

For the Love of Gatsby

Fidelity, Voyeurism and Baz Luhrmann's Rose-coloured Glasses

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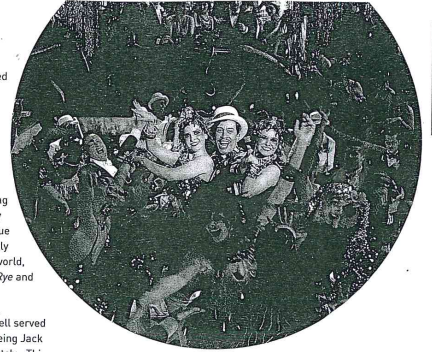
There are few works that are as revered or as secure in their canonicity as F Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*. It is often cited as a leading contender for the title of 'The Great American Novel', if there can be any one work that can live up to that, and it is ranked number two on the Modern Library's list of the '100 Best Novels of the Twentieth Century', trailing only James Joyce's monumental *Ulysses*. Largely because it is a very slender work – a cardinal virtue for educators – it is also one of the most frequently taught novels in English classrooms around the world, rivalled only by J D Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*.

Until now the novel has not been tremendously well served by filmmakers, with the best-known adaptation being Jack Clayton's 1974 film starring Robert Redford as Gatsby. This tepid effort that largely managed to suck all of the life out of the novel featured a script by Francis Ford Coppola and a performance by Mia Farrow as Daisy that made viewers wonder how Gatsby could ever have fallen in love with her in the first place. Clayton's film was actually the third adaptation of the novel for the screen, with the first appearing just a year after the novel was published. This silent movie, directed by Herbert Brenon and starring Warner Baxter as Gatsby, is now lost but for the trailer, which can be viewed online. Fitzgerald himself was purportedly unimpressed with the film, leaving a screening before the end.¹

The second adaptation of the novel, which was directed by Elliot Nugent and starred Alan Ladd as Gatsby, appeared in 1949. This version was based on Owen Davis' 1926 stage adaptation of the novel and featured the framing device of Nick Carraway (Macdonald Carey) standing by Gatsby's tombstone in a cemetery twenty years after his death and remembering the past. Howard Da Silva, who played Wilson in this version, later went on to play Meyer Wolfsheimer in the 1974 film, providing a curious link between the films made twenty-five years apart. A television film of *The Great Gatsby* (Robert Markowitz) was made in 2000, and starred Toby Stephens as Gatsby, Mira Sorvino as Daisy and Paul Rudd as Nick. With its modest budget, the British-American co-production couldn't match the production design of the cinematic adaptations, but focused well on the relationships between the characters.

Baz Luhrmann's 2013 adaptation of the novel arrived with much anticipation following reports of a huge budget, lavish set design and the use of 3D. With this came concomitant concerns about a lack of fidelity to the novel and an emphasis on spectacle that would lose sight of the more intimate and thoughtful moments in Fitzgerald's writing.

Luhrmann has developed a distinct visual style over the course of his career, and he has previously adapted another classic work of literature with *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), also starring Leonardo DiCaprio. There were similar concerns about a lack of fidelity in his adaptation of Shakespeare, as he updated the setting to a modern but decaying American/Mexican version of



Verona where guns replaced swords, and included an up-to-date soundtrack to punctuate the action. Luhrmann's film was largely considered a success, however, and it has become a staple in English classrooms, taking preference over such traditional adaptations as the 1968 version directed by Franco Zeffirelli.

Although there are some similarities between Luhrmann's two literary adaptations – the casting of DiCaprio in a lead role (as Romeo and Gatsby), the prominent use of a modern pop soundtrack and key scenes that focus on large-scale parties – the director faced challenges in adapting Fitzgerald's novel that didn't exist in his adaptation of Shakespeare. These primarily revolved around the differences between adapting a novel and adapting a play. Although writing for the stage and writing for the screen are not identical, both have the same ultimate purpose: performance. Novels have long been used as source material for the cinema, but much greater changes need to be made in order to transform narration into filmic language than are necessary for the adaptation of a play. Those difficulties are compounded with a novel like *The Great Gatsby*, which has a first-person narrator, Nick Carraway, who filters the reader's perception of the other characters and events. What works on the page does not work on the screen; Luhrmann can't simply use long voiceovers to replicate the effect without losing the impact on the viewer. New methods must be found.

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Nick the narrator

Luhmann expands the idea of Nick Carraway as a writer, and as the author of the (presumably nonfiction) book about this remarkable man Gatsby whom he lived next door to and whose life he became embroiled in. In the opening pages of the novel, Nick refers to 'Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book,' but this is the only reference in the novel to the idea that Nick is an author, and that he has been in the process of writing this story. A few pages later, Nick mentions in passing that he 'was rather literary in college' and wrote some 'solemn and obvious editorials for the *Yale News*,'⁷ but Luhrmann expands on this to have Nick [Tobey Maguire] and others refer to him as a writer. So when in the film Tom [Joel Edgerton] introduces Myrtle [Isla Fisher], his mistress, he says, 'Nick's a writer' – an introduction that is absent in the novel.

Luhmann and his co-writer, Craig Pearce, emphasise the idea of Nick as a writer in the film's framing device. We are introduced to Nick as a resident at the 'Perkins Sanatorium,'⁸ where he is undergoing treatment for, among other things, depression and alcoholism. There is only a slight suggestion in the novel that Nick suffers from any of these things: when describing the party in the apartment that Tom kept for Myrtle in New York, Nick says, 'I have been drunk just twice in my life, and the second time was that afternoon,'⁹ but when he attends one of Gatsby's parties for the first time soon after, he admits that 'I was on my way to get roaring drunk from sheer embarrassment,'⁴ suggesting that there is a degree of unreliability to his testimony. The sanatorium serves as part of Luhrmann's strategy to conflate Nick with Fitzgerald himself, who did suffer from alcoholism and who wrote of his mental fragility in his autobiographical essay collection, *The Crack-Up*. Thus Nick becomes Scott, the sensitive writer



who pours his soul out onto the page, and the writing of the story becomes a kind of therapy for the man who has been damaged by the events that he has witnessed.

The doctor [played by veteran Australian actor Jack Thompson] tells Nick to write down the story of Gatsby, and his suggestion to write about 'a place' prompts Nick's memory of the Valley of Ashes, the remarkable description of which begins Chapter 2 of the novel. From this point on in the film, we cut several times to Nick at his typewriter in the sanatorium. In addition to this, Luhrmann occasionally superimposes the words over the screen, giving a visual representation of the writer at work that goes a small way towards compensating for the reduced level of narration that we get in the film. This is most noticeable at the end of the film, where we see a flurry of typewritten letters approximating a snowfall over the city of New York, and Nick emerges from this 'snowfall' unshaven and apparently a broken man as a result of his experiences. The jumble of letters represents his disordered emotional reaction to Gatsby's death and his disenchantment with the East that prompts him to return to the Midwest. When Nick returns to Gatsby's mansion for the last time and walks out onto the pier to look at the green light through the rain, we see the famous final lines of the novel typed onto the screen over the green light: 'So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.'¹⁰ We then see Nick removing the title page from his typewriter and laying it onto his presumably complete manuscript. However, reflecting on the title, which just reads 'Gatsby', he handwrites the words 'The Great' above it, before we recede from the green light into darkness and the credits roll.

By framing his story in this way, Luhrmann acknowledges the literary origins of the story and also justifies the voiceover narration that we get from Nick during parts of the film. The cinema relies more on showing than it does on telling, and can dispense with narration when events speak for themselves; so, for example, Nick's description of his wonder at being overtaken by a car full of African Americans with a white chauffeur can simply



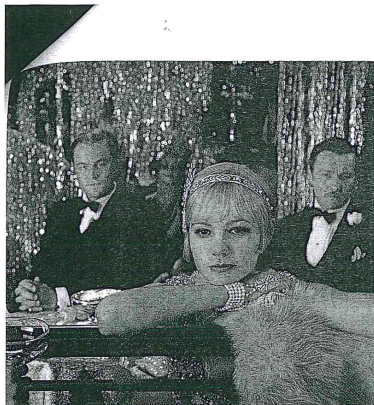
be shown. But because Fitzgerald's novel depends so much for its literary effect on the perfectly crafted sentences that pepper Nick's narration, Luhrmann uses the sanatorium frame story to justify their inclusion and highlights their magnificence by sometimes printing them across the screen.

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Altering emphasis: What is so great about Gatsby?

Luhmann's diversions from the novel reveal a somewhat different emphasis from that of the source text, and this change in emphasis means that some of the novel's ambiguity is lost. Essentially, Luhrmann just loves Gatsby too much. Nick loves him too, in the novel, but he also has problems with Gatsby. In the opening pages he tells us that Gatsby 'represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn', but then goes on to praise his 'extraordinary gift for hope' and say that he 'turned out all right at the end.'⁶ In *The Crack-Up*, Fitzgerald writes that 'The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function', and this is what we see Nick doing over the course of the novel. He is simultaneously attracted to and repelled by Gatsby – seduced by the glamour but sickened by the grimy underbelly.

In Luhrmann's film, however, the glamour dominates: when we are introduced to Gatsby, fireworks explode all around as we get



a lingering close-up on his face with its winning smile. Although Nick does devote most of a paragraph in the novel to that 'rare' smile 'with a quality of eternal reassurance in it', he also describes the 'point [at which] it vanished' and how he is left speaking with someone 'whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd'.⁹ Most tellingly, as Nick farewells Gatsby for the final time at the end of the film, Luhrmann shows us Nick calling back to Gatsby, just as he does in the novel, that 'They're a rotten crowd,' and Gatsby is 'worth the whole damn bunch put together'. In another line straight from the novel, Nick adds in voiceover, 'I've always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him.' In the novel, however, Nick adds: 'because I disapproved of him from beginning to end'.¹⁰ Luhrmann doesn't disapprove of Gatsby quite so much, so when his Nick adds the words 'The Great' in front of his name, there isn't the same possibility that there could be irony in the appellation.

The viewer as voyeur

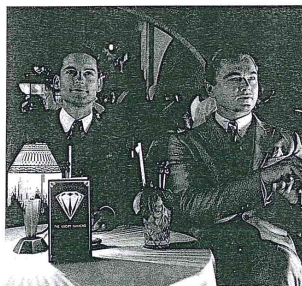
Cinema is entirely dependent on the act of viewing, as we sit and watch events unfold before our eyes on the screen. We become voyeurs as we peer into the lives of others, following the camera to see what goes on behind closed doors. Nick Carraway is also a voyeur, observing what goes on in his neighbour's mansion, and giving us a distanced and critical viewpoint on the lives of Gatsby, Tom and Daisy (Carey Mulligan). In the novel, for the most part, we only see what Nick sees (although there are descriptions of events he doesn't personally witness based on accounts he receives from others). Nick is therefore a watcher – an observer – just like we are in the cinema, and Luhrmann plays up this idea of watching others, making it a motif in the film.

The key scene for Luhrmann in terms of highlighting the voyeurism in the novel is the party in the New York apartment, where Nick observes that

our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.¹¹

Luhrmann is so taken with this passage that he has Nick repeat his observation about being 'within and without' later in the film. In this scene, though, Luhrmann shows us a string of other apartment windows, each providing a vignette of other people's lives, reminiscent of one of the greatest films about voyeurism, Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954). He also shows Nick looking down on himself in the street looking up – a divided self that is justified by Nick's drunken state at the time.

Luhrmann includes many other shots of people watching each other during the course of the film, usually through windows that serve to symbolically represent the barriers between people. Gatsby's mansion and Nick's house are depicted as being very close to each other, and the two characters watch each other on numerous occasions. In the novel, Gatsby is



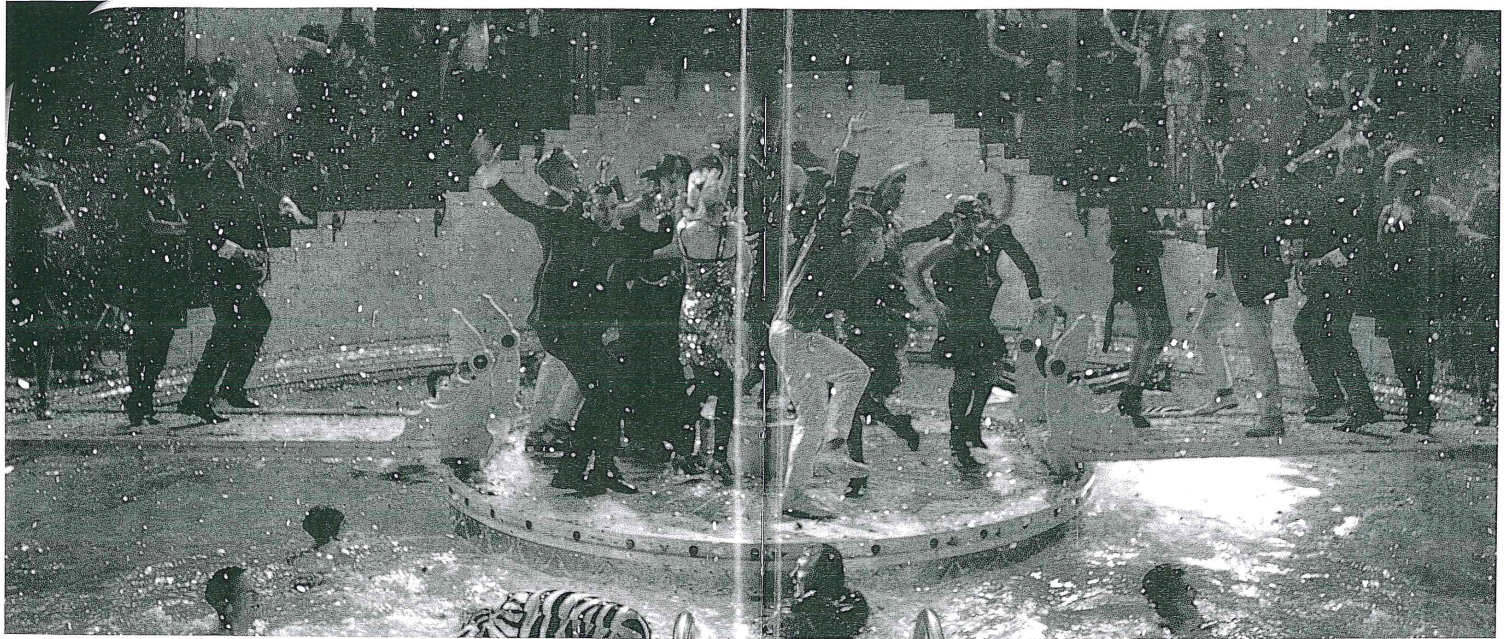
We don't get a sense of the developing relationship between Nick and Jordan; this returns Nick to the role of the neutral (and neutered) observer of the grand passions of others.

an observer rather than a participant at his own parties, and Luhrmann emphasises this element in the film – whereas in the novel Nick wakes up 'on the lower level of the Pennsylvania Station'¹² after Tom's party in New York, Luhrmann has him wake up on his own porch and realise that 'Gatsby was watching me'.

The character that Gatsby is most intent on watching is, of course, Daisy, and we see him a number of times watching the green light across the water that symbolises her. Luhrmann's kinetic camerawork, partly employed to maximise the 3D effect, takes us zooming across the bay several times as if to minimise the distance between the two characters.

Luhrmann and Pearce also add lines to the apartment party scene that characterise Nick as a voyeur, such as when Tom tells Nick, 'I know you like to watch' after he has been uncomfortably listening to Tom and Myrtle very noisily enjoy each other's company before the others arrive (another departure from the novel). Tom also asks Nick in this scene whether he's going to just sit on the sidelines or 'play ball'. Nick is, of course, something of a participant in the events he describes, but the filmmakers reduce the role of Jordan Baker (Elizabeth Debickel), so we don't get a sense of the developing relationship between Nick and Jordan; this returns Nick to the role of the neutral (and neutered) observer of the grand passions of others.

Watching has a large significance in the novel itself, particularly through the symbolism of T J Eckleburg's giant eyes on the advertising billboard in the Valley of Ashes. In both the novel and the film, Wilson says, 'God sees everything'¹³ as he looks at the billboard. Nick says at the outset of the novel that he is 'inclined to reserve all judgements'¹⁴ on other people's secrets, but there



is an implication that there is a higher power that is quite willing to pass judgement on the things that it observes. Luhrmann makes frequent use of the billboard with its penetrating gaze, perhaps most strikingly when Myrtle is run down; after being hit by the car we see her body falling in slow motion before the bespectacled gaze of the billboard.

All things must come to an end

Most adaptations make a number of cuts in order to keep the film to a reasonable running time, and despite Luhrmann's film having by far the longest running time of any of the *Gatsby* adaptations, he cuts scenes and alters events to suit his purpose. This is most noticeable at the end of the film, with the rearrangement of events after Myrtle's death and the omission of the funeral scene in which Mr Gatz, Gatsby's father, turns up to farewell his son. Luhrmann gives us a glimpse of him earlier in the film during a flashback, but denies him a speaking role, perhaps because his presence at the end of the novel has

Nick reflecting rather uncomfortably on Gatsby's shady path to wealth, whereas Luhrmann prefers to end on a more elegiac note that emphasises Gatsby's determined love for Daisy.

In the scene showing Gatsby's death, Luhrmann departs from the novel significantly. Fitzgerald writes that no telephone message arrived for Gatsby while he was in the pool, and has Nick reflect that he had 'an idea that Gatsby himself didn't believe it would come, and perhaps he no longer cared'.¹⁵ Nick goes on to imagine Gatsby seeing a new vision of the world in his final moments: 'material, without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about'.¹⁶ Luhrmann allows for no such diminishment of Gatsby's hopes and dreams, showing Daisy's hand picking up a receiver and having the phone ring just before Gatsby is shot. We see the smile on his face as he is convinced it is her, but we discover, thanks to subsequent shots of her hand replacing the receiver and Nick speaking frantically on the phone, that she decided not to call after all and Gatsby was deceived in his final surge of hope. But for Luhrmann, despite Gatsby being deceived, we are

left with the feeling that he was full of his 'heightened sensitivity to the promises of life'¹⁷ right until the end, whereas Fitzgerald would not leave us quite so sure.

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Endnotes

¹ Anne Margaret Daniel, 'What Did F. Scott Fitzgerald Think of *The Great Gatsby*, the Movie, in 1926? He Walked Out', *The Huffington Post*, 6 April 2013, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/anne-margaret-daniel/the-great-gatsby-movie-1926_b_3024329.html>, accessed 30 June 2013.

² F Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, Penguin, London, 2000, p. 8.

³ *ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴ The name is an allusion to Maxwell Perkins, who edited the work of Fitzgerald (as well as Ernest Hemingway and others) for publishing house Charles Scribner's Sons.

⁵ Fitzgerald, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 44.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 172.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 146–7.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 37.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 40.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 152.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 153–4.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 8.