FITZGERALD'S *THE LAST TYCOON* SEEN BY ELIA KAZAN: HOLLYWOOD WITHIN HOLLYWOOD

In his preface to the edition of F. S. Fitzgerald's posthumous novel, Edmund Wilson, the famous reviewer of the Lost Generation, stated that "The moving-picture business in America has here been observed at a close range, studied with a careful attention and dramatized with a sharp wit ... *The Last Tycoon* is the best novel we have had about Hollywood and it is the only one that takes us inside."[1]

In 1939, Fitzgerald wrote his sweet-and-sour reflection on the world of the movie industry, after his failed experience as a scriptwriter for MGM. 35 years after the publication of this Hollywood novel, Hollywood looks back into its old splendour and misery in a new reading of Fitzgerald's text, this time not in words, but through the expert eyes of Harold Pinter and Elia Kazan. It is precisely this inside view on Hollywood which will be dealt with in the present paper, through the analysis of both the narrative and cinematic texts. Special attention will be paid to aspects such as point of view, narrative structure and theme.

A) *THE LAST TYCOON:* THE NOVEL

Criticism on Fitzgerald's posthumous novel has come to see in it the sketch of a story that recaptures / retakes not only the main theme of *The Great Gatsby*, but also makes of its diverse references to the world of the moving pictures its main subject, and evokes the personality of Gatsby as hero, and of Carraway as narrator, in the characters of Monroe Stahr and Cecilia Brady:

To this novel, Fitzgerald was bringing not only *Gatsby*'s succinctness but its central idea, ... the death of the Great American Dream. In Hollywood -which he called a "dump", a "hideous town ... full of human spirit at a new low of debasement"— Fitzgerald had found a setting more glitteringly unreal that East Egg and, in Irving Thalberg, the model for a substantively tragic hero, a model whose successes, bitter struggles and untimely death symbolized the death of both art and individualism in America.[2]

It is significant, however, the fact that Fitzgerald wanted to keep the subject-matter of the novel he was writing a secret, because it specifically dealt with Hollywood, with the whole movie industry, and its actors, directors, writers and monsters. In a letter he wrote to Perkins

---

[1] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon: An Unfinished Novel*, edited by Edmund Wilson (New York: Scribner's, 1941). All page references are to the paperback Penguin edition, New York, 1965, pp. 1-2

[2] Wells, W. *Tycoons and Locusts: A Regional Look at Hollywood Fiction of the 1930s*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973, pp. 49-12[.

-his editor- in May 1939, Fitzgerald says that "the novel [he was writing at that time] was about some things that had happened to me in the last two years. It is distinctly not about Hollywood (and if it were it is the last impression that I would want to get about".[1]

In the outline Fitzgerald sent to his editor and to the publishers he states that "the love story [between Stahr and Kathleen] is the meat of the book". Although this was probably the author's intention in a first draft of the novel, it ended up being not just a love affair that takes place in Hollywood between a producer and a girl, but a story about Hollywood, about the film industry, in which the protagonist is a producer, a god-like figure, who happens to fall in love with a girl who reminds him of his dead wife. Nevertheless, we must take into account the fact that what we have is not the complete text, but only the first 6 chapters. We also have some important information on the line that the story was going to follow, some sketches about the characters that appeared in the author's notes, apart from two outlines that were kept in his correspondence with his editor. All this material was read and gathered for publication by his friend Edmund Wilson bearing in mind that Fitzgerald's intention was to revise it (he actually spent a long time in revising the drafts of his previous novels), because he intended to rewrite the first part completely, and "he would not want it seen as it is".

So what we have is not the text Fitzgerald wanted. However, we may apply to this case an accurate notion on narration and narrativity: "A story is a narration that attains a certain degree of completeness, and even a fragment of a story or an unfinished story will imply that completeness as an aspect of its informing principle — the intentionality that governs its construction."[2] We may observe this completeness in the treatment of themes and characters in *The Last Tycoon*, although they may have been subject to change. For instance, a technical device Fitzgerald was determined to use and which has created problems among the critics, was the idea of having one of the protagonists of the novel, Cecilia Brady, as narrator. This resource had already proved succesful in *The Great Gatsby,* because it was consistently maintained throughout the novel. However, in the case of *The Last Tycoon*, this was one of the elements which needed revision, because, for instance, the narrator could not be present in the meeting of the board of directors, or at the scenes between the lovers that take place in Stahr's house at the beach. Fitzgerald probably foresaw the difficulties this narrator would bring about, for, as he mentions in the outline, "I hope to get the verisimilitude of a first person narrative, combined with a Godlike knowledge of all events that happen to my characters".

Fitzgerald chose Cecilia as narrator, because "she is *of* the movies —she takes Hollywood for granted— but not *in* them ... she is intelligent, cynical but understanding and kindly towards the people, great or small, who are of Hollywood."[3] What he needed was an observer, somebody who could comment on what happened- such as the production of the movies, or life at

---

[1] Dardis, Tom *Some Time in the Sun* (New York: Limelight ed, 1988), p. 74.

[2] Robert Scholes, "Narration and Narrativity in Film and Fiction", in his *Semiotics and Interpretation*, (New Haven & London: Yale U. P., 1982), reprinted in Mast & Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism*. (New York & Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1985).

[3] Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon*, op. cit., p. 168 & 166.

the studios- in an objective way, because she was not involved. At the same time he needed someone who would fall in love with Stahr, someone who admired him as much as Cecilia does, so that he would not be judged too severely.

After all, this is the story of Monroe Stahr, who has been regarded as "the best artist in Fitzgerald's cast of characters"; but, at the same time, he is "a flawed, three-dimensional and *active* hero, seen at work ... for a full third of the novel." [1] The story deals with his life as a Hollywood producer, - based, as is well known, upon the real "tycoon" of the film industry, Irving Thalberg, and it explores Stahr's miseries, his illness, his emptiness and his grandeur. He is the invisible head of the chain, from the first conception of a film to its final result: "Monroe Stahr ... is inextricably involved with an industry of which he has been one of the creators, and its fate will be implied by his tragedy" (Foreword, p. 2).

A critic who was comparing the characteristics of Fitzgerald's protagonists rightly said that "Gatsby created illusion only for Daisy, Dick Diver only for his small circle of intimates, but Monroe Stahr spun out illusion for a nation."[2] In order to create this illusion, Stahr worked very hard to be able to manage every detail of the process, which would finally result in a world of dreams: "Dreams hung in fragments at the far end of the room, suffered analysis, passed —to be dreamed in crowds or else discarded ..."[3]

His personality is analyzed in many respects; not only do we see him at work, in control of every single element in the chain of film production, but also in his relationship with all the social "strata" connected with the business: from technicians, or writers, to the board of producers, from directors and stars to stunts and security guards. Not only does he tell a writer how to write, or an actor how to play his role, but also he reads and corrects the scripts, which must respond to the stories he wants to tell. As Stahr himself says, "The first thing I decide is the *kind* of story I want. We change in every other regard, but once that is set we've got to work towards it with every line and movement ..."[4]

The essence of film has to be explained to Boxley, the famous writer —based on the figure of Aldous Huxley and his experiences as a scriptwriter in Hollywood.[5], who was unable to understand the characteristic way of narrating stories for the movies. Stahr makes it clear to him in the following reference, which serves us for a twofold purpose: on the one hand it summarizes the basic idea of how to narrate for the movies, and on the other, it leads us to the analysis of *The Last Tycoon*, the film.

---

[1] Joss Lutz Marsh, "Fitzgerald, *Gatsby*, and *The Last Tycoon*: The 'American Dream" and the Hollywood Dream Factory". Part I, in *Literature / Film Quarterly*, vol. 20, 1992, n° 1, pp. 3-11. In this article, Lutz contrasts Stahr with Gatsby, who can be considered "a true hero of consumption."

[2] Seiters, Dan. *Image Patterns in the Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1976), p. 133.

[3] *The Last Tycoon*, p. 70.

[4] *The Last Tycoon*, p. 48.

[5] This episode was based on a argument between Irving Thalberg and Aldous Huxley, mentioned by Jose Luis Guarner in *Fotogramas*, nr 1489 (29 / 4 / 1977), collected in his *Autorretrato del cronista* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1994), pp. 180-2.

'Suppose you're in your office. You've been fighting duels or writing all day and you're too tired to fight or write any more. You're sitting there staring - dull, like we all get sometimes. A pretty stenographer that you've seen before comes into the room and you watch her - idly. She doesn't see you, though you're very close to her. She takes off her gloves, opens her purse and dumps it out on a table-'

Stahr stood up, tossing his key-ring on his desk.

'She has two dimes and a nickel - and a cardboard match box. She leaves the nickel on the desk, puts the two dimes back into her purse and takes her black gloves to the stove, opens it and puts them inside. There is one match in the match box and she starts to light it kneeling by the stove. You notice that there's a stiff wind blowing in the window - but just then your telephone rings. The girl picks it up, says hello - listens - and says deliberately into the phone, "I've never owned a pair of black gloves in my life." She hangs up, kneels by the stove again, and just as she lights the match you glance around very suddenly and see that there's another man in the office, watching every move the girl makes-'

Stahr paused. He picked up his keys and put them in his pocket.

'Go on', said Boxley, smiling. 'What happens?'

'I don't know', said Stahr. 'I was just making pictures.'

...

'What was the nickel for?' asked Boxley evasively.

'I don't know,' said Stahr. Suddenly he laughed. 'Oh, yes - the nickel was for the movies.'

'What in the hell do you pay me for? he demanded. 'I don't understand the damn stuff.'

'You will, said Stahr, 'or you wouldn't have asked about the nickel'[1]

This scene will be used twice in the film version of *The Last Tycoon*, once as an illustration of the situation that takes place both in the novel and in the film, the dialogue between Stahr and the scriptwriters, which explains the basic idea of what movies are, and the power that such a figure like Monroe Stahr, the "production genius" could display in that world. Its second appearance is at the end of the film, as a monologue in which Stahr recalls the phrase 'I was just making pictures' as the main point which gives meaning to his whole life.

Boxley can write, according to Stahr, "interesting talk, but nothing more", because he considers that "movie standards are different" from those he would use if he were writing one of his novels. This sequence is useful to reflect two different visions on narration. Boxley, the literary man, can write "graceful dialogue", can portray the world with words, but what he cannot do is to paint the world in images, and this is, according to Stahr, essential in the movies.

B) *THE LAST TYCOON:* THE FILM

As regards point of view in the narrative discourse of *The Last Tycoon*, we have already mentioned that Fitzgerald wanted to repeat the experience of a first person narrator for his last

---

[1] *The Last Tycoon*, pp. 40-41.

novel. In this novel, the narrator, Cecilia, presents herself in the first chapter together with some of the main characters (her father, Wylie White - one of the writers who works for MGM, and Stahr). Besides, she provides us with a quick glimpse of the kind of world that awaits her and us readers.

In the film, however, we lack the advantage of a narrator, and structurally speaking, we are directly plunged into, as it were, the second chapter of the novel, what Cecilia calls "The Producer's Day", and no further background on the characters is given. Their personality is something we will have to work out from the images, and from what the characters say about one another, as is the case with Monroe Stahr. Harold Pinter, the scriptwriter of the film version, chose to change the introduction, and the viewpoint. He decided to employ a montage of takes from different stories; thus, the film begins with a sequence from a gangster movie. The next shot is that of a projection room, where we see the back of a man who decides on the suitability of the scene we have just been presented. This man, we spectators will later discover, is Monroe Stahr, the protagonist.

One would imagine that the reason why Pinter would have chosen not to have a narrator has to do with an intention to avoid the specific literary device. He preferred to use the more "cinematic" juxtaposition of scenes in which we are directly presented with the action, since images can outline the main aspects of a character in the same way a descriptive narrative does. His scheme would seem to be as follows: if we are going to talk about the world of the movies, as seen in the life of a Hollywood producer, we might as well have him, from the very beginning of the film, doing his job.

Besides, this presentation enhances the mystery around the figure of Monroe Stahr, the producer who "never wanted to appear on the film credits" but who was behind the scene all the time, like a *Deus ex machina*. In the film, we cannot see his face until the fourth sequence[1], but from the beginning we hear his voice, and see him in the projection room, giving orders about cutting or adding details to the shots he has been watching, and then we observe him as he watches the shooting of a film without being seen. The beginning of the *The Last Tycoon*, the film, explores Stahr's multiple activities in detail, which can be summarized in the following quotation from the novel:

> "[In his projection room] Stahr sat at 2: 30 and again at 6: 30 watching the length of film taken during the day. There was often a savage tensity about the occasion - he was dealing with faits accomplis - the net result of months of buying, planning, writ-

---

[1] For the distinction between scene and sequence, we may use the following reference, quoted in Michel Chion, *Como se escribe un guión*, Madrid: Cátedra, 1992, pp. 147-8: "La *secuencia,* unidad más grande, se define como una serie de escenas agrupadas según una idea común, un bloque de escenas. ... Metz define la escena como una unidad más pequeña que la secuencia: "La escena reconstituye una unidad todavía considerada como concreta y análoga a la que nos ofrecen el teatro o la vida" (en la que el tiempo corre en continuidad), mientras que la secuencia es "la unidad de una acción compleja (aunque única), que se desarrolla a través de varios lugares y saltando momentos inútiles". ...y precisa que en la escena "tiempo fílmico y tiempo diegético (de la acción contada) parecen coincidir cuando en la secuencia no coinciden".

ing and rewriting, casting, constructing, lighting, rehearsing and shooting - the fruit of brilliant hunches or of counsels of despair, of lethargy, conspiracy and sweat."[1]

Let us now concentrate on the structure in novel and film, particularly focusing on those aspects in which the two discourses diverge. Thus, we will only analyze the beginning and the ending of both texts, because the central part of the discourse, which deals specifically with Stahr's activity at the studio, and his relationship with Kathleen, follows to a certain extent the same scheme in both narrative media.

We have already referred to the first introductory sequence of the film when dealing with the absence of the figure of the narrator. The purpose of this montage, from a thematic and structural point of view, is that of showing the authority of this man, who decides on all the elements of a scene: from its length, to its thematic content, to the angle of the camera, and so on. This powerful beginning can be contrasted with the ending, as we'll see later on.

The second sequence, in which we see a guide (John Carradine) who leads a group of tourists on a visit to the studios, is not mentioned at all in the novel. This sequence refers to Monroe Stahr's past and to his present. The guide takes the visitors to Minna Davis's dressing room, and this reference to Stahr's dead wife serves as an introduction to the love plot that will take place between Stahr and Kathleen: we spectators will later be able to establish the resemblance between the two women, because we have seen Minna Davis's portrait. Then the tourists are lead to the "biggest film set in the world", which, significantly, is empty and one of the tourists asks the guide how they shot the earthquake of San Francisco. Although this reference may seem idle, it points out at two subsequent elements of the plot. First, the earthquake —this time not being shot for a movie, but in the movie itself— provides the setting for the lovers to meet, or rather, for Stahr to encounter the ghost of his dead wife; secondly, the very emptiness of the studio foreshadows the ending of the film, and of Stahr, as will be mentioned later on in this paper.

The third sequence, the shooting of a film within the film, shows the world of the movies from inside, with its artifice, its deceit, metaphorically presented in the plot of the film, its appearance and its reality. Structurally, it is used to present all the characters that will have some relationship with Stahr, and which may function as prototypes of Hollywood's golden era: the weak director (Dana Andrews), patronized by the famous foreign star (Jeanne Moreau), who clearly represents the part of the diva, the latin lover (Tony Curtis) who will later confess his impotence, and so on.

The fourth sequence introduces two characters, Pat Brady (Robert Mitchum) and his daughter Cecilia (Theresa Russell), who form part of Stahr's life, and complete this first approach to his figure. Brady calls himself in the film "the solid base upon which Monroe Stahr rests", and claims his loyalty for the genius, but at the end, he will discredit Stahr with the rest of the board of directors, after the episode with the sindicalist, and will be in charge of throwing

---

[1] *The Last Tycoon*, p. 65.

Stahr out of the industry. Cecilia, on the contrary, always defends Stahr. Her only role in the film is that of the faithful loving shadow of Stahr, a victim of unrequited love.

It is at last in this fourth sequence where we see Stahr in action, taking care of everything at the studio after the earthquake. From this moment onwards, the story concentrates on the figure of the production genius, with his success and his final fall. This leads us to the analysis of the ending of the film. The fact that the novel was left unfinished may have given Pinter the possibility to opt for an even more open ending. In the cinematographic version of *The Last Tycoon* we only see the beginning of Stahr's decline, without being shown his degradation, which was hinted at in the outline given by Fitzgerald. In this presumable ending of the novel, Stahr would be part of a murder plot against Brady, whilst in the film, the ending is formed by a meeting of the board of directors at the studio which dismisses Stahr as their representative. He will no longer be their "production genius", as we can see in the metaphoric final shot, when Stahr enters into empty set, as a symbolic ending for his life as the industry tycoon.

To sum up, with this comparative study of *The Last Tycoon*, novel and film, I have tried to approach the theme of Hollywood seen from within, through the figure of Monroe Stahr, who was 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 the censorship." The world of the moving pictures, experienced by Fitzgerald in all its splendour and its tragedy, is recaptured by Hollywood as an attempt of self-reflection, at a time when the industry of manufactured dreams is not what it used to be.

Patricia Fra López
University of Santiago

REFERENCES

Chion, Michel 1992: *Como se escribe un guión*, Madrid: Cátedra.

Dardis, Tom 1988: *Some Time in the Sun*. New York: Limelight.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott 1941: *The Last Tycoon: An Unfinished Novel*, edited by Edmund Wilson New York: Scribner's.

Guarner, Jose Luis 1994: *Autorretrato del cronista*. Barcelona: Anagrama.

Lutz Marsh, Joss 1992: Fitzgerald, *Gatsby*, and *The Last Tycoon*: The 'American Dream' and the Hollywood Dream Factory. Part I. *Literature / Film Quarterly*, 20, n° 1: 3-13.

Lutz Marsh, Joss 1992: Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* and *The Last Tycoon*: The "American Dream" and the Hollywood Dream Factory, Part II. In *Literature / Film Quarterly*, 20, No. 2: 102-107.

Scholes, Robert 1982: Narration and Narrativity in Film and Fiction. In his *Semiotics and Interpretation*. New Haven & London: Yale U. P.

Seiters, Dan 1976: *Image Patterns in the Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald.* Michigan: UMI Research Press.

Wells, W. 1973: *Tycoons and Locusts: A Regional Look at Hollywood Fiction of the 1930s.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

* * *