



# Twentieth-Century American Fiction on Screen

Edited by **R. Barton Palmer**

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## Twentieth-Century American Fiction on Screen

The essays in this collection analyze major film adaptations of twentieth-century American fiction, from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. During the century, films based on American literature came to play a central role in the history of the American cinema. Combining cinematic and literary approaches, this volume explores the adaptation process from conception through production and reception. The contributors explore the ways in which political and historical contexts have shaped the transfer from book to screen, and the new perspectives that films bring to literary works. In particular, they examine how the twentieth-century literary modes of realism, modernism, and postmodernism have influenced the forms of modern cinema. Written in a lively and accessible style, the book includes production stills and a detailed filmography. With its companion volume on nineteenth-century fiction, this study offers a comprehensive account of the rich tradition of American literature on screen.

R. BARTON PALMER holds Ph.D. degrees from Yale University (medieval studies) and New York University (cinema studies) and has published widely in those two fields. He is Calhoun Lemon Professor of English at Clemson University, directs the Film Studies Program at Clemson, and is the Director of the South Carolina Film Institute.



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R. Barton Palmer



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521834445](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521834445)

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First published in print format 2007

ISBN-13 978-0-511-27111-3 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-10 0-511-27111-5 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-83444-5 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-83444-9 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-54230-2 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-54230-8 paperback

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(All film production stills courtesy of the British Film Institute)

## Notes on contributors

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WILLIAM RODNEY ALLEN teaches at the Louisiana School for Math, Science, and the Arts. His special interests are modern American culture, film, and literature. Among his books are *Walker Percy: A Southern Wayfarer* (1988), *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut* (1988), and *Understanding Kurt Vonnegut* (1991). His most recent project is a collected edition of the interviews given by the filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen (forthcoming).

CHRISTOPHER AMES is Provost and Dean of the College at Washington College. He taught formerly at Agnes Scott College where he chaired the English department and was Charles A. Dana Professor of English. In addition to many scholarly articles and book chapters on various aspects of modern American culture, including film, Ames has published *The Life of the Party: Festive Vision in Modern Fiction* (1991) and *Movies about the Movies: Hollywood Reflected* (1998).

MATTHEW BERNSTEIN is Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Film Studies department at Emory University. Among his many writings on the history of American film and world cinema are *Walter Wanger: Hollywood Independent* (1994), *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era* (1999), and (both with Gaylyn Studlar) *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* (1997) and *John Ford Made Westerns: Filming the Legend in the Studio Era* (2001).

ROBERT H. BRINKMEYER, JR. is Professor of English and chair of the department at the University of Arkansas. Widely published on all aspects of Southern literature and culture, Brinkmeyer has written *Remapping Southern Literature: Contemporary Southern Writers and the West* (2000), *Katherine Anne Porter's Artistic Development: Primitivism, Traditionalism, and Totalitarianism* (1997), and *The Art and Vision of Flannery O'Connor* (1993), among other books.

MARC C. CONNER is Associate Professor of English at Washington & Lee University. His research interests include twentieth-century

American fiction and African-American literature. He edited *Speaking the Unspeakable: The Aesthetic Dimensions of Toni Morrison* (2000), and his essays have appeared in such journals as *Studies in American Fiction* and *Critique*.

STEFFEN HANTKE teaches for the Cultural Studies Program in the English department of Sogang University in Seoul, South Korea. In addition to essays on contemporary literature and film that have appeared in such journals as *Paradoxa*, *College Literature*, and *Post Script*, he has published *Conspiracy and Paranoia in Contemporary Literature* (1994) and *Horror: Creating and Marketing Fear* (2004).

McKAY JENKINS is Cornelius A. Tilghman Professor of English and Journalism at the University of Delaware, specializing in environmental studies, nonfiction writing, and the history and literature of race relations. He is the author of *The South in Black and White: Race, Sex and Literature in the 1940s* (1999), *The White Death: Tragedy and Heroism in an Avalanche Zone* (2000), and *Bloody Falls of the Coppermine: Madness, Murder and the Collision of Cultures in the Arctic, 1913* (2006).

ROBERT P. KOLKER is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Maryland. He has also taught at the Georgia Institute of Technology and the University of Virginia. Among his many books on the cinema are *Film, Form, and Culture* (1998), *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, and Altman* (2000), *Landscapes of Dread in the Scapes of Modernity: Welles, Kubrick, and the Imagination of the Visible* (2006), and "Psycho": *A Casebook* (2006).

THOMAS M. LEITCH is Professor of English at the University of Delaware, specializing in film and literary and cultural theory. He has a special interest in such popular narrative modes as detective stories and Hollywood genre films (westerns, musicals, gangster films, and comedies of all sorts). Among his books are *Find the Director and Other Hitchcock Games* (1991), *The Encyclopedia of Alfred Hitchcock* (2002), *Crime Films* (Cambridge, 2002), and *What Stories are: Narrative Theory and Interpretation* (1986).

R. BARTON PALMER is Calhoun Professor of Literature at Clemson University, where he also directs the Film Study Graduate Program. Among his many books on film and literary topics are *Joel and Ethan Coen* (2004), (with David Boyd) *After Hitchcock* (2006), and (with Robert Bray) *Hollywood's Tennessee: Tennessee Williams on Screen* (2006). With Linda Badley, Palmer serves as General Editor of *Traditions in World Cinema*.

ROBERT SKLAR is Professor of Cinema Studies at New York University. Among his many books on film and literary subjects are *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Last Laocoön* (1967), *City Boys* (1992), *A World History of Film* (2001), and *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (1999).

ROBERT STAM is University Professor at New York University. His numerous books in film and media studies include *Reflexivity in Film and Literature* (1992), *Subversive Pleasures* (1992), *Literature Through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation* (2004), and, with Alessandro Raengo, *A Companion to Literature and Film* (2005).

MARK R. WINCHELL is Professor of English at Clemson University. He also serves as the director of the League of the South Institute for Southern History and Culture. His publications include *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* (1996), *Where No Flag Flies: Donald Davidson and the Southern Resistance* (2000), *Too Good to Be True: The Life and Work of Leslie Fiedler* (2002), and *Reinventing the South: Versions of a literary Region* (2006).

ALLEN L. WOLL is Professor of History at Rutgers University-Camden, where he also directs the Film Studies program. He has published *Ethnic and Racial Images in American Film and Literature* (1987), *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (1991), and *The Hollywood Musical Goes to War* (1982).

## Acknowledgments

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The idea for this volume, and its companion, emerged from discussions with Dr. Linda Bree, senior editor at Cambridge University Press, that followed our serendipitous meeting at the Medieval Institute. I have benefited greatly not only from Linda's continuing interest and sound advice on sundry matters, but also from the comments of several anonymous readers, all of whom made very useful criticisms and suggestions. A larger, if more indirect, debt is owed to Jim Naremore of Indiana University and Bob Stam of New York University, whose stimulating work on film/literature adaptation has provided this volume with a theoretical program of sorts. The Calhoun Lemon foundation at Clemson University provided necessary research funds for completing this project, while graduate assistants John Longo and Kevin Manus ably assisted with copy-editing the manuscript.

# Introduction

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*R. Barton Palmer*

Since the early days of the commercial cinema, many, perhaps most, important works of literary fiction have found a subsequent life on the screen, extending their reach and influence. Filmmakers, in turn, have enjoyed the economic and critical benefits of recycling what the industry knows as “pre-sold properties.” No doubt, this complex intersection has deeply marked both arts. Keith Cohen, for example, has persuasively argued that cinematic narrative exerted a decisive influence on the shift in novelistic aesthetics from “telling” to “showing,” providing new depth of meaning to the old maxim *ut pictura poesis*.<sup>1</sup> Film theorists, in turn, most notably Sergei Eisenstein, have emphasized the formative influence on cinematic storytelling of the classic realist novel, whose techniques and themes, adapted by D. W. Griffith and others, made possible a filmic art of extended narrative. Modern fictional form has been shaped by filmic elements such as montage, shifting point of view, and close attention to visual texture. An enabling condition of this constant and mutually fruitful exchange has been the unconventional conventionality of both art forms, their generic receptivity to outside influence. As Robert Stam puts it, “both the novel and the fiction film are *summas* by their very nature. Their essence is to have no essence, to be open to all cultural forms.”<sup>2</sup>

Screen adaptations provide ideal critical sites not only for examining in detail how literary fiction is accommodated to cinematic form, but also for tracing the history of the symbiotic relationship of the two arts and the multifarious and ever-shifting connections between the commercial institutions responsible for their production. Until recently, however, neoromantic assumptions about the preeminent value of the source text have discouraged a thorough analysis of the complex negotiations (financial, authorial, commercial, legal, formal, generic, etc.) that bring adaptations into being and deeply affect their reception. Traditionalist aesthetic considerations have also foreclosed discussion of the place of adaptations within the history of the cinema. For this latter is a critical task that requires the identification and analysis of contextual issues that have little,

if anything, to do with the source. In sum, the notion of “faithfulness” as the sole criterion of worth positions the adaptation disadvantageously, as only a secondary version of an honored work from another art form. An exclusive view of the adaptation as a replication closes off its discussion not only *per se*, but also *in se*. From the point of view of the source, an adaptation can only reflect value, for it does not result from the originary, creative process that produced its model. Traditional adaptation studies thus strive to estimate the value of what, by its nature, can possess no value of its own.

For this reason, it is not surprising that literary scholars have too often viewed adaptations as only more or less irrelevant, if occasionally interesting, copies, as mere supplements to the literary source. From this viewpoint, the importance of adaptations is quite limited to the fact that they make their sources more available, extending the influence of literary masterpieces. Film scholars, in turn, have often viewed with suspicion and distaste the dependence of the screen adaptation on a novelistic pre-text, seeing “literary” cinema as a less than genuine form of film art. The “grand theory” developed during the past three decades has emphasized the description and analysis of various aspects of cinematic specificity; grand theory, however, has not for the most part concerned itself with the intersemiotic relationships that generate and define the formal features of film adaptations. A nascent discipline, eager to establish its independence, perhaps could not afford such tolerance and breadth of critical vision. An approach that postulated films as in some sense secondary, especially as derivative versions of valued literary texts, would enact in microcosmic form the institutional bondage of film to literature. It would also reinforce the notion that the cinema was a parasitic art form, dependent on prior literary creation. Providing popular abridgements of literary masterpieces (to make the obvious point) hardly argued for the cultural importance of what Gilbert Seldes terms the seventh of “the lively arts.” Studying filmic adaptation ran counter to the new theorizing about the cinema in the 1970s – not to mention the academic respectability and independence for which such work implicitly campaigned. For literary and film scholars alike, adaptation studies encountered disfavor on both intellectual and institutional grounds.

During the past five years, however, the increasing popularity in cinema studies of what is usually termed “middle level theory” has turned the attention of scholars back toward the analysis of, and limited *in parvo* theorizing about, the material history of films and filmmaking, including the cinema’s relationship with literature. A key role in this development has been the increasing institutional presence of cultural studies (or, in its more politically self-conscious British form, cultural



materialism). Now recognized as a legitimate academic specialty, cultural studies ignores the formal and institutional boundaries between film and literature, even as it provides fertile ground for working on their interconnections. As Stam has recently remarked, "From a cultural studies perspective, adaptation forms part of a flattened out and newly egalitarian spectrum of cultural production. Within a comprehensively textualized world of images and simulations, adaptation becomes just another text, forming part of a broad discursive continuum."<sup>3</sup> From this point of view, treating a film as an "adaptation" is a matter of critical politics as well as of facts, the result of a decision to privilege one form of connection or influence over any number of others.

Other recent developments in postmodern theory have made it possible for literary and film scholars alike to take a more nuanced and positive look at film adaptations. There is no doubt, in fact, that the field has been thriving, with a number of important theoretical works published during the past decade. In particular, intertextuality theory and Bakhtinian dialogics now hold prominent positions in literary and film studies. Intertextuality contests the received notion of closed and self-sufficient "works," their borders impermeable to influence, their structures unwelcoming of alien forms. As an archly postmodernist critical form, intertextuality provides an ideal theoretical basis from which can proceed an account of the shared identity of the literary source and its cinematic reflex. More radically, intertextual theory can be used to challenge the very notion of a privileged source/adaptation relationship by identifying the potentially innumerable pressures that affect the shaping of the adaptation; these pressures can be considered "texts" and any distinction between such texts and the contexts of production is arguably no more than a matter of analytical preference or rhetoric. In any case, any consideration of filmic adaptation means speaking of one text while speaking of another. Adaptation is by definition transtextual, to use Gérard Genette's more precise and inclusive taxonomic concept of textual relations. A peculiar doubleness characterizes the adaptation. For it is a presence that stands for and signifies the absence of the source-text. An adaptation refers to two texts with the same identity that are not the same. Such forms of permeable and shared textuality can be accounted for only by critical approaches that focus on interrelations of different sorts, including the (dis)connections between literary and cinematic contexts.

In film studies the decline of grand theory has enabled the field to take the direction that theorist Dudley Andrew has long advocated: a "sociological turn" toward the consideration of the institutional and contextual pressures that condition the process of adaptation and define what role the adaptation comes to play in the history of the cinema. Critical

studies of literary/film relations are beginning to focus on “how adaptation serves the cinema,” as Andrew puts it; and this new direction of inquiry has the added advantage of shedding light on how the literary source is affected by becoming part of an intertextual, intersemiotic, interinstitutional series.<sup>4</sup> Robert Stam provides an anatomy of source/adaptation relationships; these are surprisingly varied: “One way to look at adaptation is to see it as a matter of a source novel’s hypotext being transformed by a complex series of operations: selection, amplification, concretization, actualization, critique, extrapolation, analogization, popularization, and reculturalization.”<sup>5</sup>

Comparing the source and adaptation draws attention to the specific negotiations of various kinds involved in the process of transformation. Consideration can then be given to the role the resulting film comes to play within the cinema. The foundational premise of the approaches taken by the contributors to this volume has been that adaptations possess a value in themselves, apart from the ways in which they might be judged as (in)accurate replications of literary originals. Because it is sometimes a goal that guides those responsible for the adaptation process, faithfulness has found a place in the analyses collected here more as an aspect of context rather than a criterion of value. The fact (more often, the promise) of fidelity in some sense can also figure rhetorically in the contextualization of the film, most notably as a feature promoted by the marketing campaign. But very often it plays no crucial role in the transformation process and merits less critical attention than more relevant issues.

Undeniably, adaptations constitute an important area of modern cultural production, making them worthy and appropriate objects of study. But how to organize that study? Seeing a text as an adaptation means invoking its relations to two distinct but interconnected cultural series and its insertion within two divergent institutional histories; adaptations thereby become the analytical objects of two separate but not dissimilar disciplines in which topical, author-oriented, genre, and period forms of organization predominate. Film/literature adaptation courses are becoming increasingly prominent in university curricula, and they are usually housed within English or literature departments, where they are often organized, following the most common disciplinary paradigm, in terms of literary period. That practice has been followed in this volume and its companion, *Nineteenth-Century American Fiction on Screen*. This is by no means the only interesting or pedagogically useful way in which adaptations might be studied. In fact, Thomas Leitch, one of the contributors to this volume, in his essay on the various versions of *The Killers* raises an interesting challenge to such a privileging of the literary text and of the literary series more generally. Even so, it is indisputable that organization

of the source-texts by period has the not inconsiderable virtue of offering literature teachers a familiar body of fiction with which to work. Additionally, this approach focuses narrowly on a selected stretch of literary history, permitting the analysis of how movements, themes, and dominant formal features have undergone "cinematicization." In treating American fiction of the past century, this volume marshals a broad sweep of expert opinion, literary and cinematic, on an equally broad field of texts.

*Twentieth-Century American Fiction on Screen* has been conceived to fill the need for an up-to-date survey of the important films made from these texts, with the book's unity deriving in the first instance from the literary and cultural connections among the various sources. The fourteen essays collected here, written expressly for this volume, each address the adaptation (occasionally adaptations) of single literary texts, though discussion, where relevant, also ranges over screen versions of other works by the same author, other releases from the same director, or films that are otherwise relevant. This book has a focus that provides a ready organization for courses in adaptation, with readings and viewings easily coordinated with the essays. Despite their singular emphasis, the essays also open up discussion into broader areas of importance. Although the scheme adopted here is in the first instance literary, the different essays are also deeply cinematic, addressing specific aspects of the adaptation process, including details of production where relevant and usually seeking to define the role the film came to play within the history of the American cinema. Some contributors discuss the intersemiotic aspects of transferring a narrative from one medium to another, while others consider in depth the problems of authorship, an important question whenever the work of a valued author becomes part of the oeuvre of an important director or when the contributions of a screenwriter prove significant and defining.

Much thought has gone into the selection of novels and films. My starting point was to review all commercial American adaptations of twentieth-century American fiction from the sound era, roughly 1930 to the present. The extensive corpus of cinematic material has made it possible to exemplify the varied fictional traditions of the period, from traditional forms of realism (*The Color Purple*, *The Killers*, *The Last Tycoon*, *The Member of the Wedding*, *Ship of Fools*, *The Thin Red Line*), modernism (*The Day of the Locust*, *Intruder in the Dust*, *Lolita*, *Wise Blood*), and post-modernism (*Naked Lunch*, *Short Cuts*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*). It has also proved possible to offer a cross-section of authors, with five works written by women. I thought it appropriate as well to include two works, Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*, that engage interestingly with the American film industry and

with Hollywood as a cultural phenomenon. In the silent era not many feature films were adapted from twentieth-century fictional texts, and the few that were, in any case, are often too difficult to obtain for classroom use. Only films that had been commercially released in either VHS or DVD format and remain readily obtainable in either of these two formats made the final list. Full filmographies are included as an appendix.

The writers represented here are all *major* in the sense that they have been and remain the subject of substantial critical work. They also continue to find a readership; their works, in other words, remain in print. While nearly all the writers on the list are what we would now term “high cultural,” I have decided to include one writer, James Jones, who might be described as a popular writer with substantial historical, but also literary, importance. In the final analysis, of course, both the criteria used and the particular choices made are subjective, in the sense that they are based, first, on my knowledge of and experience with literary and film study and, second, on my appraisal of what material would appeal to scholarly and general readers, yet also prove useful in the classroom. I do not know, of course, any more than anyone else, how to decide *objectively* what works, literary or cinematic, should be thought *major*. Among other prominent rankings, the American Film Institute has compiled a list of the “100 Best American Films.” A number of the films I have selected, but by no means all, are on this list. If there is a comparable list for twentieth-century American novels and short fiction, I am not familiar with it, but most of the literary texts chosen for this volume would likely be on it. But even if such a list did exist, its authoritative value would be dubious. The canon of literary study remains very much in dispute and can hardly be said to be fixed or stable, as scholars such as Paul Lauter have shown.<sup>6</sup>

In planning this book, the status of both authors and works was in fact a preliminary condition. That I considered them *major* was a necessary but not sufficient reason for inclusion. Another important purpose of this volume is to exemplify the *process* of adaptation and provide detailed discussion of how adaptations have served the cinema. In making the selections from among major works by major authors, I have picked formally and culturally interesting adaptations, by which I mean those that can be shown to have served the cinema in some significant or revealing fashion. For example, the fictional text might offer technical challenges (e.g., how do you film a novel with prominent antirealist elements such as *Naked Lunch*?) or the context of the adaptation might be interesting from the viewpoint of Hollywood history (e.g., in the case of *Intruder in the Dust*, Hollywood’s renewed concern during the late 1940s with racism). The film might constitute an important part of a director’s oeuvre, with

the source thus inserted into two expressive series, one literary and the other cinematic. In fact, most of the films selected here belong to the oeuvres of respected old and new Hollywood *auteurs*, a roll of honor that includes Robert Altman, David Cronenberg, John Huston, Elia Kazan, Stanley Kramer, Stanley Kubrick, Terrence Malick, John Schlesinger, Steven Spielberg, and Fred Zinnemann. As the contributors to this volume demonstrate, the films discussed herein all hold an interest that, while determined to a large degree by their status as adaptations, also derives from their insertion within the history of Hollywood and the larger cultural role that the movies played in twentieth-century America.

## NOTES

1. Keith Cohen, *Film and Fiction: The Dynamics of Exchange* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). See also his *Writing in a Film Age: Essays by Contemporary Novelists* (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1991).
2. Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," in James Naremore, ed., *Film Adaptation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 61.
3. Robert Stam, "Introduction," in Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo, eds., *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 9–10.
4. Dudley J. Andrew, "Adaptation," in Naremore, ed., *Film Adaptation*, p. 35.
5. Stam, "Dialogics of Adaptation," p. 68.
6. See especially Paul Lauter, *Canons and Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

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# 1      Filming an unfinished novel:          *The Last Tycoon*

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*Robert Sklar*

When F. Scott Fitzgerald (b. 1896) died of a heart attack at age forty-four, on December 21, 1940, in Hollywood, he left behind a novel-in-progress about the motion picture industry. A few weeks later, his companion, the Hollywood columnist Sheilah Graham, sent the author's draft materials to his editor, Maxwell Perkins, at Charles Scribner's Sons. After considering several options, including hiring another writer to complete the work following Fitzgerald's outlines and notes, Perkins enlisted the literary critic (and friend of Fitzgerald) Edmund Wilson – whom Graham had also contacted shortly after the author's death – to shape and edit the manuscript for publication. As titles, Fitzgerald had considered "Stahr: A Romance," after the novel's central character, Monroe Stahr, a Hollywood studio executive, and "The Love of the Last Tycoon: A Western," giving the work a different, perhaps more ironic, genre connotation. Wilson's version was published in October 1941 as *The Last Tycoon: An Unfinished Novel*, in a volume with *The Great Gatsby* and five of Fitzgerald's most important short stories.<sup>1</sup>

"Unfinished works by great writers form a category as haunting as it is unsatisfactory," the novelist Alan Hollinghurst has written. "In gratifying a curiosity about what might have been, they heighten the feeling of loss."<sup>2</sup> One certainly feels a sense of loss at Fitzgerald's early death, yet in the case of *The Last Tycoon* what exists in published form seems almost more of a benefaction than a cause for regret. Perkins puzzled over whether what Graham had sent him was publishable at all. Fitzgerald had drafted little more than half of the planned episodes, and expected to rewrite nearly everything that he had completed. The unwritten sections were to have involved a turn toward violence and murder plots, and might have drastically altered the tone of what appeared in print in 1941. "It would require some re-arrangement, and it would not be well proportioned, and would chiefly tell a secondary story, a love episode in the life of the hero," Perkins wrote to Wilson, and the critic, following the editor's lead, changed words, moved scenes, and created chapters,



Figure 1. Elia Kazan's *The Last Tycoon* is largely the story of a doomed romance between studio mogul Monroe Stahr (Robert De Niro) and Kathleen Moore (Ingrid Boulting), who resembles his dead wife. A 1976 Academy Productions/Paramount Pictures release.

forging the work that we know now out of the author's more-or-less raw material.<sup>3</sup>

Matthew J. Bruccoli, who edited a scholarly version of Fitzgerald's drafts more than half a century after the novel's original appearance, criticizes the "cosmeticized text" that Wilson produced.<sup>4</sup> "*The Last Tycoon*



is not really an ‘unfinished novel,’” Brucoli has asserted, “if that term describes a work that is partly finished. The only way to regard it is as material toward a novel.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, what Wilson accomplished for Fitzgerald should not be underestimated. As Fitzgerald’s first book publication since a short story collection in 1935, the 1941 *The Last Tycoon* once again brought before the reading public what Perkins called “those magical sentences and phrases and paragraphs that only Scott could write,” and launched the revival of the author’s reputation that catapulted him from neglect to preeminence as a twentieth-century American writer.<sup>6</sup>

As a facet of Fitzgerald’s recuperation, the Philco Television Playhouse adapted *The Last Tycoon* for live dramatization on October 16, 1949, a few months after Paramount Pictures’ *The Great Gatsby*, the first sound film based on a Fitzgerald work, appeared in cinemas. John Frankenheimer directed another live television version of *The Last Tycoon* for the Playhouse 90 series on March 14, 1957, with Jack Palance in the role of Monroe Stahr.<sup>7</sup> In 1965 the producer Lester Cowan (who in 1939 had hired Fitzgerald to write a screenplay of his short story “Babylon Revisited” as a potential, but unrealized, vehicle for Shirley Temple), announced plans to film *The Last Tycoon* for M-G-M release, with a script by the novelist and screenwriter Irwin Shaw.<sup>8</sup> Nothing came of this, either, and the producer Sam Spiegel acquired rights to the novel in the early 1970s. Spiegel engaged the British playwright Harold Pinter to write the screenplay, even though he had heavily criticized Pinter’s script for Joseph Losey’s *Accident* (1967) and dropped out of producing that film.<sup>9</sup> Eventually, Elia Kazan joined the project as director, and *The Last Tycoon*, with principal photography completed in January 1976, was released by Paramount on November 15, 1976. The relation between two collaborations – the Fitzgerald-Perkins-Wilson novel and the Spiegel-Pinter-Kazan film – is the subject of this essay.

## 2

“There is probably no more pathetic image in recent literary mythology,” writes Mark Royden Winchell, “than that of F. Scott Fitzgerald in Hollywood.”<sup>10</sup> The myth that Winchell interrogates is of Hollywood as corrupter and destroyer of literary talent. Yet Fitzgerald’s image, as he describes it, adheres closely to the known facts: the author’s literary and financial difficulties that led him in the mid-1930s to seek employment as a screenwriter; his contract with M-G-M beginning in July 1937; bitter squabbles with co-workers; limited success at his work; feelings of abjection and resentment at his status and treatment; renewed alcohol abuse. When M-G-M dropped him after eighteen months, there was fruitless



freelance screen work and short story writing to pay the bills. Not to speak of his fatal heart attack and truncated novel-in-progress.

At the heart of his difficulties, claims Tom Dardis, lay “a certain snobbish contempt for, or perhaps fear of, the medium” of motion pictures.<sup>11</sup> In a 1936 *Esquire* essay that formed part of his “Crack-Up” self-reflections, Fitzgerald framed such attitudes within his characteristic concerns about cultural change and power. “I saw that the novel,” he wrote in “Pasting It Together,”

which at my maturity was the strongest and supplest medium for conveying thought and emotion from one human being to another, was becoming subordinated to a mechanical and communal art that, whether in the hands of Hollywood merchants or Russian idealists, was capable of reflecting only the tritest thought, the most obvious emotion. It was an art in which words were subordinated to images, where personality was worn down to the inevitable low gear of collaboration. As long past as 1930, I had a hunch that the talkies would make even the best selling novelist as archaic as silent pictures . . . there was a rankling indignity, that to me had become almost an obsession, in seeing the power of the written word subordinated to another power, a more glittering power, a grosser power.<sup>12</sup>

If these sentiments hampered his survival as a screenwriter, as he became more deeply familiar with the movie industry they also stimulated his thinking about its creative processes, its personnel and internal politics, and its cultural significance. *The Last Tycoon* is almost invariably, and necessarily, apprehended within the framework of Fitzgerald’s biography and artistic goals – as is the case in my study of his career, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Last Laocoön*<sup>13</sup> – or within the genre of the Hollywood novel, alongside contemporaneous works such as Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* and Budd Schulberg’s *What Makes Sammy Run?* Yet Fitzgerald’s effort also deserves to be taken seriously as film history. His notes (Wilson’s selection, covering thirty pages in the 1941 edition, and Bruccoli’s more extensive publication of photocopied handwritten notes and typescripts) and the novel itself comprise one of the earliest and most elaborated attempts to analyze the studio system and its transformations at the height of its success.<sup>14</sup>

The relevant comparison in this context is to Leo C. Rosten, whose sociological study of the structure and values of the motion picture community, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony*, *The Movie Makers*, funded by foundation grants and involving more than four thousand questionnaires filled out by studio employees of all ranks, was completed in summer 1941 and published later that year, around the same time as *The Last Tycoon*.<sup>15</sup> It should be emphasized that Fitzgerald’s manuscript and notes delve more deeply than does the sociologist into the role of unions and the Communist Party in 1930s Hollywood politics, and make a more concerted

attempt to link motion pictures to overarching themes of American history. The subject of Jews in the movie industry, moreover, is of considerable interest to Fitzgerald, while Rosten, already becoming known as a popular writer on the Yiddish language and American religions, almost entirely elides it.<sup>16</sup>

Fitzgerald modeled his protagonist principally on Irving Thalberg, the “boy wonder” movie executive who had managed Universal Pictures at the age of twenty, became production head at the newly formed M-G-M at twenty-four, and died in 1936 age of thirty-seven from lifelong heart disease brought on by childhood rheumatic fever. Thalberg’s peers regarded him as a figure who brought class and prestige to an industry that had sorely lacked both. With even its pioneers displaying a hearty longevity, his early death seemed all the more stark. A few months afterward, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences enshrined his name by creating the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award, to be given to individuals who had attained “the most consistent high level of production achievement.”<sup>17</sup> Thalberg’s memory was still fresh when *The Last Tycoon* first appeared, and a few astute readers noted the unpublicized links between him and the fictional Stahr. As Fitzgerald’s legend soared over the next generation, however, his fictional character surpassed in prominence its historical source. In a 1969 Thalberg biography, the Hollywood journalist Bob Thomas devoted the first chapter to disentangling his subject from Fitzgerald’s creation.<sup>18</sup>

The word “tycoon” derives from Japanese and Chinese written characters signifying “great prince.” It was applied in pre-1868 Japan to the shoguns who held virtually complete power over their domains while persons of higher rank – Japan’s emperors – were nominally in charge. If the analogy between the shoguns and figures such as Thalberg and Stahr was not exactly precise, Thalberg’s reputation rested on his effective control of the entire moviemaking process, even though he was technically subordinate to Lewis B. Mayer, M-G-M’s first vice-president and general manager – who was in turn overseen by the studio’s corporate owner, Loew’s, Inc. Thalberg effectively made the day-to-day decisions involving all the company’s projects: acquisition of properties, scriptwriting, casting, assignment of directors, reviewing the daily rushes, editing and postproduction. Producers like Thalberg supervised and evaluated the work of their creative talent. Whether they were themselves “creative,” or authors in any conventional meaning of the term, has been a matter of debate. Yet one might choose to regard them as the true *auteurs* of the studio system, in the sense that their company’s products bore the stamp of their personal taste (or commercial calculation) more than that of any other individual.<sup>19</sup>

But how could Thalberg or Stahr be construed as “last” tycoons? In Thalberg’s case, because of his delicate health, in the early 1930s he began to doubt whether he could survive the demanding schedule that his responsibilities entailed. Linked to this calculation were mutual antipathies and resentments that were souring his relationship with Mayer. When Thalberg and his wife, the actress Norma Shearer, took an extended overseas vacation in spring 1933, Mayer seized the opportunity to remove him as head of production. On Thalberg’s return to a restructured studio, he became one of several producers in charge of their own individual units. No longer would a shogun-like figure hold more actual power than the emperor at M-G-M. Nevertheless, tycoons did not disappear from Hollywood. One such figure, who never managed to build a legend comparable to Thalberg’s, was Hal B. Wallis at Warner Brothers, nominally subordinate to Jack L. Warner, the brother whose title was vice-president in charge of production. Wallis won the Thalberg Award for 1938 (following first-time recipient Darryl F. Zanuck) and again for 1943, galling his boss.<sup>20</sup>

In Thalberg’s image, Fitzgerald’s “last” tycoon confronted a rival within his studio – Pat Brady was clearly drawn from Mayer, though his ethnic origins were Irish rather than Jewish – and also faced opposition from outside the movie industry. The final chapter in Wilson’s edition involves Stahr’s intellectual and finally physical confrontation with a Communist union organizer, Brimmer. The novelist replicated Thalberg’s antipathy to the founding in 1933 of the Screen Writers Guild, which the executive tried to counter by forming a house union, the Screen Playwrights, and by threats to close down the studio if the writers went out on strike. At one point in their verbal sparring, Fitzgerald has the union man say to Stahr, “We’d like to take you over as a going concern” (125). The remark represents one strand in Fitzgerald’s configuration of the industry’s power struggles, and of the tycoon under siege. In a manuscript note Fitzgerald wrote, “Stahr didn’t die of overwork – he died of a certain number of forces allied against him.”<sup>21</sup>

### 3

Fitzgerald chose to tell Stahr’s story through the narrative voice of Cecilia Brady, his antagonist’s daughter. The author had used a similar strategy previously with Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*, but in the new work the narrator’s circumstances were markedly different – in age, in gender, and in her emotional attachment to the protagonist. Carraway takes a more mature and reserved perspective on his novel’s central character, and one that is less judgmental (so far as this is an apt comparison between

a finished and an unfinished work). As with *The Great Gatsby*, Cecilia is looking back on events that occurred years before her recounting of them – in Carraway’s case two years, in hers, five. In 1935, the setting of the novel’s action, she was nineteen years old, a college junior, and Stahr was thirty-four. Her status as a movie executive’s daughter solicits the reader’s credence that she has sufficient access and experience to be a trusted chronicler – in the novel’s opening paragraph she notes ironically that Rudolph Valentino attended her fifth birthday party, “to indicate that even before the age of reason I was in a position to watch the wheels go round” (3).

Nevertheless, Fitzgerald may have felt the need to give further attention to Cecilia’s narrative authority. Twice in Chapter 5 of Wilson’s edition similar phrases occur – “This is Cecilia taking up the narrative in person” (77), “This is Cecilia taking up the story” (98), to indicate events in which she personally participates as opposed to those she imagines. The link between what she observes and what she invents is earlier elaborated at the beginning of several chapters that are intended, she tells us, to relate how Stahr functions at the studio. “It is drawn partly from a paper I wrote in college on *A Producer’s Day* and partly from my imagination,” she writes. “More often I have blocked in the ordinary events myself, while the stranger ones are true” (28–29). As the novel stands in its unfinished state, these paradoxical self-reflections add a tantalizing open-ended element to the reader’s opinion of the narrator’s reliability, in ways that further differentiate her from Carraway’s role in *Gatsby*.

At the end of the day in Stahr’s life that Cecilia describes, which comprises nearly a third of the published text, she returns to the question of how she knows what she tells. She cites several sources for her information about Stahr’s activities: her father, a visiting European dignitary who was a guest at an important luncheon, and a writer friend. “As for me,” she concludes, “I was head over heels in love with him then, and you can take what I say for what it’s worth” (67). This confession – actually an intensified reiteration of feelings she has averred from the beginning – adds a further twist to the issue of her narrative credibility. It may also bring into focus Fitzgerald’s thinking when he proposed as a tentative title, “Stahr: A Romance.” With his roots in the Romantic poets and a continuing interest in literary modes, he may have been positioning his work within a genre whose contours were familiar to him. “The romancer,” writes Northrop Frye, “does not attempt to create ‘real people’ so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes . . . That is why the romance so often radiates a glow of subjective intensity that the novel lacks.”<sup>22</sup> Frye, to be sure, suggests that the forms of prose fiction are

mixed, so that the archetypal and allegorical qualities of the romance are typically rooted in the novel's social world.

In its generic sense, and with its narrator speaking of her love for the hero, *The Last Tycoon* often builds Stahr into a figure of romantic imagination. "He had a long time ago run ahead through trackless wastes of perception into fields where very few men were able to follow him," (17–18) says Cecilia, and later, "He 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" (28). Yet even toward Stahr the narrator cannot repress the ironic tone that she establishes from the start about herself. For the writer Wylie White, after a script meeting, "the mixture of common sense, wise sensibility, theatrical ingenuity, and a certain half-naïve conception of the common weal which Stahr had just stated aloud, inspired him to do his part, to get his block of stone in place, even if the effort were foredoomed, the result as dull as a pyramid" (43). Watching rushes in the screening room, "Stahr must be right always, not most of the time, but always – or the structure would melt down like gradual butter" (56).

To what extent is Stahr himself a romantic? As Perkins had noted to Wilson, the material that Fitzgerald had most extensively developed told chiefly "a secondary story, a love episode in the life of the hero." Like Thalberg, Stahr had married an actress, but (fiction veering from fact) she had died. When an earthquake strikes Southern California, causing a flood at the studio, Stahr sees, clinging to a floating head of the goddess Siva, a woman who is identical in appearance to his dead wife. His pursuit, conquest, and then loss of her indeed comprise a major focus of the existing work. What precisely is the significance of this element in the story? The arrival of this simulacrum seems to offer him a second chance. His marriage, says Cecilia, "had been the most appropriate and regal match imaginable" (96), but he had not been in love with his wife until just before she died, and then, curiously, with her and death together. "Like many brilliant men, he had grown up dead cold" (97) but he had learned emotions like lessons – how else could he have conceived the romantic ideas that suffused his movies? In the crucial moment, however, when he is ready to step forward into a new life with the dead wife's double, "something else said to sleep on it as an adult, *no romantic*" (115; italics added). The chance is lost.

"Monroe Stahr is a hero without a flaw," the novel's most assiduous scholar, Matthew Bruccoli, astonishingly asserts.<sup>23</sup> How is it possible to contemplate such a view in the light, for example, of an episode in which Stahr and his dead wife's lookalike, Kathleen Moore, after lovemaking,