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Review Essay: *The Great Gatsby* on Film
"It's More than a Second Coming: that Unadaptable, Larger-than-Life, Golden Boy, Jay Gatsby, Comes Again. Why? To Meet Jay-Z?"

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Baz Luhrmann's adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* (co-written with Craig Pearce) had the honor of being the May 15th opener of the 66th Cannes Film Festival, though it was originally scheduled to open six months earlier in December of 2012, and it had already opened on American screens. Luhrmann is considered an astonishingly visual filmmaker, and the visual spectacle is astonishing as well as entertaining; but at the same time, this adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald, though not as literal as the Jack Clayton 1974 adaptation, which it now replaces (new stars for old, though Robert Redford and Mia Farrow still seem luminous to me), is in a way even more literal, though not at all faithful to its source novel. Luhrmann tampers with Fitzgerald's narrator, Nick Carraway (played by Tobey Maguire) by making him the focal point of the story, which he relates to a therapist years later, and finally ends up typing a manuscript called "Gatsby," which, perhaps, is meant to tell us that this certainly isn't Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*. Luhrmann indulges not only in voiceover narration, but in text-over narration, as Nick's handwriting and later his type-font floats over the 3-D frame. *Variety* reviewer Justin Chang objected to what he considered a book-bound adaptation: "No degree of visual opulence," he wrote, "can ultimately free this picture from its lumbering and unimaginative fidelity to the page" ("Glitzy Gatsby" 79). More later on the problem of servile fidelity: Jack Clayton was utterly devoted to it. Baz Luhrmann strays from the template and creates blunders of nuance and confusion, except, perhaps, in his treatment of Gatsby and Daisy.

So, why Gatsby, again and again and again? Is it the character, but if so, could anyone improve on Robert Redford, who was simply gorgeous in the role? Or is it the period (the Roaring Twenties)? The parties and

the music? But is this novel in fact even filmable? Can the camera plumb the mystery of Jay Gatsby? Can he be spiritually revealed and made flesh? What, really, is the meaning of his life and death? Why does each movie generation need to reinvent Gatsby? Did Robert Redford somehow get it wrong? The focus of this piece will be on the Jack Clayton *Great Gatsby* (1974), which broke into the box office shortly after *Literature/Film Quarterly* was founded, which was, if not a perfect adaptation, at least one very faithful to the text. Ah, yes, I remember it well. And why wouldn't I? I was myself plucked out of academic obscurity and chosen to host, write, and moderate a 13-week television series called *The Films of the Gatsby Era* for the Maryland Center for Public Broadcasting, wherein I found my fifteen minutes (and then some) of celebrity. So, all of a sudden, there I was, on camera, interviewing not only critic Richard Corliss, but also Leonard Maltin (a few weeks apart) about adaptations. Of course, back then we were not very sophisticated about theory, which had barely developed past incipient auteurism, so such conversations, lacking theoretical ballast and exquisite contemporary sophistication, were surely for naught. We simply didn't know any better, but we tried.

Back then, in 1974, just the anticipation of a movie "version" of *Gatsby* starring Robert Redford and Mia Farrow was a pretty exciting media event. Nearly forty years later, the anticipation of another version starring Leonardo DiCaprio, that lovely Titanic boy director Baz Luhrmann had pitchforked into stardom in his anachronistic movie adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), zipped the novel right to the top of the bestseller list. Hence it could inspire a renewed interest not only in the literary classic, and its author, and his relatives. During the lead-up to the film's release, no fewer than three novels were published having to do with Fitzgerald's wife: *Z: A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald* by Therese Anne Fowler; *Call Me Zelda* by Erika Robuck; and *Beautiful Fools: The Last Affair of Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald*, by F. Clifton Spargo, none of which could touch Nancy Mitford's biography, *Zelda* (1970).[1]

So, why another Gatsby, and why now? Does the giddiness of the 1920s somehow touch our more desperate and despondent times? What possible cultural advantages could there be? Certainly there were critics

1 All three novels are reviewed and compared by Joanna Scutts in "Zelda's Story, reinvented in three novels," in *The Washington Post*, 7 May 2013, C1, C9.

out there ready to pan and ridicule the picture even before its release, and when it was released on May 10th, it took a drubbing. Joe Morgenstern of *The Wall Street Journal* gave it a rather gentle drubbing, however, trying to find it "entertaining," but, even so, concluded that it was a "spectacle in search of a soul" ("Grating Gatsby" D1, D3). That missing soul would logically be Gatsby, one supposes, or perhaps Nick Carraway, depending on how one reads the novel. But does Gatsby even have a soul? Yes, he has ambition, and lust, and desire, and even connections, but Daisy seems to be the be-all, end-all for him, and the question is, is she worth it? The only conclusion Nick Carraway reaches is that she is "reckless." Enough said? There is no inner glimmer there. But, then, there was hardly any inner glimmer in the scrupulously "faithful" Jack Clayton adaptation, either. All of the glimmer was externilized and made superficial. And superficiality is the issue here, in 2013 as well as in 1974. Can the mystery of Gatsby's "greatness" be explained by throwing money and technology at it? Make it Bigger? Gaudier?

So, as even *Variety* wondered, is Gatsby to be admired, or pitied ("Glitzy Gatsby" 79)? On American television, cable host Chris Mathews just knew in his heart that Gatsby was meant to be admired. He brought *Washington Post* reviewer Ann Hornaday on to his program to bully her into agreement with him, making it impossible for her to reply, even though one suspects she may have a fine sense of irony than Matthews is capable of and even though she only gave the film two stars. But she had credentials as a film critic, as Chris Matthews does not. He simply used her to advertise his own enthusiasm for the film ("Brighter, Bigger, Flashier.")

To be sure, everyone has read the story of *Gatsby* and knows it by heart. It's been foisted on students for decades as possibly the Great American Novel, but not only is *Gatsby* "Great," it's short and readable and can be dispatched within a few hours. Why should it be considered the Great American Novel? Because many people have decided that it's "about" The American Dream" (of wealth and materialism, achievement and success, happiness and fulfillment — or is it simply wretched yearning?); but tell that to Jay Gatsby, shot dead in his swimming pool. Readers no doubt carry myriad notions of what *The Great Gatsby* is and means. The memory helps us to rewrite the novel in a particular nostalgic and memorable way, and that is the template readers will use to measure the achievement of any given film adaptation. Director Jack Clayton re-wrote

Gatsby one way, director Baz Luhrmann quite another, each version to be weighed in terms of what readers imagine to be "faithful" to the novel. Jack Clayton (and his scriptwriter Francis Coppola, perhaps at his journeyman best, whose original screenplay was far more tidy than the one Clayton used) at least tried to achieve some measure of fidelity to Fitzgerald's novel. Hence the Clayton/Redford adaptation seemed intended to satisfy (if not necessarily to please or impress) scholars and teachers looking for usable classroom material. Baz Luhrmann is striving for a much wider audience and thus taking chances with his filmed "text." He takes extreme liberties with the narrative framework of the novel, linking Nick Carraway with Fitzgerald himself, writing down the story in an alcoholic stupor years later in a mental asylum. Am I wrong to suppose that some readers would like to think better of Nick?

Perhaps too many years of film-viewing and reviewing have convinced me that the best-known literary sources are probably the most difficult to adapt to cinema (with the possible exception of Shakespeare, whose lines were written to be performed and whose plays have even been called "cinematic" by some critics). If readers love and respect those sources, they probably have already played them out in the playhouses of their imagination. Are novels and short stories "filmable"? Aside from John Huston's *The Dead* (1987), James Joyce's writings have pretty much been beyond the reach of the camera (although I would give credit to Bosco Hogan's Stephen Dedalus for doing his Jesuitical best). Tony Richardson astonished us with his popular adaptation of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1963), followed up brilliantly (I thought) by *Joseph Andrews* (1977). The antics of Fielding's characters can easily be visualized and performed for comic effect, but the thoughts of Stephen Dedalus can only be voiced over in a way that is not at all cinematic because it stymies the action. And for that reason, critics trained in cinema studies object to the voice-over solution to the conflict between words and images.

And that, of course, was the solution found in the Redford/Clayton adaptation of *Gatsby*, which is smoothly carried on to its conclusion by Nick Carraway's (Sam Waterston's) voice-over narration. But Baz Luhrmann's solution is hardly an improvement, for he turns Nick into an alcoholic Scott Fitzgerald substitute, first telling Gatsby's story to a therapist at a mental asylum, and then writing it down and typing it, until

he has a completed book manuscript. The problem is that Nick Carraway is not Scott Fitzgerald, and his life is not ruined because Gatsby's "tragedy" turned him to drink. So Nick dictates or writes, and as he does, the words dance over the 3-D images, a wordy and silly solution that's not even close to acceptable. Critical lesson here: do not confuse authors themselves with their fictive characters. It's just not dignified, and it doesn't make sense.

Robert Redford looked the part of an idealized Jay Gatsby, but the idealization overlooks the potential thuggishness of the character. But for the most part, Leonardo DiCaprio is as much of a visual prop for Gatsby as Redford was. Only at one point does his Gatsby seem dangerous, and that is when he confronts and then attacks Tom Buchanan (Joel Edgerton) in that overheated hotel room, just before the auto accident in the "Valley of Ashes," when in a fit of rage he takes Buchanan by the throat. The violent aspects of Gatsby's character encouraged several critics to prefer the Alan Ladd version (1949) to the more genteel Redford, since Ladd was more in touch with the dark and mysterious past concealed by the glamour of the present. DiCaprio manages to re-capture some of that aspect of Gatsby's character.

On the other hand, Clayton's supporting cast would be hard to improve upon. Waterston's Nick Carraway is by-the-book, functioning, presumably, much as Fitzgerald might have intended, and providing a moral compass for the action, even though he seems to be dazzled by Gatsby. Mia Farrow's Daisy exudes superficial charm, but little else. Bruce Dern's Tom Buchanan is, for me at least, forceful, convincingly brutish, indulgent, wrongheaded, and reckless. Lois Chiles is charmingly appealing and conniving as Jordan Baker, the cheating tennis-player and parasite. Karen Black and Scott Wilson bring Fitzgerald's fictional Wilsons to the novel's tragic forefront from the "Valley of Ashes" far better in the Clayton adaptation than in the newer version. Clayton contextualized Myrtle Wilson and takes time to explain her husband's motive for revenge.

Ultimately Clayton gets higher marks for fidelity than Baz Luhrmann does. But fidelity is not the only measure under consideration here. Flawed though Luhrmann's inscription may seem to a fidelity purist, it may well be considered the more entertaining film. It takes a familiar story and adds unexpected flourishes and surprises. It makes the Nick Carraway narrator both more and less interesting, a weak fellow from the midwest who

turned to drink simply because he was Gatsby's neighbor and ends up a failure in an asylum, writing a manuscript named "Gatsby," then deciding as the film's final flourish to call it "The Great Gatsby." Textual purists will blanch at that turn of events, as if, somehow, a substantive text exists to be reached and touched. At least the action stays in its period, unlike Luhrmann's (or is it "Shakespeare's," as advertised?) *Romeo + Juliet*, which did better with the verbal translation. Nowadays we must be tolerant.

But regardless, Luhrman changes the focus and nuance of the story so much that it is no longer Fitzgerald's, and that involves a huge amount of cultural arrogance. Who is this Australian glitz-monger to rewrite an American cultural classic? Speaking on MSNBC cable television's *Morning Joe*, *New York Times* critic A. O. Scott criticized Luhrmann's "rampant commercialism," on 20 May 2013, while pardoning the film's "pleasurable excesses," but who does this gaudy thing belong to, after all? ("Gatsby Brings Glamour.") Why is America such a forgiving nation?

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