

FILM

The Great Gatsby (1925)

F. Scott Fitzgerald

(1896-1940)

adaptation by David Merrick (1974)

ANALYSIS

David Merrick produced the third film version, this time directed by Jack Clayton and with a script credited to Francis Ford Coppola. With the enormous sales of the novel during the 1960s and early 1970s, and with so many readers familiar with the plot, any radical adaptation probably would have produced howls of protest. Thus this version was much closer to the plot of the novel [than preceding adaptations]. And yet there were still differences. Here, for example, an embarrassed Gatsby does not walk out of Nick's cottage just before Daisy appears as he does in their reunion scene in the novel, nor is it raining outside; further, this is all taking place *eight* years since their Louisville separation.

In addition, this film made far greater use of the pictorial to convey Fitzgerald's themes than the 1949 *Gatsby*. For example, the differences between the economic classes is emphasized at the very beginning when Nick in a small boat with outboard motor crosses the bay to his cousin's house. In a voice-over he recites the opening passages of the novel, talking of the advantages that some people have. Suddenly a much larger sailboat cuts him off, knocking his hat momentarily into the water. When Nick arrives at his destination, this theme of rich versus poor is further visually emphasized when the athletic Tom Buchanan, in a riding outfit, coming directly toward the camera on one of his polo ponies, is juxtaposed with Nick standing by in his summer suit.

But too many of the cinematic effects were unsuccessful. Several seem to be metaphors used first during a much earlier period in the history of film and may have been used to evoke the feeling of the 1920s. A closeup of a white flower symbolizing Daisy's virginal beginnings in Louisville; a closeup of two birds nibbling bread while Daisy and Gatsby are in Nick's cottage and then a shot of Nick stubbing out a cigarette, showing his impatience; and a shot of a pool reflecting the images of Daisy and Gatsby kissing while a goldfish idly swims by are all extremely old-fashioned devices.

Other far too obvious scenes are those that suggest the erotic relationship between Daisy and Gatsby. These include shots of a water fountain spurting up in the distance behind the couple dancing at a party, another scene of their dancing around a candlestick on the floor, and, especially, a third scene in Gatsby's kitchen where Daisy first fondles a shiny copper mold and then fondles her lover's hand.

Although many sections of the script were adapted from Fitzgerald's novel without too much change, the dialogue, as in the previous version, was not completely satisfactory. Even Fitzgerald's own dialogue is disconcerting at times, particularly when Nick's narration is broken up and given to the other characters. Still more disturbing is the added dialogue, and there is a good amount of it. Some is clearly unnecessary, such as Daisy's 'My, my, my' as the camera shows Jordan Baker cheating at golf, or her 'Do you remember?' introducing a flashback. And Fitzgerald would never have abided such trite conversation as: Gatsby: 'I'll love you forever.' They kiss. Daisy: 'Be my lover; stay my lover.' Gatsby: 'Your husband.' Daisy: 'Husband, lover.' Fade out.

Some of the actors played their parts extremely well, especially Howard de Silva (the Wilson of the 1949 film), whose worn pug face and expressive voice made for a marvelous Wolfsheim with fractured syntax but no perceptible accent; Tom Ewell, who was seen as Owl Eyes in some theaters in the United States, but whose scenes were eventually cut and never replaced; and possibly Bruce Dern, whose athletic body and gruff voice seemed to match Fitzgerald's portrait of Tom Buchanan. But one can quarrel with the

casting of others. Sam Waterson and Lois Chiles were far too bland as Nick and Jordan; on the other hand, Karen Black's acting was far too broad for the role of Myrtle Wilson, especially when after cutting herself in one scene, she licks the blood from her fingers as if were melted chocolate. Mia Farrow's poorly disguised pregnancy in a number of scenes (note the furniture purposely placed in front of her once or twice as well as her empire-style dresses) resulted, for some viewers, in an unwelcome added dimension to her portrayal of Daisy and was as disconcerting as her uneven acting. And finally, Robert Redford's matinee-idol face, blonde hair, and far too even voice in no way fit Fitzgerald's description of 'an elegant young roughneck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd.'

This slow-paced, approximately two hour and twenty minute film, the longest and most expensive of the four adaptations—it cost some \$6.4 million dollars, a large sum for a movie in 1974—had a huge advertising campaign. The studio extensively publicized the fact that exteriors were being filmed both in New York and 'in some of the most famous mansions in America' in Newport, Rhode Island. But other exteriors as well as interiors were shot in Pinewood Studios, London, and far less publicity was given to this. There were many advertising tie-ins too, such as one for Ballantine Scotch...

But despite the ballyhoo, critics intensely disliked this film, using such phrases as 'a long, slow, sickening bore' (Stanley Kauffmann, *New Republic*), 'a disaster' (Stephen Darst, *New York Times Book Review*), and 'appalling' (Robert Hatch, *Nation*). Even the headlines were disrespectful. These included 'The great enigma' (*Sunday Times* [London]), "'The Great Gatsby' Not So Great—Despite Fanfare" (*Philadelphia Inquirer*), and 'They've Turned 'Gatsby' to Goo' (*New York Times*). Penelope Gilliatt's extensive *New Yorker* review was the only major exception and even it had some objections to the film. In short, the latest and longest adaptation of Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby* had received the most negative reviews.

Thus to date Fitzgerald's novel has proven too much of a challenge for its adapters. None, for example, has successfully portrayed Fitzgerald's reflections on the death of the American dream, despite the obvious Horatio Alger parallels in all of the adaptations and despite the introduction, in the play and in the 1974 film, of Gatsby's Hopalong Cassidy book with its list of Franklinian resolutions.... Further, despite such obvious exceptions as the portrayal of Wolfsheimer in the 1974 film, very little of Fitzgerald's incisive satire is found in any of the adaptations. One of the most glaring omissions is the lengthy list of metaphoric names of those who attended Gatsby's lavish parties... In no way does the scene reflect Fitzgerald's biting commentary on the class structure in this country....

Undoubtedly there will be more adaptations of *The Great Gatsby*. One can only hope that with better scriptwriting, casting, and acting, those responsible will give us 'a measure of the novel's intention. *Gatsby* is obviously much more than a gangster thriller and much more than a love story. Possibly some future adapter will recognize this and succeed in creating a satisfactory version of Fitzgerald's masterpiece."

Alan Margolies
"Novel to Play to Film: Four Versions of *The Great Gatsby*"
Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby
(G.K. Hall 1984) 187, 195-99