסה להראות שפיצג'רלד מגדיר את הפונקציה של הוליווד והיחס שלה לחברה כמעט באותה צורה שלוייס מרינן מבהיר את תפיסתו לפונקציה של דיזנילנד כמקום יותופי. כמו שהוליווד מעצבת את המציאות מחדש ומראה אותה כמקום מושלם כך דיזנילנד, כפי שמרינן חושב, היא פנתזמה של המציאות ההיסטורית והסוציאלית של האומה האמריקאית. לכן, הפונקציה של דיזנילנד והוליווד היא להראות את השוני בין המציאות הסוציאלית לבין מודל פנתזמי של קיום סוציאלי. אבל בכדי ששניהם נוטים לראות את הפונקציה של הוליווד ודיזנילנד במסגרת של תענוג ובילוי האם זה מצביע שמקומות אלו מפחיתים התובנה לתחום הבילוי ולכן הקונספט שלנו למודעות היסטורית נחבל?