A new film version of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

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Directed by Baz Luhrmann, co-written by Luhrmann and Craig Pearce, based on the novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald

> **"It's not all rubbish," cried Amory passionately. "This is the first time in my life I've argued Socialism. It's the only panacea I know. I'm restless. My whole generation is restless. I'm sick of a system where the richest man gets the most beautiful girl if he wants her, where the artist without an income has to sell his talents to a button manufacturer. Even if I had no talents I'd not be content to work ten years, condemned either to celibacy or a furtive indulgence, to give some man's son an automobile." Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise* (1920)**

It is unfortunate that during the filmmaking process no one ever turned to director Baz Luhrmann and suggested that his interpretation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) was wrongheaded and likely to result in an artistic travesty.

Now we are burdened with the result, and there's not much that can be done about that.

Luhrmann's version of *Gatsby* opened in the US last Friday, and it may well reach a wide audience. There is an interest in the material and enough left (enticing fragments) of the original, in these times when intriguing dramas are few and far between, to encourage audiences hungry for something out of the ordinary.

As well, certain prominent newspaper critics, who should know better, are irresponsibly recommending the new *Gatsby*, as though it were a substantial treatment and showed anything more than a passing familiarity with the book's major concerns.

Fitzgerald's novel, set in the summer of 1922, concerns a young man from the Midwest, Nick Carraway (Tobey Maguire in the new film), who sells bonds on Wall Street and lives on suburban Long Island (in a small house) next to the mansion owned by the enigmatic, youthful millionaire Jay Gatsby (Leonardo DiCaprio). Nick's appealing cousin Daisy (Carey Mulligan) and her brutish, philandering husband Tom Buchanan (Joel Edgerton) live directly across the bay where older money holds sway.

Gatsby regularly hosts elaborate, lavish parties, attended by New York celebrities and hangers-on, most of whom have not been invited. Rumors circulate as to the source of his vast wealth. Nick makes Gatsby's acquaintance at one of these gatherings. He eventually learns of the other man's deep, abiding feelings for Daisy, whom Gatsby met while still a poor young man, a soldier in World War I, five years earlier in her hometown of Louisville, Kentucky.

Gatsby's all-dominant desire is not simply that Daisy will leave Tom, but that she will publicly declare she never loved him and essentially efface the intervening years. Gatsby has made his millions (through bootlegging and stock fraud in partnership with gangster Meyer Wolfsheim [Amitabh Bachchan]), bought the Long Island mansion and organized his personal life to a large extent around the goal of getting close to Daisy again. Introduced by Nick, the pair ultimately commence an affair.

Meanwhile Buchanan has set up his mistress, Myrtle Wilson (Isla Fisher), with an apartment in New York, where he visits her—on one occasion in Nick's reluctant company. Myrtle's weak and vulnerable husband George (Jason Clarke) owns a garage in the wretched stretch between affluent Long Island and Queens known as the Valley of Ashes.

The various desperate and delusional relationships set off a tragic series of events, which result in death and misery for the upstarts and have-nots, while the Buchanans, largely untroubled and uncaring, escape unscathed.

Fitzgerald's work is a brilliant effort, easy to underestimate in its brevity, delicacy and the simplicity of the drama. The novel has something of the diaphanous sensibility of Keats, the author's favorite poet. At the same time, it is an angry, scathing work, as thoroughgoing a debunking of the "American dream" as there ever has been…

Unfortunately, Luhrmann is simply not up to the intellectual and social questions involved. He is not even close. Not to mince words, the film is something of a disaster.

The Australian director brings to the material a largely crude and cartoonish approach. He appears to suffer from an almost fatal literal-mindedness. Every hint, allusion or metaphor in the novel he chooses to dramatize is spelled out in large, capital letters.

Taking off from comments by the narrator such as this one a third of the way through, "Reading over what I have written so far …," the filmmakers have created a framing device in which Carraway is recovering from alcoholism (*à la* Fitzgerald himself) and a general emotional breakdown in an absurdly snow-bound Midwestern sanitarium under the care of a psychologist of some sort. Nick sets to work on an account of the events as part of his therapy.

How does this add anything? It merely provides an opportunity for Luhrmann and co-scenarist Craig Pearce to insert more of their own simplistic dialogue.

As part of his general literal-mindedness, Luhrmann apparently believes the way to present the restlessness of the Jazz Age is by a camera that rarely rests on its human or other subjects. We are swooped across the bay in Long Island, from the tops of skyscrapers to New York's streets, through the hideous Valley of Ashes, all in overdone, rapid-fire fashion. The various excesses cancel each other out, leaving almost nothing behind.

When Nick explains, as preparations are made at his house for the first encounter between Daisy and Gatsby, "The flowers were unnecessary, for at two o'clock a greenhouse arrived from Gatsby's, with innumerable receptacles to contain it," Luhrmann generates a virtual greenhouse on screen. It is excessive, unconvincing and distracting. This sort of thing occurs a dozen times or more. The story and themes simply get lost.

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The secondary figures, Gatsby's party-goers, Myrtle's guests in New York and others, are a collection of grotesques. The Long Island party scenes themselves, set to contemporary popular music, are entertaining enough as a collective tour de force, but have next to nothing to do with Fitzgerald or 1920s America. The sets, presumably on purpose, look unreal, something out of a Disney film.

On those few, fleeting occasions when the goings-on slow down and recognizably human moments occur, one feels the extraordinary truth of the book and its dialogue. Oddly enough, set against the general silliness, the lines then do stand out. DiCaprio is probably a good choice for Gatsby, although Luhrmann makes this difficult to determine.

In one of the few decently paced scenes, Carraway asks Gatsby whether Wolfsheim, to whom he has just been introduced by Gatsby, is an actor or a dentist. "He's a gambler," the latter explains, and the man who fixed the 1919 World Series. (Wolfsheim is based on the famed gangster Arnold Rothstein, whom Fitzgerald once met.) Carraway is staggered. "'How did he happen to do that?' I asked after a minute. 'He just saw the opportunity.'" In the film, the last line is delivered perfectly by DiCaprio.

The scene in which the marital drama reaches its peak, in the Plaza Hotel on a horrible, hot day, is presented more or less straightforwardly by Luhrmann. Such moments are terribly rare, however.

It may be that Luhrmann, Pearce and their collaborators genuinely admire the novel and only mean to make it accessible to a youthful, contemporary audience. If so, in my view, they have badly misstepped. Their pandering to what they conceive to be the current level of understanding and culture would be enough of a mistake, but, worse than that, in the confused, pointless process the filmmakers have cut out the film's core.

Luhrmann and Pearce have chosen to reduce the drama in *The Great Gatsby* largely to its element of a romance. They take to heart the great love between Gatsby and Daisy, and paint it in sentimental, conventional colors. This extends to making the young woman a far more sympathetic character than she ought to be, adding details that are not in—and, in fact, contradict the spirit of—the novel (for instance, her contemplation of a last-minute phone call to Gatsby).

Fitzgerald has something else in mind. Like his fictional contemporary Clyde Griffiths (in Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, also published in 1925, although coming from a different generation and artistic tradition), Gatsby is in love less with an actual woman (whom he hardly knows, after all) than with a way of life—identified with luxury, elegance, ease, good taste, refinement—that finds individual human expression in Daisy.

Toward the end of the book, as Gatsby and Nick are struggling to define Daisy's magical appeal, Fitzgerald has this wonderful passage:

"'Her voice is full of money,' he [Gatsby] said suddenly. That was it. I'd never understood before. It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it. … high in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl. …"

The 1974 film version, with Robert Redford and Mia Farrow, which never fully comes to life under the direction of Jack Clayton, at least placed this social element at the center of things. (The 1949 rendition, with Alan Ladd as Gatsby, Betty Field as Daisy and Shelley Winters as Myrtle, directed by Elliott Nugent, is not readily available. Blacklist victim Howard Da Silva was in both the 1949 and 1974 adaptations.)

The lethal denouement in Luhrmann's film is put down almost exclusively to Tom Buchanan's malevolence. Of course, Tom is responsible for a good deal, but Daisy is fully complicit and, in fact, the perpetrator of one of the central crimes (a fact this version tends to downplay). Not for nothing does Fitzgerald write, after the defining catastrophe has taken place, "They [Tom and Daisy] weren't happy …—and yet they weren't unhappy either. There was an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture, and anybody would have said that they were conspiring together."

A novel is not a history book, or a political manifesto. The important artist accumulates thoughts, feelings, moods and themes over the course of years and works them into concrete and coherent imagery charged with meaning. Any serious work also includes ambiguities, complexities, "asymmetrical" elements that are not easily reducible to immediate social analysis.

However, the individual artist does not draw his or her conceptions and emotions from empty space, nor are they simply the expression of eternal psycho-biological urges. Significant artistic ideas and representations are always shaped by collective human experience, by historical and social development.

Fitzgerald thought a good deal about political events and social life. His books and letters only have to be read carefully for that to become apparent. Born in 1896, the novelist belonged to a generation deeply affected by the First World War, the Russian Revolution and subsequent developments.

One example. In *The Great Gatsby*'s first bit of important dialogue, Tom Buchanan goes off about a book he has read, *The Rise of the Colored Empires*, "by this man Goddard." He goes on: "The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved."

The thinly fictionalized reference is to Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (1920), a reactionary diatribe about the dangers expressed in the title. But Stoddard was not only a racist (and later for a time a sympathizer of the Nazis), he was a ferocious anti-communist, who penned such gems as "Bolshevism: The Heresy of the Underman," and "Social Unrest and Bolshevism in the Islamic World."

In the book's dramatically climactic scene, Buchanan returns to the issue: "Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white."

One need not overestimate the references in Fitzgerald's letters to "We Marxians…," "I'm still a socialist …," "I'm a Communist enough …", to grasp the degree to which he knew his way around these issues. In the portion of *This Side of Paradise* cited at the top of this article, this piece of dialogue goes on, involving the central figure, Amory:

"Russia is your example of a beneficent violence, I suppose?"

"Quite possibly," admitted Amory. "Of course, it's overflowing just as the French Revolution did, but I've no doubt that it's really a great experiment and well worth while."

"Don't you believe in moderation?"

"You won't listen to the moderates, and it's almost too late. The truth is that the public has done one of those startling and amazing things that they do about once in a hundred years. They've seized an idea."

One of the most moving expressions of Fitzgerald's feelings about society comes through in a comment he made to his daughter in a letter only days before his death in December 1940: "Sometime when you feel very brave and defiant and haven't been invited to one particular college function, read the terrible chapter in [Marx's] *Das Kapital* on 'The Working Day,' and see if you are ever quite the same."

Along with many other things, *The Great Gatsby* is a furious attack on the rich in America. No one has ever put on paper a more stinging and unforgettable indictment: "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made. …" (These words are essentially thrown away in Luhrmann's film!)

The characters are rather monstrous in the novel, by and large. On receiving a copy of the book in April 1925, the critic Edmund Wilson wrote Fitzgerald and heaped praise on it. His only reservation was that "the characters are mostly so unpleasant in themselves that the story

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becomes rather a bitter dose before one has finished it. … I wish, in your next, you would handle a more sympathetic theme. (Not that I don't admire Gatsby and see the point of the whole thing, but you will admit that it keeps us inside the hyena cage.)"

Fitzgerald, perhaps a little more diffusely, also has things he wants to say about the point that society in the US has reached by the 1920s (by which time of course it was the dominant world power). The final pages seem to suggest that not only Gatsby's personal fantasy, but America's progressive promise ("the last and greatest of all human dreams,") as well, which once seemed so unlimited, are things of the past.

Fitzgerald writes of Gatsby, "He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night." Already behind America …

Luhrmann's artistic failures and lapses have to be seen in context. Whatever may be in their heads, the unwillingness of the filmmakers to take on *The Great Gatsby*'s indictment of the parasites and criminals who were running America 90 years ago, and who have strengthened their stranglehold exponentially since then, has a certain objective significance.

The current crop of parasites and criminals in America, and their hangers-on, would not care to see their activities and lifestyles exposed to public view. That pressure works its way through confused, socially oblivious artists such as Luhrmann and Pearce.

Speaking for all those who would have attended Gatsby's parties, and perhaps attend such events today, Kathryn Schulz of *New York* magazine (who has also written for the *Nation*, among other publications) explained earlier this month, "Why I Despise *The Great Gatsby*." She noted that it was the only book she had read a number of times "despite failing … to derive almost any pleasure at all from the experience."

One can only note that the book was not intended to provide pleasure for the self-satisfied upper middle class. It was directed against that social layer, and Schulz's ongoing unhappiness with Fitzgerald (a "moralist," and also, inevitably, someone with an "unthinking commitment to a gender order so archaic as to be Premodern") is one of the highest recommendations for reading his novel.

Unhappily, Luhrmann's film version is a failure by any objective standard.

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