

Some Time in the Sun

Tom Dardis

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Some Time in the Sun



Hollywood Boulevard, 1936

For Jane, and for Tony, Anne, and Francis

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I saw my first film when I was six; I suppose I've seen on average—and discounting television—a film a week ever since: let's say some two and a half thousand films up to now. How can so frequently repeated an experience not have indelibly stamped itself on the *mode* of imagination? At one time I analyzed my dreams in detail; again and again I recalled purely cinematic effects . . . panning shots, close shots, tracking, jump cuts, and the like. In short, this mode of imagination is far too deep in me to eradicate—not only in me, in all my generation.

—JOHN FOWLES

We are whores working in a brothel, a journal says of us, a journal noted generally for its civility and enlightened wit. We are regularly assailed, censured, pestered. “Did the Pope tell Michelangelo how to paint?” a big city newspapers asks, and they read out the roll of names: Fitzgerald and West and . . . and . . . and . . . who? I can rely on old friends to remind and reprove me; the correspondence doesn't slacken: What happened to you? Why have you fallen into silence? Why have you stopped writing? I write, in collaboration or alone, from my own original material, in the morning and in the night, on studio time and on my own time, until I fill shelves and prize reticence as the rarest of all jewels. But they don't mean movie writing. What they mean—they don't know what they mean, and the truth is they don't know as much about Hollywood as they believe they know. . . .

—DANIEL FUCHS

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Introduction

Mr. Thalberg, I don't write lovely music . . .

—Arnold Schoenberg, 1936

This book originated in a chance conversation I had one night in London with Anthony Powell about F. Scott Fitzgerald and his years in Hollywood. To my considerable surprise, Powell had once spent the whole of a long afternoon there with Fitzgerald in the summer of 1937, shortly after his arrival in Los Angeles on his first visit to the United States. For a moment it was hard to accept the idea that such a meeting had ever in fact taken place, but it really had. Powell's extraordinary descriptive powers created a portrait of Fitzgerald in his final years that appeared to be very much in conflict with the one most of his biographers have succeeded in creating.

In the spring of 1937, some friends in London had informed Powell that Michael Balcon was going to produce a picture for the new firm of MGM-British. The film was to be shot entirely in England, but the script and casting were to be done in Hollywood. It was to be called *A Yank at Oxford*, with Robert Taylor as the Yank. Unemployed at the time, Powell decided to try his luck in California and see if perhaps MGM would agree to hire him to write the screenplay for this production—or any of their productions, for that matter. Although hard-pressed financially, Powell and his wife managed to get to Los Angeles after a four-week trip on a slow boat by way of Panama. Things started off very badly for them in California, for Powell's American agent had dropped dead on Hollywood Boulevard while they were still en route from En-

gland. He quickly acquired a new agent, who offered little hope of supplying any work at all for him in California, a soundly realistic view as it turned out.

In the course of the next few weeks, Powell went dutifully around to a number of the leading studios in Hollywood, including MGM, telling their chief executives his life story, but all to no avail. There were simply no jobs to be had. He did, however, make some friendships in Hollywood, and one of these was with a young Englishman, Elliott Morgan, who was working in MGM's research department in Culver City. He was then actively engaged in researching the background material for the very film that Powell had come all the way to California in hopes of working on, *A Yank at Oxford*. Morgan had recently been assigned to work with F. Scott Fitzgerald, who had just been given the task of revising the existing script for *Yank* as his very first job at MGM. When Morgan learned of Powell's interest in Fitzgerald's novels, he quickly arranged a luncheon, and a few days later Powell and his wife found themselves facing a highly animated Fitzgerald in the huge hangarlike atmosphere of the MGM commissary. Even then, by the summer of 1937, Fitzgerald had become something of a mythical figure: "It was almost as if he were already dead; at best risen from the dead, and of somewhat doubtful survival value."

Powell still recalls that long and delightful afternoon of July 20 with the utmost clarity. Here was someone very much alive, sober, and not at all the broken-down figure he might perhaps have expected to find there. They discussed at great length and in considerable detail the kind of dialogue to be written for the *Yank* film, the exact nature of the slang to be used. Powell was greatly surprised by this precise, almost donnish side of Fitzgerald's personality, especially when he launched into a long discussion of the differences in American and British life as reflected in their languages. At one point Fitzgerald drew for Powell a map of the United States on a scrap of paper, adorning it with arrows which were to indicate the three main directions by which culture had entered this continent. This was an element in Fitzgerald's character he would

? > never have suspected, and it is one that few of his many biographers have stressed. Fitzgerald seemed to radiate a tremendous amount of enthusiasm for everything they discussed that afternoon, including his first impressions of his newfound way of making a living. They talked on in the vast, noisy eating place filled with throngs of other people on the MGM payroll. Spencer Tracy and James Stewart suddenly appeared, table-hopping their way around the immense area of the commissary. Fitzgerald pointed out Stewart to Powell, indicating that he too had attended Princeton.

As the afternoon advanced, the restaurant gradually emptied as people returned to work until finally there were only a few of the studio's "big shots" still talking at their tables in the center of the room. It was clearly time for Fitzgerald and his party to go, for these big shots were now staring with morose curiosity at this cheerful, talkative group of people who seemed utterly indifferent to MGM and all of its immense concerns. A few weeks later Powell returned to London, still jobless, and Fitzgerald continued on with his new life as a contract studio writer. That night, July 20, was the night of his first dinner with Sheilah Graham. It was truly the beginning of a new life for Fitzgerald. He and Powell never saw each other again.

not true { This image of an apparently healthy and energetic Fitzgerald working in Hollywood is not the one usually encountered in much of the vast literature concerning him. The most common one is of a man engulfed in a continual state of despair, only slightly relieved by the presence of Sheilah Graham. It appeared that Fitzgerald's biographers, with a single interesting exception, hadn't much cared about the details of what he had done in California in these last three and a half years of his life. Acute misery was the key word in all these accounts, enlivened only by tales of some of his worst drinking escapades.

See Lathan He had been paid a good deal of money, it would appear, as much as \$1,250 a week, but what had he done to earn this

kind of money? There had been some serious troubles for him at MGM, with people like Mankiewicz and Stromberg, and it seemed that he had earned only one screen credit in all the time he spent in Hollywood. This was the *Three Comrades* film of 1938, based on Remarque's novel, with Margaret Sullavan and Robert Taylor. He had worked on *The Last Tycoon*, published posthumously, the only book he wrote in the last five years of his life, the only sound in that long silence. It didn't really seem as if he'd done very much; and why had MGM ever hired him in 1937 if it were true that he was generally thought to be "finished" as a writer?

One biographer, Aaron Latham, whose book *Crazy Sundays* is devoted entirely to this period of Fitzgerald's life, has covered his screenwriting activities in considerable detail. The Fitzgerald of Latham's pages is, however, the same bleak and despairing man found in the Mizener and Turnbull biographies. For reasons that remain unclear, Mr. Latham tells us that Fitzgerald could do little that was wrong or downright bad as a film-writer, and his portrait of him in these years is that of a stricken, once noble figure much put upon by his gross, ~~unfeeling~~ employers. It is a puzzling picture in many ways, for his account is seriously marred by its lively descriptions of events that never occurred in fact, such as the details concerning Fitzgerald's collaboration with Aldous Huxley on the script of MGM's *Madame Curie*. Latham also recounts an episode in which Fitzgerald took Ernest Hemingway on a guided tour of the MGM lot, in the course of which Hemingway made some anti-Semitic remarks to Louis B. Mayer and Bernard Hyman before being forcibly ejected from the studio. There is not a word of truth in either of these stories.

Despite all of the details in Latham's 300 pages, I still found Fitzgerald's Hollywood years rather cloudy and contradictory. It was unclear how good or bad he was at his new profession. If he made \$1,250 a week, how much was this salary compared with what the other writers at MGM or at the other major studios were getting at the time? If the state of our knowledge was as vague as this about Fitzgerald, perhaps the most carefully scrutinized figure in all of modern literature,

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what of all the other notable writers who had spent long stretches of time writing screenplays—Faulkner and Huxley and West? With these writers the available information was generally even scantier, for most of their biographers seemed to regard the work done in Hollywood as something just a bit shameful; they usually passed it over in their books as quickly as possible.

Some of the very greatest names in all of modern literature have spent considerable periods of their lives working as contract writers in Hollywood, with varying degrees of involvement. It was the case with most of them that their working in Hollywood became a matter of financial salvation for them, as even Bertolt Brecht found to be true when he arrived in Los Angeles in the summer of 1941:

Every morning, to earn my bread,
I go to the market, where lies are bought.
Hopefully
I join the ranks of the sellers.

Faulkner joined these ranks as early as 1932, but nearly all of the available information about his twenty-odd years in Hollywood has been either vague or inconclusive. There are many more unanswered questions about his work there than there are about Fitzgerald's. Almost all of the accounts of it have stressed the fact that Faulkner's visits to Hollywood were prompted by only temporary financial problems, that the work he performed there was done quickly and/or carelessly "just" for the money in it, and that the experience of Hollywood left absolutely no marks or traces on him as a writer. Not one of these assumptions is correct, for the necessity of Faulkner's becoming a professional screenwriter arose in time from financial burdens just as desperate as those of Fitzgerald's or perhaps even worse, for he had many more people to support. For twenty years Faulkner's finances were in a state of permanent crisis. In these years he wrote several dozen screenplays for the major studios, devoting weeks and

even months to individual projects. In the early thirties it was at MGM, in the later thirties at Twentieth Century-Fox, and for nearly all of World War II at Warner Brothers. Just about everyone who has written about Faulkner has noted his contempt for much in Hollywood, but this fact is difficult to reconcile with his having found the origin of the novel he worked on for a decade in a screen treatment he wrote for a film that was never produced. < !

Joseph Blotner's recent massive biography of Faulkner has cleared up some, but scarcely all, of the confusion surrounding his years in Hollywood. It appears that Faulkner lacked confidence in himself as a screenwriter and always considered himself totally unfit for the work, once in desperation offering his services to any firm in Hollywood willing to pay him more than \$100 a week. He was not joking, for by that time, in 1942, there was as little market for books by William Faulkner as there were for those by F. Scott Fitzgerald. If his lack of self-confidence for the work was that extreme, and if he was really all that unfit, why then did the director Howard Hawks keep requesting Faulkner's services as a writer on his films for over two decades? He used Faulkner as a collaborator on a half-dozen of his best films in very much the same way that Ingmar Bergman has used the same basic group of talents over and over again in his films. What did Hawks see in this tiny man who once rated himself as being worth only \$100 a week?

Thank God for the movies. . . .

—Nathanael West, 1939

*Whoever stayed in Mahagonny
Needed every day five dollars
and if he carried on more than most
he probably needed more than that . . .*

*In either case they lost,
But they got something out of it,
But they got something out of it,
But they got something out of it.*

—Bertolt Brecht, Mahagonny

Jack Warner is once reputed to have snarled loudly that writers as a class were just “schmucks with Underwoods”; this attitude toward the writers he employed was perhaps reflected in the working quarters he gave them at his studio. At many of the major studios in the thirties and forties, the writers’ building was more often than not a structure that had been originally designed to house something else on the lot, the kind of something that had finally managed to get new and better quarters—the publicity or advertising departments, for instance. In these years many of the writers discussed in this book occupied tiny cubicles in these small, slightly run-down buildings that many of them called rabbit-warrens. There, against the constant hum of electric fans, and in later years that of air conditioners, the writers typed out their daily quota of words.

The status of the screenwriter was considerably more ambiguous in the thirties and forties than it is today. If you were a Robert Riskin, a Dudley Nichols, a Nunnally Johnson, or ul-

timately a Ben Hecht, you were accorded lavish social and intellectual prestige, along with a salary commensurate with these graces. But below these lofty heights of enormous success most of the other screenwriters were looked down upon as hacks of one sort or another. When Fitzgerald wrote his series of short stories about Pat Hobby he was expressing some widely held views about hack-writing in Hollywood. Pat had graduated at the end of the twenties from the humble role of a writer of titles on silent films to a full-fledged writer of mediocre screenplays in the late thirties. He was the ultimate hack, and Fitzgerald seemed to derive some genuine pleasure from chronicling his behavior; most of his knowledge was derived from the observation of what went on around him in the course of his own daily work.

The “hack” epithet was accorded many of the writers who went to work in Hollywood, especially in the “politically conscious” thirties, and has been leveled against all five of the writers discussed in this book. Perhaps the most commonly held assumption about them is precisely this: that all the time they spent in Hollywood was lost, wasted time. With this also goes the general feeling that their work done in Hollywood is really best forgotten, left dead and buried in the story files of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Warner Brothers.

Behind this basic assumption of wasted time and talent lies still another one, that *all* film-writing is by definition hack-work or simply work done with the left hand for the money and nothing else, the “don’t ever look back” kind of work. With the single exception of Nathanael West’s routine genre films for Republic, Universal, and RKO, the film-writing of the other four here—Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Huxley, and Agee—is of lasting interest as examples of what these extraordinary sensibilities could actually do in the film medium. While they may well have regarded their Hollywood work as indeed hack stuff, some of it has been done with such rare grace and ingenuity that the epithet “hack” no longer means very much.

All of which is by way of saying that neither Fitzgerald, nor Agee, nor Huxley were capable of turning out what is easily