



THE GREAT GATSBY

THE UNADAPTABLE AMERICAN HERO?

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The screen adaptations based on Scott Fitzgerald's stories have often provoked more criticism than praise. Compared with his powerfully evocative texts, the screen versions based on his novels – and particularly on *The Great Gatsby* – are said to be tedious and unimaginative. Despite the intensely visual quality of the novel, it seems that instead of the giddy cocktails served at Gatsby's dream mansion, the American movie house has come up with little more than bubbleless lemonade.

What are the reasons behind the watered-down versions of the original, heady cocktail? In other words, what makes it so difficult to transpose on screen the fizzy visuality surrounding the American hero of the Prohibition era, one whose elusive profile remains imprinted on the minds of countless readers, many of whom have been unable to find the 'true Gatsby' among the existing moving pictures? Is it because the film directors – Jack Clayton (1974), Elliott Nugent (1949) and Herbert Brenon (1926) – were too overwhelmed by the task, or did the transposition strategies themselves prove ill-adapted? Or, is *Gatsby* – the puzzling literary embodiment of the American dream – simply untranslatable into cinematic language, underlining by the same token the very limits of the entire transposition business of literary texts, often considered as far subtler than cinematic texts?

In this brief exploration of the screen adaptations of *Gatsby*, the focus remains on the visual aesthetics of the existing films. Rather than calling for the apparition on screen of the 'true Gatsby', I shall argue that despite the initial impressions of flatness, Nugent and Clayton's cinematic strategies succeed, at times quite convincingly, in creating extensions capable of rendering the ambiguity around the American prohibition hero. As we move from the verbal to the visual, some effects are lost while others are gained in what Virginia Woolf regarded as the 'unnatural alliance' between the literary work and the visual medium. In her still pertinent essay 'The

cinema',¹ published in 1926, Woolf regrets the simplification that results when 'picture-makers' adapt novels to the cinema, quite a savage art form in Woolf's eyes, because capable of '[falling] upon its prey with immense rapacity' and 'subsist[ing] upon the body of its unfortunate victim'. While viewing the cinema's act of transposition as something intrinsically parasitic Woolf, however, admits that 'cinema [also] has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression'. The British modernist's early interrogation regarding the 'specific devices' (not to be confused with 'special effects') possessed by the cinema is worth keeping in mind when examining the picture-making power involved in the inevitable tampering with Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* by Clayton and Nugent. In our day and age when visual suggestiveness often seems crushed by shock effects and other forms of 'visual savagery', as Woolf might put it, it is indeed interesting to see what the two movie directors do when left with their own 'specific devices'.

When too much telling and showing kills the gangster

When asked to screenwrite Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, Francis Ford Coppola had shot *The Godfather* only two years earlier, yet unlike Nugent whose 1926 movie presents *Gatsby* as a quintessential gangster, Coppola, the gangster specialist, chose a more allusive mode to represent the key character. In this respect, Clayton's adaptation remains closer to Fitzgerald's narration which sustains the reader's interest without killing the mystery. Yet both movie makers have been criticised. One for the 'excessive liberties' of adaptation (Nugent), the other (Clayton) for the nearly 'religious faithfulness' to the plot.

Clayton's seeming refusal of the very idea of adaptation is underlined by his comment after the shooting was over: 'We've made the book'. [Atkins: 221]. A boastful claim, for whatever the degree of 'fidelity' or 'literariness' of the adaptation, a film director never 'makes' a source text unless 'making' refers to the 'fabrication', 're-making' or other interpretative tamperings that movie adaptation necessarily involves. Yet at the same time the 'parasitism' that Woolf blames the cinema capable of does not mean frantically clinging to the novel's thematic and other material. As several film theorists have underlined, one cannot expect films to reproduce all the pleasures of reading. On the other hand, moving pictures create other, parallel, and no less valuable forms of enraptured reading experiences, all of which are not of purely visual kind. Therefore, despite the higher status that literature notoriously enjoys over cinematic adaptations, one should not be blind to the ways screen adaptations knowingly move away from their source texts, in order to provide extensions to the 'original text'.

What makes the case of *Gatsby* – a particularly resistant text to adaptation – more complicated, is its palimpsestic quality that may not be entirely of Fitzgerald's making. The 'Gatsby style' (fancy, bulky cars, wiggling Charleston shoes, flapper girl haircuts, etc.) has long been exploited by a society willing to grasp any image worth branding. At the

¹<http://www.film-philosophy.com/portal/writings/woolf>

same time, these marks, labels or vignettes of the so-called 'Gatsby era' mirror only the surface structure of Fitzgerald's writing, while the text poses more fundamental questions regarding modes and means of representation than what these props and explicit costume categories suggest.

Most of us have seen the 1974 movie version of *The Great Gatsby* featuring Robert Redford in the key role, but there is also an earlier version dating back to 1949, starring Alan Ladd. In the movie posters of this Elliott Nugent adaptation, Jay Gatsby is presented as a hazy 'womanizer', surrounded somewhat mistakenly by young women in light clothing, while the man himself is presented clad in a gangster coat and a hat, in a more or less deliberate 'Al Capone pose'.

Fitzgerald's novel has been adapted three times as a feature film, but only two are available today. The earliest version was a silent film made in 1926. Besides rumors about a surviving copy somewhere in Moscow, there is no trace of the print. One may wonder if the 'lost Gatsby' once belonged to the private collections of Stalin, a notorious film fan. In which case, the movie might now be enjoyed by Vladimir Putin, the current emperor of the Russian power house. Whatever the case, should the film be found, it would be thrilling to see how Herbert Brenon transposed on screen the roar of the Roaring Twenties, without the slightest of sounds!

The first sound version of *Gatsby* (1949) was based on the play adaptation of Fitzgerald's novel by Owen Davis. Besides Alan Ladd, the Hollywood star known for his roles as a gunman, it featured Betty Field in the role of the flowery yet deleterious Daisy, as well as Shelley Winters embodying Myrtle Wilson, the vicious and tragic 'other woman'.

In Nugent's black and white movie influenced by the *film noir* genre, we do not find the deliberately delayed appearance of the hero created in the novel, as well as later by Clayton. Rather than introducing Gatsby in a carefully laid out setting – made up by rumours and contradictory bits of gossip that create a peculiar, moveable halo around the character – Nugent has Gatsby emerge on screen as a recognizable yet curiously smooth-faced gangster. The filmwork seems to make no bones about it, *Gatsby is a crook!* Right from the beginning, he is shown holding a gun and killing like a true criminal. Later on, he is even seen punching one of his guests on the nose during one of his extravagant parties. Thus, rather than fabricated out of a subtle blending of trash and splendor, snobbery and vulgarity, Nugent's Gatsby is rushed onto the screen as a specimen of the underworld, a bootlegger whose criminal past provides a justification for the final punishment scene of the villain. The fatal shots shatter Gatsby's proud poolside confessions, as the baddy is definitely turned into a goody in front of pearl-white copies of Greek statues, all part of the visual discourse of Nugent's grandiloquent and moralistically charged film.

Whether it is due to Nugent's insistence on the mineral (marble pools, statues, stony expressions and rigid dichotomies), the 1949 movie version largely fails to capture the vitality of the drifting movement that underlies Fitzgerald's writing. The gangster's transformation into a square, all-American guy who accepts to go to jail to make up for his ill deeds greatly reduces the impact of the Fitzgeraldian *persona*. Moreover, the final framing-

in of the redeemed hero is heightened by Daisy's pathetic pleading on the other side of the bay, begging her husband to 'do something before it is too late', an alteration that leads to a far more virtuous ending compared to Fitzgerald's closure where depravity and other less glorious human characteristics are left lingering in a sweet and sour mix of things.

Striking for its moralistic framing, Nugent's adaptation opens with a prologue, an appended sequence during which the now grey-haired Nick Carraway is seen returning to Gatsby's tomb twenty years after his death. The epilogue scene – another added sequence completing the implicit frame – leads the spectators back to the cemetery, tying the knot of the curious funeral ribbon that seems to surround the entire film. Accompanied by Jordan Baker who has given up her little tricks and turned into a respectable wife, Nick reads aloud a Biblical inscription (*Proverbs 14:12*) on Gatsby's tombstone thus triggering off a series of flashbacks that reconstruct Gatsby's life since his encounter with Dan Cody. Depicted as a Melvillian Ahab-type of sea-captain, Cody is staged as a devilish benefactor who allows the young man to get a start in a duplicitous life.

In the process, the role of the subjective and often unreliable storyteller of the novel is deleted as Nick, the posthumous elegist, is turned into one of those telling Gatsby's story. Indeed, in Nugent's movie, not only Nick Carraway, Jordan Baker, Daisy Buchanan, but Gatsby himself is heard telling *exactly how* he turned into a bootlegger. Needless to say, the insistence on revisiting the crucial stages of Gatsby's life (including the expository scenes where Cody's wife is shown tempting the young Jay) ends up damaging the specific mode of Fitzgerald's writing. Unlike the novel, which maintains its suspense till the closing pages, there is too much evidence too soon for the viewers of the film to be pulled in as active participants in the discovery of the subject. Instead of gradual food for fantasy, Nugent offers the viewers factual summaries together with a documentary angle and tone. As a result, when the timeline has been straightened out and the shadowy aspects of the hero's life filled in, Gatsby's killing has lost most of its interest. Cinematically speaking, the hero has already been killed, well before the arrival of the murderer.

And when fooling the eye resuscitates the hero

If there are things that novels can do and films *cannot*, the reverse is often true as well. While Nugent's flashback structure deprives *Gatsby's* viewers of some of the pleasure of discovery, the loss is partly counterbalanced by visual means that seem to have little to do with the signifying techniques of the novel.

In both adaptations, it is well before Gatsby's plunge into his watery tomb, whose narcissistic attraction is amplified that more innovative camerawork is used to seize the unstable contours of the Fitzgeraldian hero. In Nugent's film the impression of timelessness is sought by the presence of old statues, visual hints scattered around Gatsby's garden that also read as an attempt to link the American prohibition craze of modern times with some of the great myths and tragedies of the Old Continent. Yet, the more

stimulating elements are the painterly effects which, more effectively than the 'pedestalized' Greek figures, raise the question of authenticity and artifice, inseparable from Fitzgerald's novel. The last part of this article briefly examines the complex painterly processes which remain associated with the problems of points of view.

Unlike Nugent's adaptation, where Fitzgerald's unreliable narrator is deleted from the script, Nick Carraway keeps some of his crucial ambiguity in Clayton's film. In the opening scene of the latter movie, we are provided with a series of comments, reminding us that it is indeed through Nick's eyes and other senses that we enter and explore the Gatsby world. Yet, similarly to the 1949 version, Clayton's 1970s Nick-as-narrator rapidly seems to join the other characters, losing thus his status as a subjective teller. What is lost is the vision reflected by Nick's eyeball that never filters an objective truth, but only a series of subjective visions colored by the changes in his own moral standpoint. It should also be pointed out that rather than taming him into a Bible-quoting husband, Clayton and Coppola have Nick leave the East coast, almost as disgusted and homesick and puzzled as in the novel, pursuing his attempts to probe the limits of visual perception.

On the whole, the optical shifts performed in the screen versions of *Gatsby* have not received due attention, and we may not always be attentive enough to the film directors' attempts at translating those shifts on screen. It is worth adding in passing that Fitzgerald's initial intention was to use the 3rd person narratorial point of view. He gave up the idea, though, to choose a narrative structure that allowed a more effective build-up of mystery around the main character. According to Bernard Poli and André Le Vot, the method finally adopted was quite similar to the montage technique, as the American author kept reassembling scenes as if they had been shots to be put together in specific sequences in the service of a particular dramatic impact.

Jack Clayton's opening credits unfold as a series of glimpses at some of Gatsby's intimate belongings (presumably) after his death. Without a commentary other than distant ball room music, the camera initiates the telling, moving from one object to another, setting up connections and establishing relations that start making sense only gradually, as you watch along. The viewer is once again struck by the effect of framing, now by the presence of framed photographs or otherwise square or rectangular shapes. Besides the increased fascination with photo-taking that marked the 1920s, the framed photographs undoubtedly mirror the attempts by Fitzgeraldian characters to capture the fleeting, out-bursting, irretrievable elements that keep escaping the authorized limits imposed on things. In Clayton's filmic rereading of the text, the anonymous camera eye focusing on the portrait of the young woman captures some of Daisy Buchanan's pernicious naïveté, better than Mia Farrow's excessively girlish voice. The camera then moves slowly away from the rigid shapes to glide over Gatsby's bed spread and its blurred moiré lines, thus creating an interference with its meshed lines.

During the same interpretatory process, Clayton's cinematic approach of *The Great Gatsby* seeks to transcribe on screen other complex patterns of the novel. As the camera penetrates Gatsby's Long Island mansion, we are led in front of a picture of what used to be Miss Daisy Fay's Louisville home,

thus emphasizing that Gatsby's house is but a replica of the place that witnessed the blissful, fleeting encounter between Daisy and Jay. At the same time, this early visual reference to spatial duplicity and the entire 'eyeing' process – the surreptitiously prying 'I' that lies at the core of the Gatsbian space – does not rub away the mystery around the 'American Taj Mahal', the greatest American temple of love ever appeared in writing. One that, uncannily enough, tends to turn into a ghostly mansion once transposed on the New Continent!

Fitzgerald's play between the original and the copy thus rendered visible, it is regrettable that Clayton did not pursue his subtle camerawork beyond the proleptic visual hints of the seemingly 'square guy' yet to appear. Besides a few later scenes, there is little actual re-presenting of the novel's visual suggestiveness, and the general impression is one of weak visual resonance. One of the other moments when the visual (enhanced by the aural²) thickens and intensifies, corresponds to a scene where Gatsby is seen looking at the flickering green light over the bay. Once again, the nearly clichéd phrase 'the less we see, the more we think we see' turns out to be true. The only thing we see is Gatsby's turned back, his hand reaching across the blue bay towards the green light, facing a couple of waves that move in sluggish, rhythmic, animal-like moves towards another direction. This is very little, yet it somehow manages to display without explaining away the mystery. All in a few compressed glimpses!

Indisputably, the most striking visual effects of the two films are created when the painterly enmeshes with the moving (pictures). This is particularly true in the creation of *trompe l'oeils* by Nugent, although visual toying with the novel is perceptible also in Clayton's play with known paintings and genres, including a *memento mori* in the form of a half-eaten sandwich with a black fly marking, or willingly 'scarring' the opening sequence. Far from insignificant elements of décor, they create extensions in the otherwise flat and linear storyline, uttering at the same time the wordless aesthetic desires that reach beyond individual destinies. Together with Clayton's romantic bayside scene that undoubtedly mirrors Caspar David Friedrich's 'Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog' (1817), one could also mention the 18th century British portrait artist Thomas Gainsborough (1727-88), who seems to have influenced the way Nugent captures Gatsby in a later, curiously anachronistic tableau effect, reinforced by the frames formed by French windows. First shown in the window of a recklessly speeding gangster car, Nugent's iconic criminal is rendered problematic, both by the cemetery scene and Gatsby's presentation during the shootout that create a Prohibition hero who is always already dead and sanctified.

Nugent's *trompe l'oeil* effects include an early view of Gatsby contemplating Daisy's new dwelling, together with a ball scene with a noisy crowd swinging in front of a huge fresco that represents a mythical landscape without a single character in it. This enigmatic pictorial element,

² Within the limited space of this article, it was impossible to deal with the sound effects of both film adaptations of *The Great Gatsby*. It should nevertheless be noted that musical effects play an important role especially in Nugent's film, where the Prohibition years are revisited as steps in the musical and dancing history of America. Contrasting with the flat, hymn-like music played in the prologue scene, jazz is fingerpointed and blamed for the freely pulsating, spasmodic excesses of an entire era.

which is non-existent in the novel and which none of the movie characters comment upon, is almost impossible to miss while watching the film. All through the film, this process of 'background picturing' remains a crucial element in the movie maker's visual strategy to give shape to Jay's paradoxical, and ultimately tragic attachment to the mythologized future affected by the European past. Concurrently, the use of *trompe l'oeils* allows Nugent's *Gatsby* to escape the one-dimensional diegetic logic that he seemed captured in. Once freed from linear chronology by the more oblique mode of representation, the filmic *Gatsby* regains some of his lost magic. During the 'fooling of the eye' business that *trompe l'oeils* are literally all about, *Gatsby* emerges as a con man, one who struggles to turn into a Mr. Somebody through photographs, motorcars, as well as via reset scenes and remade statues. In the end, he also stands for the artist whose main business is deceiving senses, an operation possible only if the viewer agrees to 'willingly suspend his disbelief' in the Coleridgean sense of the well-known expression, which here includes a will to ignore some of the limits of the medium. In this respect, both Nugent and Clayton certainly experimented what Virginia Woolf, in her essay published a year after Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* regarded, despite her suspicion towards the new art form, as the 'residue of visual emotion which is of no use to either painter or to poet [and that] may still await the cinema'.

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