The Exercise of Power and Acting

in F. Scott Fitzgerald's

The Last Tycoon*

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*The Last Tycoon*** evokes the glamorous setting of Hollywood, the false mannerisms of the rich, whose monopoly of advanced technology bestows them with extreme power, divine authority over a wide spectrum of "backward" people. Through Cecilia, his narrator, Fitzgerald provides us with two types of power: First, Monroe Stahr, the young and highly talented motion picture director who pays for his exalted authority through suffering, which ennobles him and helps cleanse him of the lies and betrayals which his position dictates. Second, Brady and his group, whose power is shown to be dependent upon acts of calculation, intimidation, deceit and false belief.

Like Gatsby and Diver the protagonists of *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*, respectively, Monroe Stahr, the protagonist of *The Last Tycoon*, represents a self-undermining authority whose paradoxical practices are appropriated for the stage. Through most of the novel, Stahr, modelled on Irving Thalberg for whom Fitzgerald worked on *Red-Headed Woman* in 1931 upon his return to Hollywood and whom Fitzgerald admired (Joane E. Rapf 1988, 77), understands his behavior as a role that he is performing. His rise from rags and humble origins to riches and tremendous power is the result of strict application of a scheme he writes in his younger days, one which will direct his conduct and illustrate his goals in life in much the same way that a script designates the role of a performer on stage. Cecilia says,

> Like many brilliant men, he had grown up dead cold. Beginning at about twelve, probably, with the total rejection common to those of extra-ordinary mental powers, the 'See here: this is all

> wrong - a mess - all a lie - and a sham - ' he swept it all away, everything as men of his type do; and then instead of being a son-of-a-bitch as most of them are, he looked around at the barrenness that was left and said to himself, '*This* will never do.' And so he had learned tolerance, kindness, forbearance, and even affection, like lessons. (1965, 117)

Obviously, the passage presents Cecilia's "take" on Stahr, her interpretation of his mental, spiritual and social attitudes. In fact, it reflects the personal philosophy of Fitzgerald, who in 1936 believed that people of "first-rate intelligence" like him could dominate life and subject it to their will: "life yielded easily to intelligence and effort" (1965, 39). On the one hand, Stahr's schedule (script), with its strict adherence to reality, is harmonious with the good aspect of what Richard Lanham calls the "*homo seriosus*" (76, 1). On the other hand, like Gatsby, Stahr rejects his parents' origin and past and sees himself as auto-generative, a man who shapes himself, his world through the power of words and belief. *Ergo*, Cecilia casts him in the role of a "*homo rhetoricus*" defined by Lanham as the playwright of his role and also, intercalatedly, the "actor" who manipulates reality by establishing through his words the imperatives to which he and his fellows must respond; his life throngs with ever-changing roles, non-stop situations and adaptive strategies and therefore he is "committed to no single construction of the world" (76, 4). He writes directs and plays his own script as he goes, and is constantly committed to trying, filtering, adding onto, fabricating new roles and interpretations. This is perhaps what Cecilia means when she conceives of Stahr as one who is fully aware of the way people around him behave and form his roles in life accordingly. Interestingly, Stahr again makes Lanham's two poles meet, indicating their dynamic potential. His solid insistence on the "*rhetoricus*", subject to the

dictation, to the rigid limits of his goals, values and constraints of his primary self-created role of the successful prince, the divine authority, attempting to get people to accept his interpretation of reality, makes him emerge as a "*homo seriosus*" figure who possesses a master situation. So motivated by his moral attitudes and extraordinary skills, the poor Jewish boy who had led a gang of kids in the Bronx runs into fields where very few men can follow him; he becomes a monarch just as Gatsby is a Dan Cody type and Diver is the last hope of the clan. But Stahr's power, unlike Gatsby's and Dick's is immense, unlimited. Thanks to the power of cinema and its advanced technology, Stahr practices his authority not only over those who work with him in the studio but also over large multitudes outside; Cecilia believes that he is "a marker in industry like Edison and Lumière and Griffith and Chaplin. He led pictures way up past the range and power of the theatre, reaching a sort of golden age, before censorship" (35). In fact, it is Fitzgerald's contention, as Rapf notices, to connect Stahr with great American leaders of the past, in particular presidents like James Monroe, to affirm his interest "in exploring movies and movie-makers as the reincarnation of new American myths" (77). Cinema intensifies Stahr's sense of omnipotence; he becomes able to relax his grip on people, on time and repeat the past. Through the power of his character and cinema, Stahr claims mastery over reality which he considers as plastic and subjective rather than objective and fixed. So he plays the role of a divine authority, a Machiavellian prince, who is committed to the survival and welfare of his people and in return he is entitled to make exploitative demands upon the world and them, to promote their belief in his divinity and compel their obedience just because he wants it. In theatrical terms, Stahr is a scriptwriter who requires of actors, stage hands, etc., an *ad hoc* social cohesion through imposing strict rules on each individual member of the group. But to fulfill

his prospect Stahr abstains from the relentless exercise of violence, physical compulsion. He knows

> how to shut up, how to draw into the background, how to listen. From where he stood... he watched the multitudinous practicalities of his world like a proud young *shepherd* to whom night and day had never mattered. He was born sleepless, without a talent for rest or desire for it. (19; italics mine)

Stahr is not associated with false appearances and artificial acting where emotional involvement is not present. On the contrary, he is the care-giving actor, the all-powerful playwright who acts in accordance with Dick Diver's suggestions concerning people's behavior on the real stage of the world: "They act- face, voice, words- the face shows sorrow, the voice shows shock and the words show sympathy" (*Tender*, 297). In other words his utterances and external behavior are an "acting out" of his inner feelings and therefore are real and authentic. Does this problematize the idea already advanced that Stahr has learned his qualities “like lessons”(117) – that is, his inner feeling is the product of an external conduct? It seems that for Stahr the relationship between inner feelings and conduct can work both ways.

Obviously the word "shepherd" is suggestive of Jesus Christ, the "good shepherd" (John 10 :11-16) who watches, guides, directs, protects and takes care of his people. So if the world of acting is represented by Stahr, his utterances are not "hollow and void", independent of context or tethered to no origin, typical of the utterances of, as Austin says, "an actor on stage". On the contrary, he means and performs in reality what he says. Cecilia tries to indicate that he does mean what he says and feels and he takes responsibility for his behavior. This notion of Stahr contradicts what Austin says about the utterances of the actor on the stage in the process of the distinction between "serious" and "non-serious" speech act, "performative"

and "constative" utterances. According to Austin, “a performative utterance” becomes “hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in a soliloquy…. Language in such circumstances is in special ways… used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use”(76, 22). This is seen in the section, which follows Stahr through a typical working day at the studio, where we are given the opportunity to witness his authenticity in practice. He is shown as a fatherly figure who cares for the contentment of his employees; he settles the domestic problem of Mr. Rodrigues, a very successful actor who fails to get on well with his wife, restores to Peter Zavras, a camera man, his happiness after a failed suicide, courteously lectures George Boxley, a discontented writer, on the imaginative power needed to produce a film and shows solidarity with his employees at times of difficulty. And after the earthquake, an absolutely “unmanaged”, natural event over what he none the less appears to take control, Stahr exhibits the peak of paternal care, responsibility and greatness:

> He spoke and waved back as the people streamed by in the darkness, looking, I suppose, a little like the Emperor and the Old Guard. There is no world so but it has its heroes, and Stahr was the hero. Most of these men had been here a long time - through the beginnings and the great upset, when sound came, and the three years of depression, he had seen that no harm came to them. The old loyalties were trembling now, there were clay feet everywhere; but still he was their man, the last of the princes. And their greeting was a sort of low cheer as they went by. (34)

Clearly the above quotation celebrates Stahr's stupendous ability as stage manager and also as a dramatist. What adds poignancy to the scene is

the fact that it takes place in Hollywood. Yet, it hints at the beginning of a change in Stahr's status as a hero or a prince. His play of authority is complicit in undermining its legitimacy. With his claims to transcendence, absolute truth and morality, completed by his notion of art, Stahr generates the displeasure of his management and employees who collaborate to wreck his life. In insisting on the divine image of himself, he hints at his own superiority to others. He treats them as virtually lower classes, alien groups and immensely less intellectual individuals. For him, his conception of himself, his interpretation of his role in life and his relationship with others are fixed and rigid and so he demands that others see them as such. According to Stahr, his mission in life is to provide people with true creative art because " 'It takes more than brain. You writers and artists poop out and get all mixed up, and somebody has to come in and straighten you out'" (21). He believes that writers and artists are so blinded by their selfish desires that they can't give art its true image: " 'You seem to take things so personally, hating people and worshipping them- always thinking people are so important - especially yourselves. You just ask to be kicked around. I like people and I like them to like me, but I wear my heart where God put it- on the inside'", says Stahr to Wylie White (21). Ironically, Stahr commits what he accuses others of. He is so blinded by his selfish desires and claims to superiority that he loses self-awareness and, with it, the ability to apprehend and attach himself to truth and true knowledge that exists apart from all systems of belief; instead he possesses "a self or consciousness", to borrow Fish's words in describing Milton's Belial "that is turned inward in the direction of its own prejudices, which, far from being transcended, continue to inform its every word and action" (1990, 205). Furthermore, he takes things personally, hates and worships people. In other words, Stahr has his own negative points; he unconsciously reveals his weaknesses, that he is far

from being a purely divine figure. Still what he implies is not essentially different from Diver's conclusions concerning people's conduct. Like him, he believes a true artist should detach himself from personal involvement, typical of everyday life situations and wear his "heart where God put it - on the inside". On another occasion, he tells Boxley, the English writer, who, as Rapf thinks, is based on Aldous Haxley and reflects Fitzgerald's youthful ideas (76), that the Hollywood establishment "have to take people's own favorite folklore and dress it up and give it back to them" (128). Does he mean that art should entertain and amuse audiences rather than cause their dissatisfaction and displeasure? Does he believe that cinema, true art, is deprived of moral inclinations and is confined to the field of entertainment and so run the risk of giving art a debased image? Stahr, like Dick Diver, presents two types of acting: first, acting in the real stage of the world, which is akin to Hamlet's notion of acting. On this stage people "suit the action to the word" (*Hamlet*, III, ii, 16) and therefore people are "*homo seriosus*"; second, acting in cinema where any kind of empathy either between the actor and his audience or between the actor and his role is prohibited, and therefore this kind of acting exemplifies the negative aspects of the "*homo rhetoricus*". According to Walter Benjamin, however, the film actor cannot but be engulfed by the feeling of strangeness. Because his creation, his role, consists of various disconnected performances, he is denied the chance to identify either with the stage or with himself (1968, 229-230). The first type states its moral message explicitly, insists on it and allows for no other interpretations. Hence, the audience becomes a passive recipient of an entirely formulated meaning. The second type, however, casts the audience in the role of an active agent in the making of meaning. Since it denies any clear bond between the actor and his role, the actor and the audience, the signifier and the signified, it gives the audience the chance

to construct a wide diversity of interpretations. But Walter Benjamin warns against putting the public in the position of the critic. He thinks that the movie with its “shock effect” requires no attention on the part of the public because its mode of perception is one in a state of distraction.The audience, he concludes, “is an examiner, but an absent-minded one” (240-1).

In the name of true art, Stahr is willing to go ahead with a film that will lose money; he fires a director and a camera man for focusing the camera on the top of Claudette Colbert's head instead of photographing her beautiful face; a chance meeting on the beach with a black man who will not let his children go to the movies convinces Stahr to throw four pictures out of his plan; he makes writers work in several pairs on the same idea so as to get the desired script; and once, he invents a game to recreate for a group of writers the proper atmosphere they need to go on with the kind of performance he desires. Unfortunately, Stahr's attitudes arouse the dissatisfaction of those people, who are ‘of Hollywood’ (166), who cause his degeneration from the first type of acting packed with nobility and honesty to the second characterized by artificiality, aggression and crime. Worse, the death of his wife, the nearness of his death and the failure of his love affair with Kathleen, who is the exact image of his wife, accelerate the process of his death.

The death of Stahr's wife so terribly shatters his life that he loses his previous liveliness and vigor. Even when his professional success comes to a climax Stahr feels that he is over-worked and deathly tired and that his rule in Hollywood is almost moribund: "I've got no place to go in the evenings, so I just work" (31), he tells Cecilia early in the novel; he is lonesome, and feels too old and tired to undertake anything apart from pictures. On seeing Kathleen amid the confusion which follows the earthquake, Stahr is at once haunted by her face and attempts to control the

past by casting her in the role of his dead wife, Minna. Once he finds her, he is so dazzled by her beauty that their eyes "met and tangled. For an instant they made love as no one ever dares to do after. Their glance was slower than embrace, more urgent than a call" (79). Stahr behaves as if he has restored his former vitality and happiness. He feels that he is invited by her beautiful eyes "to a romantic communion of unbelievable intensity" (90). So it might be said that Stahr is writing and producing a show which signifies a replaying of an unpleasant experience (the death of his wife who nurtures and fosters his imagination and therefore is a mother-type figure) to his own liking. Kathleen notices that and accepts his offer; she says, "You've fallen for me - completely. You've got me in your dreams" (91). Staged repetitions, as Peter Brooks and Jerry Aline Fleiger indicate in the context of their discussion of Freud, are advantageous since one is given the chance to exercise active mastery over reality, over what one has been compelled to endure (in Davis ed., 1986, Brooks, 289-90; Fleiger, 359). Stahr's love affair with Kathleen affirms that Stahr is a figure, centering on the principles of the "*homo rhetoricus*" who considers reality, the world and people as subject to his desires and wishes. The fact that he imposes on Kathleen his plans and revision of reality reassures him of his power and fills him with pleasure and comfort. Looked at from a different angle it might be said that his sense of pleasure stems from the power over time and space with which cinema, the art of mechanical reproduction, provides him. Stahr happens to see Kathleen for the first time through a film camera. With the lens that adjusts at any angle Stahr wants and moves in space, he is able to focus on her and realize that she is the exact image of Minna, a replica, a perfect reproduction of his dead wife. As Benjamin write, technical reproduction “can bring out all those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye” and “put the copy of the original into

situations which would be out of reach for the original itself" (220). Indeed, with the close-up, Stahr not only sees Kathleen, who will otherwise escape natural vision, but also focuses on her eyes, which without this technique, will remain unnoticed by him and, in consequence, the reader. More important, Minna, the original reproduction, leaves her locale in the grave to meet Stahr first in the form of Kathleen in the studio and afterwards in the form of a photograph record.

It might be added that Stahr's pleasure arises from his awareness that he represents a world where he, "the active/male", to use Laura Mulvey's words, takes pleasure in subjecting "the passive/female" to his controlling and curious gaze. He reduces her to an object of sexual stimulation (in Davis ed., 1994, 224-225). The most colorful examples which best illustrate this are when he first meets her and their eyes "met and tangled" and "made love as no one ever dares to do after" (79) and at the scene at Brady's party where Stahr feels that he is invited by her beautiful eyes "to a romantic communion of unbelievable intensity" (90). As already said, Stahr's pleasure arises from using Kathleen as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. But as the above quotation implies, Kathleen draws pleasure from being looked at and plays the exhibitionist role imposed on her; she behaves according to the role she is styled in and expected to endorse. Mulvey says: "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (in Davis ed., 1994, 425). With this strong emphasis on Kathleen as a replica (her fitness for exhibition), a "passive/female" who is subject to Stahr's will and in adjusting herself to this role, is she not in danger of losing her value as a human being? Not quite so because, if Kathleen's beauty haunts Stahr so profoundly that she impacts upon his life and lives in his dreams, if her eyes

are powerful enough to make Stahr undergo a strange experience and if she is the heroine, the love or even the concern, the fear that inspires Stahr, isn't she, by a strange paradox, the real playwright who makes Stahr act and behave the way he does? Isn't she the determiner of what reality is for him? More important, while still caught within the language of patriarchy, under the control of man's gaze, the woman, as Mulvey maintains, symbolizes the castration threat by her real lack of a penis and therefore shatters the patriarchal "pleasure" (427). One route that the male consciousness might choose to tread, so as to escape from this castration anxiety, as Mulvey proceeds to outline, is "voyeurism" usually associated with sadism. She says, "Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end" (428). What Mulvey says is apposite to our understanding of the behavior of Stahr, who advances a similar notion after his loss of Kathleen and once he realizes that time is running out and that he is due to die soon: "He had an evening- a beginning, a middle and an end" (133). What Stahr ultimately intuits here is more than his perception of his personal history; he provides us with the essential terms that consider the covenant history of the world as a great plan, an unrepeatable "performance" of Providence, proceeding in a Biblical dimension of place and time, guided to its proper conclusion. Still, Stahr does not think that this great theater of the world governed as it is by a divine dramatist has a place for human freedom and effort. On the contrary, he discovers that his life witnesses a radical shift from one position to its antithesis: from the position of the "*homo rhetoricus*", the playwright-actor who devises and plays non-stop roles and ever-changing situations and, in consequence, is not committed to any single role, to the position of the "*homo seriosus*", the actor who believes in a master situation, a referent

reality on which all men depend and so is constrained by the one and only role assigned to him; from the position of one assuming that reality yields to first rate intelligence to one whose designs are turned upon their heads and thinks life is a "cheat" (1963, 112), and from the position of a reader who can produce various interpretations of a certain text and can enter the text at his will, to the position of a reader who has one route to follow. With this recognition, Stahr knows that the last act of his own tragedy is approaching and so his vision is darkened.

Notes

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supported in part by a grant from College of Sharieah And Islamic Studies.

** F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896 – 1940) is said to have created the Jazz Age defined by him as "a generation grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in men shaken." Among his very famous publications were *This Side of Paradise*, *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*. *The Last Tycoon* (1941), Fitzgerlad's last unfinished novel, depicts the glittering decadence of Hollywood in its heyday.

تلخيص

استخدام القوة والتمثيل في رواية أف. سكوت فتسجيرالد:

"التايكون الاخير"

للقوة والمسرح أرض مشتركة: لكليهما يوجد طلبات من الآخرين تحت إمرتهم وإشـــتراط الطاعـــة. مونرو ستار، بطل الرواية والذي يلعب دور السلطة الإلهية، أو أمير ميكيا فيللي مهتم بسلامة ورفاهية عماله(شعبه) إنما هو شبيه بعالم المسرح، بل أكثر من ذلك، هو مخرج حقيقي في هيلوود. من خـــلال قوة شخصيته والسينما، يستطيع "ستار" هذا من فرض سيطرته على الناس داخل وخارج هيلـــوود. ولكن, هذا المخرج الموهوب والشاب يدفع ثمناً غالياً لسلطته العالية هذه من خلال معاناته وكونـــه ضحية لأعمال الإرهاب، الخداع والعنف. ومما يثير السخرية، أنه شعوره بالمعاناة وكونه ضحية الذي يرفع من مرتبته ويساعد في تنقيته من أكاذيبه وخيانته اللاتي يمليه عليه منصبه.

תקציר

השימוש בכוח והמשחק ברומן של אף סקוט פיצזגיראלד:

"הטאיקון האחרון"

לכוח ותיאטרון מכנה משותף: לשניהם יש דרישות מאחרים לרבות צייתנות.מונרו סטאר ,הגיבור של הרומן, שמשחק תפקיד של רשות דתות, נסיך מיקי אווילי, אשר נאמן לרווחת אנשיו (בני עמו) לא רק מזכיר את עולם הבמה, אלא הוא בעצמו במאי בהיליווד. באמצעות הכוח של דמותו ושל הקולנוע סטאר מצליח לשלוט על אנשים בתוך ומחוצה להוליווד. אבל הבמאי הצעיר והמוכשר הזה משלם ביוקר עבור הרשות הרמה שלו באמצעות הסבל שלו והיותו קורבן לאלימות וטרור. למרבית האירוניה, הסבל שלו והיותו קורבן עוזרים לו להיות נקי מהתכסיסים אשר רשותו הכתיבה עליו.

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