The GREAT GATSBY meets ALAIN BADIOU

Rethinking fidelity in film adaptation

Ursula Vooght

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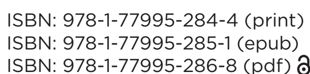

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Research justification

This book, *The Great Gatsby meets Alain Badiou: Rethinking fidelity in film adaptation*, occupies the disciplinary field of adaptation studies, an interdisciplinary field located at the intersection of literary studies, cultural studies and film studies. Its intended audience is scholars of film adaptation and F Scott Fitzgerald scholars. It considers the Hollywood film adaptations of F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) in light of philosopher Alain Badiou's theorisation of fidelity and truth, as well as his theoretically informed writings on cinema as a form.

From the very beginning of the discipline, fidelity has been a key and persistent topic of discussion. Critical approaches based on fidelity have both been defended and attacked within the field. Primarily, difficulties were felt to arise from evaluative and comparative approaches that tended to favour the novel form and originating text, and emotional or moralistic responses to adaptations. The book considers how the foundational disciplines of adaptation studies shaped scholarly reactions to approaches that considered fidelity, as scholars came bearing their own ideological stances and taboos.

Whilst some scholars attempted to find solutions to the so-called 'problem' of fidelity, these tended to attempt to save parts of the concept and remove others. This book takes a new, holistic look at the problems and benefits of including a consideration of fidelity in the scholarship of film adaptation. The book does so by taking Alain Badiou's differing concept of fidelity and applying it to the scholarship of adaptation.

Badiou's theory of fidelity has not yet been applied within the field of adaptation studies, except in the author's published paper of 2018 in the *Critical Arts* journal and the PhD thesis that this book is founded upon. His philosophy has, however, been applied in several other fields, including education, history and political science. Badiou's differing concept of fidelity, which necessitates an openness to fissure, contradiction and ambiguity, removes some of the difficulties typically experienced in attempts to utilise fidelity as a construct in discussing film adaptations and creates an avenue for justifying evaluative approaches in the discipline.

In order to demonstrate the application of a Badiouian fidelity, film adaptations of F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* are explored using the methodology proposed within the book. *The Great Gatsby* has had a variable but relatively consistent status as part of an American canon and continues to be of scholarly interest. Its cultural centrality is reflected in the repeated Hollywood adaptations, directed by Hubert Brenon (1926), Elliott Nugent (1949), Jack Clayton (1974) and Baz Luhrmann (2013). These provide sufficient relevant information to examine. The film texts, including images, and their paratexts, such as interviews with the directors, marketing and film reviews, are considered using the textual analysis method.

Although this book has grown out of my PhD thesis in Media and Cultural Studies and a previously published 2018 article, I affirm that at least 50% of the work has not been previously published. The book represents original research. No part of the book has been plagiarised from another publication or published elsewhere, and it has undergone an iThenticate similarities check.

Ursula Vooght, Department of Media, Language and Communication, Faculty of Arts and Design, Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa.

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

ASR	American Safety Razor
BFI	British Film Institute
CANRAD	Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy
CGI	computer-generated imagery
DUT	Durban University of Technology
GGC	Great Gatsby Curve
OP	*L'Organisation politique*
PTSD	post-traumatic stress disorder
RADLA	Research and Doctoral Leadership Academy
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
USA	United States of America
UKZN	University of KwaZulu-Natal

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Biographical note

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Dedication

For my father, Peter Erik Strauss – the most authentic person I've known

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Preface

When I came across Alain Badiou's writings on fidelity, I realised here was a new concept of fidelity that gave voice to some of the intangibles that operate in adaptation. The more I read, the more profoundly his conception of fidelity seemed to relate to film adaptation and its issues. Adaptation has been an abiding interest of mine for over 30 years. As part of my early studies in visual communication, I chose to create graphic novel adaptations of Shakespeare. At the time, I was fascinated by how to distil Shakespeare's plays into a more concise narrative format without losing their profundity.

Further study in screenwriting, adaptation and film directing followed, giving insight into filmmaking processes. Over time, my own academic background came to almost mirror the interdisciplinary triad of literature, film and cultural studies that I describe in Chapter 1.

My interest in the literary canon and its representations as manifestations of culture, plus a longstanding interest in the works of F Scott Fitzgerald, chimed with these earlier creative explorations. For these reasons, approaches in the field which did not factor in creative intention and the role of the maker came to feel incomplete to me, side-stepping how adaptations are intentionally shaped, within commercial constraints, by their creators. The challenges of adapting Fitzgerald's resistant text, *The Great Gatsby*, simply add to its attraction for adaptors. As Badiou writes, to respond to a truth with fidelity requires courage. To take up the issue of fidelity in adaptation again has also required a bit of courage, even if attitudes in the field have been more moderate in recent years. Practical and idealistic, contemporary and universal, Badiou's fidelity is a concept that speaks to both the creativity and limitations of adapting.

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Chapter 1

Scorched earth: Talking about fidelity in adaptation

> Sometimes it seems that certain ideas in Adaptation Studies have been done to death. One of these is 'fidelity', and all its attendant associations of textual purity or impurity; another is 'traditional adaptation studies', involving questions of value judgements between source and target texts. (Raw 2015, p. 318)

Raison d'être

This is a book for scholars of film adaptation, as well as for F Scott Fitzgerald scholars interested in his work and what it has inspired. It is a book about how adaptations of the so-called literary canon are made and how these 'announced' adaptations function as a unique form. For this latter point, the theory of French philosopher Alain Badiou when applied to film provides explanations. Badiou's work sets out a way of being faithful without relying on copying; it also provides explanations for the strong responses to adaptations. This will be demonstrated by the approach this book takes to the four Hollywood film adaptations of F Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel, *The Great Gatsby*.

This book thus takes up the issue of fidelity, or faithfulness, in film adaptation; in essence, how faithfully a film adaptation relates to its source text. This in itself is the sort of statement which, for adaptation scholars, may meet with several reactions; the most negative being the idea that even the discussion of fidelity is jejune, or that the concept has run its

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course and there is nothing further to say about it. The fidelity wars of the 20th century left a kind of scorched earth behind them, although the ferocity of this debate appears to have waned somewhat.

Much of the academic pummelling was directed at intuitive and evaluative reactions to adaptations – the *feeling* that an adaptation is good or bad. The quest to understand the basis of why and how an adaptation creates its effects (and affects!), and whether fidelity has something to do with this, is thus a scholarly one, which the work of Badiou serves to illuminate. It is not, of course, the only area of interest for an analysis of adaptation, nor is it put forward as such. However, as many scholars have noted, the overtly stated relationship an adaptation has with a source text, is what makes adaptation unique as a form (see Cardwell 2018, p. 2; Harold 2018, p. 91; Leitch 2017, p. 5). Fidelity is one of the areas where this uniqueness is properly considered. In doing so, in line with a great many other scholars, albeit based on different reasoning, I go beyond the film as discrete entity.

Creative intention is key to an understanding of Badiou's fidelity. Hence it seems highly relevant to consider the impact of the maker upon the work, for all the 'death of the author' (discussed later in this chapter); commercial filmmaking in particular is subject, not only to the hand of the creatives involved, but to the many decision-makers in the process. To a greater degree than books or artworks, films are at the mercy of 'how things are done' – making them contextually-driven and interpreted cultural outputs. The immediate context that shaped the making of adaptations will thus be a part of the consideration of these works.

I do not believe that the fidelity concept is stagnant, and the aim of this book is to show how Badiou's differing understanding of fidelity can bring life to this fundamental debate. Whilst Badiou's work has been referenced in many other disciplines (see ch. 3), at the time of writing his concepts have not been applied to film adaptation, except in my own work.[1] Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* exemplifies many of Badiou's ideas and the usefully multiple film adaptations of this novel will provide a place of exposition for this Badiouian investigation. Fitzgerald's novel can be regarded as an expression of the truth-event of modernity. Badiou's fidelity, which points at truths, thus enters into a consideration of the adaptations (Badiou's terms and system will be discussed in more detail in ch. 2).

The study of film adaptation, specifically a certain kind of adaptation, that of a so-called 'classic' text produced within the Hollywood studio system, is, in itself, an expression of one particular facet of what an

1. 'Rescuing fidelity? Alain Badiou's truth event and four adaptations of *The Great Gatsby*' (Vooght 2018).

adaptation can be or currently is. Popular films inspire books and fan fiction, computer games become films, and comics inspire adaptations. Series adapt well-known films, and even theme parks may be regarded as adaptations, as Hutcheon (2006, p. 138) noted in her influential monograph. Scholars of adaptation do not confine themselves to film but have for many years considered other types of adaptations. The advent of streaming services has seen the extension of production away from the traditional routes and types of viewing experience (see Elliott 2020, pp. 43–44). This book focuses on Hollywood film productions of a 'classic' literary text, *The Great Gatsby*; in part to speak to previous approaches in the field and the fidelity discourse which this book aims to rethink but also to assert that this type of adaptation continues as a unique form of its own with aspects and considerations that other kinds of adaptation do not share.

Those who object to the exploration of the adaptive relationship between books and films might consider that these do not exclude or block other kinds of studies whose interest may lie elsewhere; there are numerous examples of these, as seen in the field's key journals[2] and recent anthologies. Also, this book is as focused on comparing adapted versions to each other as it is with the source text–adaptation relationship. Indeed, this is intended to be a consideration in terms of a differing concept of fidelity, an opening up of conversations that may have previously been shut down about what works in an adaptation and how to evaluate adaptations, rather than a new structure to be imposed – such an approach would anyway be very much at odds with Badiou's concept of fidelity.

To take up Badiou's differing understanding of fidelity, it is useful to understand where the concept of fidelity arose within adaptation scholarship and why it has been contentious. I explore this in Chapter 1. If your interest lies more with Fitzgerald than with disciplinary debates in adaptation studies, you might prefer to cut forward to Chapter 2, where I concentrate on Badiou's conceptual framework of fidelity in the service of truth, the vital concept of the truth-event and what can go wrong in realising a fidelity. Chapter 3 considers how Badiou's concepts relate to *The Great Gatsby* (1925) as an expression of the global truth-event of modernity. *The Great Gatsby*'s history and how canonisation impacts adaptation will be examined in terms of Badiou's fidelity. In Chapter 4, I will consider how a Badiouian viewpoint could be brought into a study of film and more specifically to film adaptation, also considering Badiou's own writings on film. This chapter ends by putting forward an approach to the four Hollywood film adaptations of *The Great Gatsby*.

2. *Literature/Screen Quarterly*, *Adaptation*, and *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance*.

Based on this approach, Chapters 5–8 consider aspects of the adaptations. Chapter 5 examines the paratextual elements of the *The Great Gatsby* adaptations[3] – what happened before, during and after production. These elements surrounded and presented the texts in particular ways that influenced their reception and interpretation. Chapter 6 considers how the filmmakers interpreted elements of Fitzgerald's text, such as description and characterisation, as indicating a closed or open approach. Chapter 7 looks specifically at some of Fitzgerald's key symbols and themes, such as the billboard of the eyes of Doctor TJ Eckleberg and the theme of social mobility, and examines how these are treated across the films. Chapter 8 takes a single sequence, the first party Nick attends, and compares its treatment across adaptations, considering how different elements work together. Chapter 9 concludes the book, considering further the impact of this approach to *The Great Gatsby* and the possibilities created by a Badiouian approach to the study of adaptation.

As this book is, in part, a look at changing attitudes over time, I will use the past tense rather than the more commonly used present tense when discussing scholarship that is important to consider in light of its historical situatedness. As many attitudes were determined by previous trends in criticism, or express the context of the works, or relate to items from the archive, the use of older references is also felt to be appropriate in relation to these.

The merging of the streams of literature, film and cultural studies

As I write, well into the 21st century, the study of adaptation has been established as a discipline, albeit an interdisciplinary one that overlaps with other disciplines. Its disciplinary position has been key to shaping the varying attitudes to a consideration of fidelity in adaptation. As Elleström (2017, p. 513) writes, the discipline of adaptation studies has 'grown organically' since its inception, absorbing approaches from other disciplines. It is considered to be a relatively young field, becoming more defined as of the mid-1990s (Bruhn 2013, p. 3). As an interdisciplinary construct, adaptation studies continues to fight for a stable space, jostling at times with intermedial studies and translation studies[4] (Cardwell 2018). However, the large body of research relating to adaptation speaks for itself.

3. Elements that occur with or in relation to a text which influence the perception and reading of the text. The term paratext is taken from Genette and MacLean (1991, pp. 261–272), 'Introduction to the Paratext'.

4. Intermedial studies is concerned with medial properties and conversions. As many (although not all) adaptations are in a different medium than their source texts, Elleström (2017, p. 513) argues that adaptation is, in fact, 'part of the broad field of transmediality and the even broader field of intermediality'.

Leitch's (2017, pp. 2–5) outline of stages of development in the discipline (Adaptation Studies 1.0–3.0) suggests a more established discipline which now has its own history.

But this was not always so. The tentative beginnings of adaptation criticism arose out of a consideration of film that itself arose from and was influenced by the study of English literature. In the United Kingdom (UK), the academic study of film began to establish itself in the 1960s and 1970s, growing out of English literature departments (Aragay 2005, p. 11). The key method of literary studies was textual analysis, and this continued into the study of film.

One iteration of film studies was hence that which evolved out of the study of English literature, where the film was viewed as a text. Terms relating to cinematic texts established themselves within criticism, for example, shot range (extreme close-up, long shot, medium shot); shot type (establishing shot, point of view shot, tracking shot, bridging shot); camera movement (tilt, pan, roll); camera position (high angle, low angle); depth of field; et cetera (Bateman & Schmidt 2013, pp. 9–10). Whilst film studies[5] has a range of methodologies and methods of analysis, the one that bears most reference to the textual methods of adaptation studies is that of *mise-en-scène* criticism; not only what is seen on screen but how it is filmed (Buckland & Elsaesser 2002, p. 81). This may also include the analysis of narrative operations and thematic content (including genre and auteurism); as a method, it tends to be evaluative (p. 83). Thus, the tropes of film studies that manifested within adaptation studies tended to be those that dovetailed with the literary textual analysis tropes of the study of English literature rather than, for example, a focus on production methods.

However, adaptation studies did not progress down this straight line, which valorised the formal qualities of a text. The differing approach of cultural studies began to engender a 'crisis' in English literary studies from the 1970s onwards (Whelehan 1999, p. 18). According to Elliott (2014, p. 577), it came even later, in the late 1990s, to the study of adaptation. Cultural studies began as a leftist cultural theory that emphasised popular culture and attacked humanism for its 'complicity with capitalism, sexism, heterosexism, racism, nationalism, and colonialism' (p. 578). Cultural studies viewed itself as intrinsically at odds with the establishment, academic or otherwise. This made for an obvious clash with the long-established traditions of English literature departments. Cultural studies 'foregrounds the activities of reception and consumption, and shelves [...] considerations of the aesthetic or cultural worthiness' (Whelehan 1999, p. 18).

5. Namings of disciplines have varied across time and location. I've chosen the descriptors cultural studies, film studies and literary studies as they best capture a sense of the content relevant to this argument.

The cultural studies approach was embodied in Cartmell and Whelehan's co-edited volumes, works such as *Pulping Fictions: Consuming Culture Across the Literature/Media Divide* (1996) and *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text* (1999). These included the study of 'extra-textual' elements, 'extra-cinematic factors (current trends, historical events)' as well as the study of 'popular (rather than canonical) texts', the impact of technological innovations and 'the film and television industries themselves' (Whelehan 2007, p. 4). They expressed an overall 'desire to free our notion of film adaptations from this dependency on literature' (p. 2). The influence of attitudes stemming from cultural studies was thus crucial to how the idea of fidelity to an 'original' was viewed.

Cultural studies emphasised the everyday and popular, rather than an established hierarchy of worth that is invoked by the concept of a literary canon. However, ideological differences did not necessarily make for a different mode of analysis. Whilst in literary studies, the use of a textual analysis method remained 'inexplicit' (Easthope 2003, p. 10) into the 21st century (Griffin 2013, p. 2), within cultural studies, a similar vagueness was driven by the desire to avoid categorisation. This stemmed from its inception as a discipline that manifests 'ambivalence [...] towards disciplinarity and institutionalisation' (McKee 2001, p. 1; see also Easthope 2003, p. 171; Gray 2002, p. 3). Malleability is seen as a strength (Gray 2002, p. 5). The resulting method was an 'Intuitive form of textual analysis' (McKee 2001, p. 1).

Thus, although the approach of the disciplines from which scholarship emanated tended to influence the approach to adaptation, what was deemed acceptable and even desirable, and what was rejected, this expressed itself in terms of methodologies rather than changes in the actual methods used. Methodologies have not been in short supply – these include intermediality (Elleström 2017) and translation-orientated models (Krebs 2012; Vandal-Sirois & Bastin 2012), 'genetic criticism' (Bryant 2013; Rossholm 2013), neo-formal semiotic approaches (Cahir 2006; Desmond & Hawkes 2006) and intertextual dialogism (DeBona 2010; Stam 2005), amongst others. Most of what are put forward as new methodologies continue to use textual analysis as their method. Explorations of fidelity were also conducted through a comparative textual analysis that has been critiqued within the discipline (Leitch 2012, p. 103).

It is notable that even context-driven analyses also rely on treating the paratextual elements as texts (S Murray 2012b, p. 128) – the change is merely to the range of texts considered (p. 137). This is not to say other methods are not increasingly used in adaptation studies, for example, in Simone Murray's socio-economic approach (2012b), the scholarship of adaptation pedagogy (Cutchins, Raw & Welsh 2010), and in Nicholson's (2020)

practice-led article, 'Oh Hi There History'. Referencing methods overtly, as Nicholson does, is a newer trend within both adaptation studies and its parent disciplines (Griffin 2013, p. 14). The pervasive use of textual analysis does underscore that the discipline remains interested in texts and their interpretation, whilst having expanded the notion of the text from its earlier, more limited, beginnings. A method suitable for a Badiouian approach will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

Discussions over whether, as a discipline, adaptation studies should favour a contextual or a formal approach, which consumed much of the last century, have thus seemingly made little difference to the method of textual analysis which is applied to both these kinds of approaches. Similarly, scholarship relating to film adaptations of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* also shows a primarily textual analysis approach, with the inclusion of archival work into the paratextual elements of the films.

To sum up, the study of film adaptations grew out of other disciplines, and their disciplinary norms have suggested the method and mode of criticism. However, there may be a case to argue that there is much common ground despite the ideological differences – and this is expressed by the interest in what texts contain and how they create their effects.

■ Following 20th-century theoretical trends

Whilst, of course, a broad-brush discussion of disciplines and historical trends may elide many specifics, the general heft is important as it speaks to attitudes toward the concept of fidelity in adaptation. Disciplinary developments are intertwined with historical trends in criticism. An overview of these is useful, as many key concepts, such as auteurism, intertextuality and medium specificity, continue to be at play in a consideration of fidelity and come in and out of favour alongside prevailing theoretical trends. These shed light on developments which influenced the strong debate around fidelity in adaptation, placing them within the context of theoretical strands within the discipline. The fidelity wars, which will be discussed in the next section, make far more sense once viewed within the context of the shifting theoretical trends and allegiances of the 20th century. It should be noted that although there is the sense that arguments in adaptation studies followed some of the broader trends in theory and philosophy (such as structuralism and poststructuralism), time periods were not discrete and there are substantial overlaps in trends and arguments. What follows aims to give an overview of where certain attitudes and approaches, not to mention their scholarly affiliations, emerged that continue to influence the field.

The early 20th century's emphasis on aesthetics, the unity of an artwork and the 'high art' tropes of modernism versus the idea, at this time, of film

as 'a low-brow, popular entertainment' (Aragay 2005, p. 12) led to the initial privileging of literature over film (Naremore 2000, p. 2). Much critical energy was expended in trying to shake off the idea that an adaptation could only be a lesser form of, for example, a much admired literary work of the canon; for example, film critic and theorist André Bazin's (1985, 2000, 2014) seminal work, written in the 1940s and 1950s and translated into English from the 1960s onwards, asserted the worth of cinema as a consideration for analysis. The study of adaptation began as a way of looking at how literary works were expressed within this newer medium, examining how narrative or tone might be created in a different, more visually concrete, medium; an approach that highlighted medium specificity.

Most adaptation studies scholars view George Bluestone's pioneering *Novels into Film* (1973), first published in 1957, as the inaugural text of adaptation studies (Elliott 2014; Leitch 2017, p. 2; McFarlane 1996, p. 4; Murray 2008, p. 5; Naremore 2000, p. 4). Elliott's rediscovery of the work of Lester Asheim, published in the early 1950s (Asheim 1951a, 1951b, 1951c, 1952), in which he examined how commercial, cultural and audience influences on Hollywood production influenced choices in specific film adaptations (topics that would be revived with vigour much later), gives an example that somewhat predates Bluestone. However, these articles had little traction compared to Bluestone's full-length monograph.

Bluestone's work illustrates the dilemma experienced by the early critics of adaptation. As is evident by his title, his analysis takes literature as its starting point. Bluestone's work is primarily concerned with stating the (in his view) profound differences between the medium of screen versus written text: 'the two media are marked by such essentially different traits that they belong to separate artistic genera' (Bluestone 1973, p. 8). Debatably, he describes books as 'essentially linguistic' and films as 'essentially visual' (p. viii). Bluestone also notes the differing commercial constraints on film and novel: 'where a novel can sell 20,000 volumes and make a substantial profit, the film must reach millions' (p. 34), emphasising that novels and films have 'different origins, different audiences, different modes of production, and different censorship requirements' (p. viii).

Despite this emphasis on the incompatibility of the two media, Bluestone (1973, p. xi) proposes as a method the page-by-page comparison of a transcription of the film versus the literary text. A script-based analysis raises obvious issues for the many non-textual qualities of film which may not be captured in such a system. Whilst Bluestone's approach would have gone beyond film dialogue to include stage directions and storyboard details, it nonetheless translates what it can of visual data into words and thereby still favours the written over the visual. At the end of this process, 'I was able to hold before me an accurate and reasonably objective record

of how the film differed from its model', writes Bluestone (p. xi). The words 'objective' and 'accurate' suggest a desire for empirical analysis, and the word 'model' is also telling – the source is the model, and the adaptation is an attempt at replicating it. The conundrum of how to analyse adaptations without placing them at this kind of fundamental disadvantage as a secondary version of the text upon which they are based persisted as a critical anomaly. Connor writes that, in this viewpoint, itself characteristic of modernism, the different media are unbridgeable (2007). However, even early critics such as Bazin (2000, p. 19) noted in a 1948 essay that there could be 'equivalence' between forms.

This concern about the value of different media gave rise to various 'solutions'. Bazin is known for his contribution to another early development arising from the movement toward a serious appraisal of film: the idea of auteurism. Auteurs supposedly bring their own stamp of originality to a production, staking a claim for film as comparable to literature in its ability to create works of individual genius. Auteurism allowed film to ostensibly fill a similar role to that of literature, asserting that it could also be considered an art of inspiration. In doing so, it drew upon ideas of the 'hand of the maker' as distinguishing 'art' from the merely mass-produced. The philosopher Walter Benjamin's influential essay, written in 1935, on the fate of 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', gave expression to anxieties created by the increasingly industrialised processes of creation and dissemination of creative works. Benjamin (1999, pp. 214–215) felt that the 'authority' of the art object is undermined by technical reproductions that in various ways disrupt the object's integrity (through, e.g., the relocation into the household or the intense photographic close-up which presents a view that escapes natural vision). 'In the case of the art object, a most sensitive nucleus – namely, its authenticity – is interfered with' (p. 215). Although 'in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder [...] in its own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced' (p. 215), it is then, according to Benjamin, in a compromised position, removed from history and tradition. For Benjamin (p. 218), the reactivated work becomes, instead, part of a 'practice' of 'politics'.

Whilst film might seem an obvious candidate for critique as a mass art heavily reliant on industrialised processes, it could thus be defended if it could be argued that it bore the unique stamp of the hand of the maker. Bazin's 1957 essay, '*De la politique des auteurs*' (1985), notably played a role in developing the concept of the 'auteur', that is, differentiating between a director able to bring a personal vision to a film versus one with a mere workman-like approach to a script. The concept was further propagated in the United States of America (USA) by scholars such as Sarris (1992, p. 587) in his 'Notes on the Auteur Theory 1962', which states

that the three premises of the auteur are 'technique', 'personal style' and the creation of 'interior meaning'. When it came to adaptation, auteurs could be notably cavalier in terms of their sources: director Alfred Hitchcock's claim, 'I just forget all about the book and start to create cinema' (Truffaut 1984, p. 71), is indicative. Their personal style is expected to dominate the film's organisation.

The concept of the director of genius to balance the idea of the famous author, resulting in a film that can supposedly 'hold its own' against or even usurp its literary source, offered at the time a kind of solution to the devaluing of film. However, as the 1960s drew to a close, it was heavily critiqued as asserting a concept of individual genius in isolation from contextual influences. Bazin (2000, p. 23) himself had earlier noted its limitations, writing that it depends upon 'a rather recent, individualistic conception of the "author" and of the "work"' that became 'legally defined only at the end of the 18th century'. Commentators have also noted the differences between a film (where there is a collective effort) and the solitary pursuit of the novelist (Cartmell & Whelehan 2007, p. 7), as well as the gender and other biases inherent in identifying these primarily male directors of 'genius' (Emig 2018, p. 29). Roland Barthes (1977) wrote in his influential 1968 essay, 'The Death of the Author':

> [*T*]he image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author [...] *Explanation* of the work is always sought in the man who has produced it. (p. 143; [*emphasis in the original*])

The auteur argument merely reinscribes this tyranny. Instead, for Barthes (1977):

> [*A*] text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God), but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. (p. 146)

Bazin (2000) himself foresaw these developments, writing in 1948:

> We are moving toward a reign of the adaptation where the notion of the unity of a work of art, if not the very notion of the author himself, will be destroyed. (p. 26)

Again, the concept of auteurism seems since to have since found a place as suggestive of a signature style, without the loaded narrative of 'genuis' it may have had earlier (see Griggs's discussion of Clayton and Luhrmann [2016, pp. 202–218]). The irony of auteurism is that in adaptation it can function against the tyranny of the author; an irreverent or original adaptor may help to liberate an adaptation from the domination of a famous writer. A problematised consideration of auteurism is also helpful when considering some of the paratexts as the idea of the auteur remains alive in the minds of film critics, as will be seen in Chapter 5 in the reviews of Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* (2013).

The work of Barthes meant that meaning could no longer just be straightforwardly assigned to the author – what the reader brings to the text cannot be limited to that which is brought about by the text but includes the reader's own position. Barthes' (1977, p. 146) removal of the author's status and his statement that 'the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture' set the stage for a postmodernist intertextuality. The death of the author was really the birth of the reader and a consciousness of the role that interpretation plays. The implications of this also encouraged an awareness of what we do when we watch a film, and what lenses or experiences a viewer might bring.

Ironically, these ideas coexisted with Barthes' own structuralist analyses. Structuralist ideas in the discipline largely grew out of the study of literary texts, with philosophers such as Barthes (a structuralist who moved toward poststructuralism in his later work) writing of the need for a 'common model' to help 'differentiate' narratives, drawing upon Ferdinand de Saussure's models for language (Barthes 1977, p. 80). Those within adaptation studies who seek 'a principle of classification' (Metz 1982, p. 215) for adaptations may be seen as aligned to structuralist approaches. Stam (2005, p. 4) lists some of the proliferating terms, including 'translation, actualisation, reading, critique, dialogisation, cannibalisation, transmutation, transfiguration, incarnation, transmogrification, transcoding, performance, signifying, rewriting, detournement'. This kind of taxonomising has been criticised for being covertly hierarchical, again illustrating the disciplinary pull against evaluative practises. Leitch (2008, p. 64) argues that 'the will to taxonimise' often involves 'gratuitious value judgements' and 'the decision to classify (adaptations) as more or less faithful to their putative sources'. Cartmell and Whelehan (2007, p. 2) also assert that 'hidden in these taxonomies are value judgments and a consequent ranking of types'.

In the 1970s, structuralist and narratological approaches to the analysis of form hence supplanted ideas of aesthetic and 'artistic worth' (Elliott 2014, n.p.). These methods encouraged close textual reading and a 'closed' idea of the text, that is, viewing the text as a largely self-contained object of meaning-making. Structuralists such as Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal analysed how narratives function. Genette's (1980, pp. 10–11, 51, 54, 58) work on narrative helped to define ideas of narrative order, pace and duration, mood, voice and point of view as ways of structuring and interpreting narratives, and analysed the ways in which narratives work using recall and return; aspects which are equally pertinent in adaptation. Genette, for example, analyses the 'paratextual markers', such as how the text is presented, that signal fictionality (Genette, Ben-Ari & McHale 1990, p. 770) and explores differences between the signalling of a fictional versus factual narrative through the gap between narrator and author (pp. 756, 764). This represents a late attempt to introduce contextual

elements into the structuralist theoretical model. Postmodernism would playfully subvert audience expectations in relation to these modalities.[6] Structuralist ideas helped to develop a language in relation to narrative that was largely focused on the written text; film, another narrative medium, demanded its own language, and scholars drew on the writings of Christian Metz (1982, p. 195) on films' image systems in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (published in 1974) (1991) and *The Imaginary Signifier* (published in 1977).[7] As with the writings of Barthes, narratological concepts were not in opposition to those of postmodernity but helped to develop them – Genette's writings on the paratext (1991), in particular, are cited in adaptation studies by scholars concerned with postmodern intertextuality (Bruhn 2013; Dovey 2005; Stam 2005), and the paratexts of the *The Great Gatsby* films will be considered in Chapter 5.

Drawing on postmodern sensibilities, poststructuralist approaches came in the latter half of the 20th century. Again, this gave rise to the rejection of past preferences in studying adaptation; at times, the baby seemed to be thrown out with the bathwater. Dicecco writes of moving from the 'ill-considered positivism of structuralist approaches to adaptation which dominated in the 1990s' (2015, p. 162) toward the intertextual model that 'explicitly resists essentialism by recognizing the historical and social situatedness of texts' (p. 163). The language used is indicative. Scholars drew on influential philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze to attack the book-film binary, recalling Derrida's 'violent hierarchy' in which one of the binary always has the 'upper hand' (Derrida 1981, p. 41) – in this case, literature. Structuralist ideas of finding categorisation systems were fundamentally at odds with these approaches. Poststructuralism instead valorised fragmentation and rejected totalising narratives.

The critical result of poststructuralist ideas led to a reimagining of texts and their adaptations as endlessly intertextual, fluid and circular. The writings of Deleuze and Felix Guattari inspired scholars such as Schober (2013, p. 101), who sees the text as a 'decentralized, interactive, dynamic and spontaneous [...] network', not unlike Bryant's (2013, p. 65) 'fluid text' that is continually revised by 'originating writers, by their editors and publishers, or by readers and audiences'. In the poststructuralist schema at its most radical, Stam writes adaptations are part of a 'whirl' of 'intertextual reference and transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation and transmutation, *with no clear point of origin*' (Stam 2000, p. 66; [*author's added emphasis*]).

6. Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* (2013) shows many of these features. See Chapter 6.

7. In particular, those concerned with the unity of the film text such as Brownlee (2018, p. 160) and Jellenik (2018, p. 190).

Intertextual dialogism, as Stam termed it, appeared to resolve many of the discontents that had arisen following the changes in trends in criticism. According to Stam (2000, p. 58), intertextual dialogism 'dismantles the hierarchy of "original" and "copy" (and) suggests that both are caught up in the infinite play of dissemination'. Thus, it takes 'all signifying practices as productive of "texts" worthy of study' (p. 58) – this works against the critical elevation of certain texts above others. This idea of constant textual interplay also served to disrupt ideas of linear time associated with a narrative of progression. In the words of Bazin (2000, p. 26), 'the chronological precedence of one part over another would not be an aesthetic criterion any more'. This did speak to the iterative and reflexive processes of adaptation: Hutcheon (2006, p. 8) writes, 'We experience adaptations (as adaptations) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation', whilst Elliott (2003, pp. 230–231) notes 'memory works both ways' and 'film adaptation changes the books films adapt'. Kathleen Murray (2011, p. 93) agrees, 'adaptation does not simply work one way. The original text is transformed by the film version'. However, the difficulties with this as a critical approach, where an adaptation is merely another reading, part of an interlinked network of texts and symbols without beginning or end, with multiple authors continually remaking the text, is that it does remove something that is unique about adaptation: such an approach could be applied to any text. Hence, this orientation is described by Cardwell (2018, p. 2) as striking at the heart of adaptation studies as a discipline, eroding its 'conceptual coherence' as 'the adaptation studies scholar no longer requires an adaptation, but instead needs only take the appropriate attitude to the work under scrutiny'.

The postmodern questioning of ideas of progression, ideas of truth and grand narratives, allowed for a re-evaluation of the concept of value that operates in adaptations that make much of their source in so-called 'classic' novels. The 'conservative underpinnings' of the 'American literary establishment' DeBona (2010, p. 20) refers to were brought into the light. Traditional hierarchies of the academy that selected these so-called 'classic texts' were called into question. Changes in critical trends allowed for challenges to the idea of the dominance of the literary text over film, film having long since established itself as a form in a world dominated by visual media. However, there remains a disjunct between the academic questioning of the canon and the film industry's mostly uncomplicated referencing of it to create a perception of value and enhance saleability. The interactions between canonicity and adaptation will be considered further in Chapters 3 and 4.

The early years of the 21st century saw the polarisation of neo-formal approaches (Albrecht-Crane & Cutchins 2010; Cahir 2006; Desmond &

Hawkes 2006; Welsh 2007) and those more aligned with intertextual aspects of cultural studies (Cartmell & Whelehan 2010; Constandinides 2010; DeBona 2010; Hutcheon 2006). Such approaches could be antagonistic to each other. For example, Cartmell and Whelehan (2010, p. 11) refer dismissively to formalist studies as 'a small body of work moving against the main tide of theory', whilst at the other end of the spectrum, Bal (1990, p. 736) argues that 'privileging structural analysis over a reflection theory of language has in fact helped us to reach reality'. Recent developments suggest a desire to move on from these fiercely defended orientations and foster more inclusive approaches (Cardwell 2018, p. 16; Kaklamanidou 2020, p. 10; Lewis & Arnold-de Simine 2020, p. 7).

The trend of scholarship is to react to the overreach of previous trends. Revolutions, first of all, contain impassioned denunciations; later, they move from being a case of 'either/or' to 'both/and' – until the next revolution arises. The ways in which adaptation has been discussed have tended to change alongside changes in the social and cultural environment and in correspondence with general trends in academic criticism. The concept of fidelity in adaptation has been linked to these, and thus, in many ways, attitudes toward it have been historically determined. This chapter will now delve further into the debates around fidelity in adaptation.

'Announced' and 'unannounced' adaptation and their implications

Fidelity depends on there being something to be faithful toward. Not all films that are adaptations are consciously experienced as such; hence, the concept of 'announced' and 'unannounced' adaptation is key. By 'announced', I mean an adaptation that overtly announces its relationship to a source text, either within the film's title or title sequence, or in its marketing. At its most straightforward, this may be through retaining the title or the lines 'From the novel by [...]', appearing at the start of a film, but may also be asserted through statements made by directors or actors in interviews, poster art, and other references to the text on which the adaptation is based. These adaptations normally seek to draw on the perceived value of the literary text – either as a bestseller or as a so-called 'classic' text.

Whilst many films are, in fact, book adaptations, and this may be referred to subtly in their credits, an 'announced' adaptation is one where the announcing is deemed important. Andrew (2000) notes that whilst all representations draw on earlier models, 'adaptations claiming fidelity bear the original as a signified' (p. 28), insisting on its cultural significance (p. 29). Whilst a large percentage of Hollywood films have been based on adapted texts since the early days of film (Bloore 2012, p. 11; Ray 2000, p. 50),

not all films put themselves forward as stated and announced 'adaptations'. If a film does not put itself forward as such, as Geraghty (2007, p. 3) writes, 'faithfulness is not an issue, and the film in a very real sense is not an adaptation'.

The 'announcing' of an adaptation is hence purposeful and impacts upon the way in which an adaptation is viewed and received. The original is borne along with the adaptation in some way, however arguably. Of course, this is not to say that the announced and acknowledged source is ever the only source – film texts reference multiple other texts both consciously and unconsciously. Announcing an adaptation, however, introduces a particular element which, unlike other intertextual elements, is unique to adaptation as a form.

It also introduces other variables that affect its reception. In the popular realm, filmmakers are concerned with making films that are faithful in order to avoid upsetting an existing fanbase that exists.[8] This applies as much, if not more, to popular best-sellers than to the so-called 'classic' novels, which are themselves more likely to have been previously experienced in adapted form.

Adaptations that are recognisable but unacknowledged will be referred to as 'unannounced' adaptations. A film such as Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995), for example, never formally acknowledges its relationship with Jane Austen's 1815 novel *Emma*, relying instead on a 'knowing' viewer (Stern 2000, p. 221) who may – in fact – be knowing of the narrative trajectory of *Emma* through their experience of other adaptations. Although some have argued that for this reason, *Clueless* should not be considered an adaptation,[9] Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) is a similar example of an 'unannounced' adaptation where the transposition of enough recognisable elements from Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella, *Heart of Darkness*, means that the film is generally perceived as a loose adaptation of this text. Gus van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), with its references to Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays, is another example of a highly original, unannounced reworking. Whilst some scholars have worked to further taxonomize the variations of adaptation, what is most important for this book is the understanding that, by announcing an adaptation, a deliberate relationship with a text is established. To be read as an adaptation requires an audience that is aware of this fact.

8. See Thompson's (2007) discussion of the development of the film adaptations of JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* in *The Frodo Franchise* – the studio estimated around 25% of tickets would be bought by Tolkien fans (p. 55).

9. Stern (2000, p. 226) evinces a certain ambiguity about *Clueless* as a result, deciding finally that the most appropriate term is an 'update'.

Fidelity – antecedents

The topic of fidelity has attracted some of the most heated debate within the study of adaptation. Whilst many of the arguments relating to fidelity may seem, at this stage, well worn, the point of referencing them will be shown when I reframe the concept of fidelity via Badiou. This reframing will address the elements that have persistently been felt to be problematic or contentious about the fidelity construct. As explored in the previous sections, many of these positions stemmed from counter-responses to previously entrenched paradigms. What I will call the 'traditional' concept of fidelity in adaptation (as opposed to Badiou's fidelity) relates to commonly held notions of the term. The *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Clarendon Press 1993, p. 942) defines fidelity as: 'Loyalty, faithfulness, unswerving allegiance (to a person, spouse, cause, etc.); one's word of honour, one's pledge' and 'trustworthiness, veracity, accuracy (of a thing, a person)' as well as, notably, 'correspondence with an original, *spec.* the degree to which a reproduced or transmitted sound, picture, etc., resembles the original'. I have chosen this particular definition because it reflects two key aspects of the fidelity debate: the idea of the faithfulness of an accurate likeness based on copying, and ideas of loyalty.

These ideas, of veracity and accuracy, of trustworthiness and loyalty, of copying and resemblance, found their way into what became known in the field as 'fidelity criticism' – a practice of film analysis that assumes that adapted texts *should* be faithful to their source texts (Cartmell & Whelehan 2007, p. 2; Leitch 2017, p. 8), usually exploring this relationship through a comparative analysis of text to film, and, in its most criticised manifestation, finding that the adapted text does not match up to the source text because of aspects of the original which have not been captured 'faithfully' within the adaptation (McFarlane 1996, p. 8). It is important to keep a distinction between the deficit model of so-called 'fidelity criticism' and fidelity as a concept. 'Fidelity discourse' is a softer term which refers to the discussion of fidelity rather than this limited practice of 'fidelity criticism'.

'Fidelity criticism' rested on a concept of formal transposition that aimed at as exact a replication as possible into a differing medium, with this as the chief purpose of the adaptation and with its perceived success relating to the level of correspondence with the original work: the idea of medium transfer or 'process of equivalence' (Truffaut 1954, n.p.). In this schema (Andrew 2000):

> Adaptation would then become a matter of searching two systems of communication for elements of equivalent position in the systems capable of eliciting a signified at a given level of pertinence. (p. 33)

In film adaptation terms, this implies the reimagining of textual details and finding their equivalents within a different media. For example, in simple

terms, the text, 'he was not listening', might be represented on film by depicting a back turned to the camera; stylistic 'mood' might be created by appropriate music or lighting. Aspects of transposition can be seen in the later versions of *The Great Gatsby*, discussed further on in this book, which clearly strived to reproduce exact details of Fitzgerald's text in film.

With this approach, equivalents had to be found for particular ways in which literature makes meaning. Whilst 'basic narrative elements' were viewed to be the most straightforwardly transferable of these (K Murray 2011, p. 92), the more intangible elements of authorial voice and style required reinterpretation for film. McFarlane (2000, p. 165) argues that authorial voice is created in film by the filmic versions of narration, '*mise-en-scène*, editing and soundtrack'. However, even a strategy for intangible elements does not account for the differing effects on the cinema viewer. For example, Gjelsvik (2013) writes in her aptly titled article, 'What Novels can Tell that Movies can't Show', of the differing effects of violence depicted on screen versus in a novel (p. 245), due, she argues, to the 'particularly strong effect' on the viewer of film's 'embodiedness' (p. 257).

Fidelity as 'a system of equivalences' may seem to be easily dismissed as a credible goal for adaptations; despite the fact that aspects of this reworking undeniably provide creative excitement and motivation for the filmmaker, and hold interest for audiences. Few scholars have ever rigidly pursued the idea that the goal and intention of an adaptation should be a complete transposition. Any exact transposition is, of course, 'virtually impossible' (Stam 2000, p. 56). As Stam writes, 'The fact that the shots have to be composed, lit, and edited in a certain way – generates an automatic difference' (p. 56), as do the manifold and specific details required by a visual *mise-en-scène*. The differing lengths and formats of media also represent a practical challenge to the idea of transcription if, for example, a 300-page book becomes a 90-minute film. In such a system, it is hard to see deviations from the original as anything other than compromises; as demonstrated when Miller (2016) writes:

> The novel's characters undergo a simplification process [...] for film is not very successful in dealing with either complex psychological states, or with dream and memory, nor can it render thought. (p. xiii)

Those focused on degrees of replication problematically tend to characterise film as the cruder medium.

Alongside formal transpositions, another key aspect of the conceptualisation of fidelity has been the idea of the 'spirit' or 'essence' of a text. 'Fidelity to the spirit' often relates to the assumption that a novel '"contains" an extractable "essence"' or 'an original core, a kernel of meaning or nucleus of events that can be "delivered" by an adaptation' (Stam 2000, p. 57). When Benjamin (1999, p. 78) asks, in an essay about

translation, 'What can fidelity really do for the rendering of meaning? Fidelity in the transmission of individual words can almost never fully reproduce the meaning they have in the original', we see the replication of the form and essence considerations around fidelity. 'A "good" translation is frequently described as a text that "feels" like an original' (Vandal-Sirois & Bastin 2012, p. 24), something which 'literal approaches' may lose (p. 23).

Notably, a 'fidelity-based' approach intended to preserve this essence, to locate and replicate the vital part of the original. Formal transpositions were a part of this strategy. But what is this essence? Cartmell and Whelehan (2010, p. 20; [*author's added emphasis*]) criticise fidelity as 'an *inexact science* deployed to compare often something as inchoate as the "spirit" of the thing'. Is essence the meaning of the text? Clüver writes that, despite variations in interpretation by different communities, nonetheless, 'near-identical meanings can be constructed from two texts in different sign symptoms', a construction that still seems to favour form over spirit. Or is it something to do with tone? Welsh (2007, p. xxiii) writes that the 1974 *The Great Gatsby* was 'crippled' more by 'a betrayal of tone than of narrative structure and development'. Or does essence refer to a feeling a text conveys? In this case, if feeling is key, the viewer's reception becomes a key factor, highlighting the question of who assesses whether essence has been transferred. Or is this essence something that is universally shared by whoever is doing the reading or viewing? The essence can also be seen in terms of a myth or archetype that prevails through multiple versions, with the adaptation as acting to sustain cultural myth-making (Kaklamanidou 2020, p. 11).

What is clear is that the terminology of essence implies a location, something within the text that is relatively fixed and communicable and can be either accurately or ineffectively moved into a different medium. These ideas were upturned by Barthes (1977, p. 147), who writes of 'refusing to assign a "secret," an ultimate meaning, to the text'. Instead of exploring creators' motives and intentions, Barthes (1977) suggests that:

> [*T*]here is one place where this multiplicity is focused and this place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. [...] A text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. (p. 148)

This idea works against the idea of a discoverable essence hidden within. At the same time, it makes for less of a hierarchy between versions (Stam 2000, p. 57).

Creativity may thus reside with the audience as well as the filmmakers. McFarlane (2007, p. 15; [*emphasis in original*]) writes that the issues with fidelity criticism do not dispose of the 'yearning for a faithful rendering of *'one's own vision of the literary text*' but noting 'the impossibility of

such a venture: that every reading of a literary text is a highly individual act of cognition and interpretation'. Cutchins and Meeks (2018, p. 301; [*author's added emphasis*]) take on this impossibility, writing that although 'sometimes texts are received in ways that defy definition', 'reader/audience experience may be seen as a *legitimate* element in any understanding of Adaptation'. In their view, the key point for analysis is that 'those who listen to stories, read books, or watch films or television are actually in the process [...] of self-creation' (Cutchins & Meeks 2018, p. 305).

In terms of fidelity, the idea of a personal vision by which an adaptation may be judged can become problematic. If, as Andrew (2011, p. 27) states, 'fidelity is the umbilical cord that nourishes the judgements of ordinary viewers', it may also be 'less the surreptitious evaluation of an adaptation than an attempt at an objective justification of the prior evaluation' (Connor 2007) – in other words, coming to the adaptation with a preconceived opinion. Historical context also inevitably influences how works are received (see Perdikaki 2018; Scholz 2013). However, 'faithfulness matters if it matters to the viewer', writes Geraghty (2007, p. 3).

The criticism that fidelity is the cry of the untutored audience has elements of elitism. For example, McFarlane (2000), whilst concerned with the function of fidelity in film adaptation, attacked what he calls 'middlebrow' views of fidelity that he characterises as 'it wasn't like that in the book'. What Dicecco (2015, p. 172) calls the criticism of the 'fidelity-inflected language of the much larger lay community' is linked, in his view, to a 'fetishistic disavowal' of fidelity which aims at maintaining the distinction between the academy and the popular.

Discomfort with a feeling-based approach to fidelity, the affective side of faithfulness that translates to feelings of loyalty, also colours this disapproval. This loyalty often seemed to translate into a moralism that did not sit well with either the broadly leftist conceptions of cultural studies or the supposedly empirical and objective formalist approaches. Moral terminology often features in responses to what were felt to be 'failed' adaptations. There is obviously a difference between a scholarly approach to adaptation and that of filmmakers, critics and the public. However, even scholars have used the 'moralistic' language referred to by Stam (2000, p. 54; [*emphasis in the original*]), which is 'awash in terms such as *infidelity*, *betrayal*, *deformation*, *violation*, *vulgarization*, and *desecration*' and their attendant concepts of 'ethical perfidy', aesthetic and class disdain, and 'religious sacrilege' toward the 'holy texts' under view. For example, Bazin (2000, p. 25; [*author's added emphasis*]) writes that 'the spirit and "style" of that book had somehow been *betrayed*', and Welsh (2007, p. xxiii; [*emphasis in original*]) describes a film as 'outrageously distorted', noting

that 'many will expect it to be at least *close* to the book and not an utter betrayal' (p. xxiv).

Instead, we have infidelity: as K Murray (2011, p. 93) writes, 'when a critic uses a term like "infidelity" [it is] as if the differences a film introduces actually hurts the original', which can then 'never be read in quite the same way again'. This 'crime' apparently assumes moral proportions. The feeling-based, affective side of the response to adaptation is summarised by Stam (2000, p. 54; [*emphasis in the original*]), who writes, 'words such as *infidelity* and *betrayal* in this sense translate our feeling, when we have loved a book, that an adaptation has not been worthy of that love'. Writers such as McFarlane (1996; *Novel to Film*) illustrate this discomfort with a feeling-based approach, describing his approach as 'systematic' and drawing on Barthes' narrative functions (p. 13) and Metz's ideas of 'film narrative' (p. 12) to support his approach.

That such concepts come into play singularly when discussing adaptation is worthy of exploration. Whilst overtly moralistic responses may have waned alongside cultural changes, and more recently, even film critics have characterised film adaptations as 'too faithful' rather than not faithful enough (see ch. 5), this aspect of adaptation is, once again, unique to the form. Moral responses may have diminished alongside the position of literature in society. However, the affective side of adaptation needs to be acknowledged, and the moral responses need explaining.

The practical effects of these viewer responses are reflected in attempts by filmmakers to reassure the audience of the authenticity of the adaptive relationship. Adaptations that highlight their historical setting have a particular relationship with concepts of truth and authenticity. Novels such as *The Great Gatsby*, as they retreat into history, are often viewed through the prism of their historical moment, with their adaptations relying on a 'feeling of authenticity' which may be based on well-known cultural artefacts (such as photographs) within the public realm (Brinch 2013, p. 225) or 'effective touchstones' as Nicholson (2020, p. 147) calls them. Issues of 'truth' and authenticity also play a part in filming so-called 'heritage cinema' and costume dramas which claim to recreate the past convincingly – these also engage in the 'discourse of authenticity' (Higson 2003, p. 42).

Directors and studios often make conflicting claims relating to authenticity, claiming freedom from the need to be 'realistic' at the same time as asserting historical accuracy (Foster 2012, pp. 117–118). As discussed in Chapter 5, similar conflicting claims were made about the 1974 and 2013 versions of *The Great Gatsby*. These truth claims are made to justify choices and claim a connection within an already accepted cultural framework.

■ Fighting over fidelity

Fidelity discourse in adaptation studies thus brought together structural ideas of form with earlier ideas of intrinsic worth, relating to ideas of essentialism (the idea of an 'immaterial essence' that determines the characteristics of a thing [Winsor 2006, p. 150]). These corresponded to ideas of fidelity to the 'letter' and the 'spirit' of a text (Andrew 2000, p. 31; McFarlane 1996, pp. 8–9) – both concepts that jarred as adaptation studies took on the sensibilities of a poststructuralist, posthumanist zeitgeist. Many of the foundational norms of fidelity criticism, such as the idea of value, were precisely those that were challenged by postmodern ideas. These included ideas of the superiority of the canon; the hierarchical binary of the supposedly superior 'original' and the inferior 'copy'; the binary of the elite (literature) versus the popular (film); the idea of an essence or 'spirit' within the creative work; the idea of an author or auteur of 'genius'; the timeless context-free 'truth' of a text and, somewhat conflictingly, the idea of linear progressive time.

Both aesthetic formalist and structuralist approaches favoured the practice of comparative analysis of source and adaptation. The evaluative nature of these comparisons became questionable for scholars, where these rested on uninterrogated assumptions about worth. Geraghty (2007, pp. 2, 9) writes of the hierarchies of judgement relating to both media and genre, and others attacked the mode of evaluative comparison that they felt had dominated critical questioning. The case study analysis was attacked by many, including Ray (2000, p. 44)[10] and S Murray (2008, p. 4), who refers to the 'endless stream of comparative case-studies'. Alongside these was the almost ritual repudiation of the concept of fidelity, seen as being the overt or covert driver of comparative approaches, with Bruhn (2013, p. 70) writing in 2013 that 'the evaluative question of fidelity towards the literary source now seems to have been more or less overcome', linking the two and attempting to consign both to history.

The interdisciplinary position of adaptation studies and the differing backgrounds of scholars was part of this difficulty. The literary model that underlay much of adaptation studies was highlighted: McFarlane (2000, p. 163) writes that films are judged from the position of literary scholarship when they demand their own set of criteria; and also questions 'the adequacy of a training in film for dealing with literature'. 'Fidelity criticism' continued to be critiqued on these grounds (Andrew 2000, p. 29; Cartmell & Whelehan 2007, p. 2; Leitch 2008, p. 64).

10. 'Without the benefit of a presiding poetics, scholars could only persist in asking about individual movies the same unproductive layman's question (How does the film compare with the book?), getting the same unproductive answer (The book is better)' (Ray 2000, p. 44).

The concept of fidelity as either an important consideration in adaptation or in its criticism was roundly attacked, with Andrew writing, 'unquestionably one of the most frequent and most tiresome discussions of adaptation (and of film and literature relations as well) concerns fidelity and transformation' (Andrew 2000, p. 31) and Leitch (2012, p. 103) describing fidelity as adaptation studies 'bad object'. Excoriating reviews, such as Raw's 'The Death-Rattle of Fidelity Studies' (2012), made scholars rightly nervous about straying into the fidelity discussion, with Raw (2012, p. 79) writing: 'Reading *True to the Spirit* provides a timely reminder of just how rapidly adaptation theory has advanced beyond the positions advocated in this book'. Evaluation became a key point of contention – reflecting an overall movement, not just within adaptation studies, away from structurally unquestioned hierarchies. Once again, there was the feeling of overreach as the very idea of judgement was judged. MacCabe (2011, p. 8) noted the importance of 'questions of value that are routinely dismissed by Adaptation Studies', as does Connor (2007, n.p.), who commented that 'critics have persisted in their attempts to silence that conversation of judgment'. MacCabe (2011, p. 8) argued that fidelity can be invoked in a way which emphasises that 'there is [...] an assumption that books and films [...] are of real value, a value in most cases that has been augmented by the process of adaptation'. In his seminal essay of 2008, *Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads*, Leitch (2008, p. 76) suggested studying rather than merely condemning evaluative practices and looking 'at the ways adaptations play with their source texts instead of merely aping or analysing them'.

Both the concept of fidelity in adaptation and the practice of including fidelity as a consideration when assessing adaptations were debunked (Andrew 2000, p. 31; Cahir 2006, p. 15; Cartmell & Whelehan 2010, p. 20; and others) so frequently that fidelity criticism became something of a 'straw man'; 'the scarecrow of fidelity', as Jameson puts it (2011, p. 215). In 2013, Elliott (2013, pp. 26–27) published a table of 'repeated claims in Adaptation Studies' that showed that many arguments against consideration of fidelity were continually repeated in a circular fashion: from the impossibility of complete fidelity to criticisms of moral responses and even to the calls for an intertextual approach.[11]

Both Elliott (2013, p. 27) and Leitch (2008, p. 63) agree that from the start of the adaptation critique, the effectiveness of a fidelity criticism that looks for equivalences has been challenged. It became critiqued more often than it was avowedly practised (Hermansson 2015,

11. This table could now conceivably be reworked to include claims of the *worth* of the concept of fidelity: as Elliott herself noted (2014, pp. 24–25).

p. 147; S Murray 2012a, p. 8); or practised whilst being disavowed, as scholars found the practice of comparison hard to resist (Leitch 2008, p. 63).

Solutions and their problems

Scholars interested in the relationship between the source text and the adaptation instead tried to put forward some kind of 'solution' to the problems raised by fidelity, usually by focusing on the deficiencies of so-called 'fidelity criticism' (where fidelity is viewed in terms of transposition and cited as the reasons for success or failure of an adaptation). Many found their answer in intertextual analysis: for example, McFarlane (2000, p. 169) writes of 'the abandoning of the fidelity approach in favour of a more productive invoking of intertextuality'. Leitch (2008, p. 63) describes it as desirable to 'reorient Adaptation Studies decisively from the fidelity discourse universally attacked by theorists [...] to focus on a Bakhtinian intertextuality'. Geraghty (2007, p. 5) writes that the focus should not be on comparison between source and adaptation, but comparison between versions is valuable and revealing – this suggests some of the gymnastics required to avoid a favouring of the source text.

Scholars took up the idea of intertextuality as a corrective. Cobb (2010) writes:

> As an alternative to fidelity, I use a metaphor of conversation that evokes feminist critical traditions of reception studies and is modelled on a Bakhtinian approach that foregrounds the intertextuality and dialogism of adaptation. (p. 35)

Dicecco (2015) also uses the metaphor of 'conversation' (p. 170), noting that the 'pleasure in identifying links' need not rely on an 'announcement' of adaptation (p. 166) but also expressing concerns about the 'dizzying challenge' of an intertextuality that is 'radically inclusive' (p. 163).

These intertextual approaches had the benefit of a more significant consideration of affect. Dicecco (2015, p. 161) argues for a move away from formal and aesthetic models of adaptation 'in order to study the desires, joys, affects and investments that undergird how adaptations make meaning as adaptations'. In doing so, 'fidelity will not be the enemy of scholarly conversation, but a key tool in studying the cultural stakes of media interpretation' (p. 174). De Zwaan (2015, p. 257; [*emphasis in the original*]) posits other kinds of fidelity than the commonly understood version, arguing that an '*affective* fidelity' is more important than narrative fidelity when it comes to adapting difficult or intertextual texts (the tone argument again), and that a '*textural* fidelity' can emulate a book's style of intertextual self-reflexivity without reproducing details. Harold (2018, p. 93) is also concerned with selecting more appropriate aspects of fidelity when he writes that fidelity should be considered in relation to themes but not

the storyline, as themes are ‘of larger interest to audiences because they extend beyond the particularities of the narrative’. The relative openness and allusiveness of a theme allows for this. However, he does acknowledge there may be exceptions as the placing of events may affect their interpretation (p. 97). The argument for an aesthetic significance to adaptation suggests a move toward the consideration of formal attributes alongside intertextual ones.

Donohue (2022) also seeks to change conceptions of fidelity when he writes of the need for the acknowledgement of approach – something that will be important in the Badiouian conception of fidelity this book puts forward – arguing for a fidelity that expresses itself in respect, honesty and creativity. Greater exploration of the processes that surround and create adaptations has resulted in the foregrounding of the differing views of the creatives involved in adapting and their creative excitement. Livingston (2010, p. 19) suggests the consideration of ‘artistic problems confronted by filmmakers undertaking an adaptation, including artistic problems that are and are not shared by the creators of literary sources’. Engelstad (2018, p. 25) suggests the consideration of fidelity as a largely pragmatic, rather than aesthetic, choice by the producers who are mainly responsible for optioning source texts. Lake (2012, p. 412) describes the practical difficulties of answering to producers and directors, highlighting the origins of creative decisions. Nicholson (2020) also suggests the greater consideration of pragmatic issues, stating that:

> [*P*]ractitioners often express quite a different working understanding of the process of adaptation, and in particular the role and nature of ‘fidelity’ or ‘faithfulness’ to a source text, compared to adaptation studies theorists. (p. 143)

Others wishing not to dispense with fidelity completely include Raitt (2010, p. 49; [*author’s added emphasis*]), who puts forward the idea that, instead of looking at similarity between the text and adaptation, one should approach ‘from the perspective of difference’: ‘if one does not wish to study equivalence because *it relies on a conception of fidelity*, one may yet study difference’. He states that ‘sameness and difference are not binary opposites unless one can hold the criteria of comparison constant’ (p. 54) and that ‘differences may arise from a variety of intertextual influences and so do not rely on the concept of fidelity’. Raitt’s writing bears out Hermansson’s (2015, p. 150) view that ‘much fidelity-based criticism is marked by traces of anxiety’ and self-justification because those who ventured into the area of fidelity were either ‘critically shunned’ or ‘totally ignored’.

Also suggesting a focus on difference rather than sameness, Rizzo’s (2008, p. 299) solution is to use ‘the concept of “infidelity” as a means to assess the relationship between film and literature’, thereby going ‘beyond fidelity criticism’. Commenting on Spike Jonze’s (2002) *Adaptation*, Rizzo

(p. 301) tentatively suggests 'the terms of fidelity criticism may still be useful', noting that the 'notion of Kaufman's "crazily unfaithful" screenplay opens the movie' to 'an ideological reading that has been ignored'. Jameson (2011, p. 218; [*author's added emphasis*]) takes the idea of infidelity even further, seeming to return to the idea that an adaptation can only be a secondary construct when he argues that only with utter difference can an adaptation be of equal distinction to the original text: 'The film must be utterly different from, utterly unfaithful to, its original [...] Not only governed by a wholly different aesthetic, but that breathes an utterly *different spirit* altogether'. Jameson (2011) uses the example of *Solaris* (1972), where the director Tarkovsky imposed an entirely different meaning on the film than that of the novel. However, the fact that *Solaris* may be an excellent example of works of 'equal merit' with different meanings does not necessarily render other possibilities redundant. Friedman (2019, n.p.) writes that we can usefully recognise manifestations of the cultural zeitgeist within 'the pattern of accusations of textual infidelity' made in a particular case. Friedman gives as an example how Kurzel's 2015 adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* substitutes post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a driver for Macbeth's crimes, rather than ambition; this did not find favour with the critics, and the 'pattern of accusations of textual infidelity [...] reveals a pressing concern with the perceived degeneration of masculinity in the contemporary world' (n.p.).

Infidelity may thus be considered a strategy rather than a failure of fidelity. Gómez (2006) suggests that:

> [*M*]echanisms of fidelity work differently in a continent marked by a traumatic history, since unfaithfulness to the original text has a different meaning in the case of African adaptations, in this case, a political function. (p. 113)

Dovey (2005) agrees, writing that:

> African film adaptations tend to radically reinterpret and re-historicise literary texts written during the 'colonial' era, drawing on history as an additional source in the adaptation process. This process creates infidelities which generate new meaning for contemporary audiences. (p. 163)

This need not be limited to African texts – Dicecco (2015, p. 173) writes that there are times when 'critics *should* care about fidelity because it is about the ideological stakes of representation'. Changes may add a subversive or oppositional aspect to texts or function covertly to suppress a text's more subversive meanings.

Aspects of these solutions will feature in the discussion to follow, which will consider approach, pragmatic aspects of filmmaking, as well as affect in response and the ideological ramifications of differences. However, it is notable that many of the solutions described here focus on accepting only certain aspects of fidelity and rejecting others. This book will take a step back to find an integrated conceptual model of fidelity.

■ Rationale for rethinking fidelity in adaptation

From the variety and number of critical works addressing the topic of fidelity, it can thus be seen that excluding the concept of fidelity from adaptation becomes a tricky proposition. Rather than resolving these issues, intertextuality sidestepped them. In practice, a drawback of the approach is that it 'makes it difficult to distinguish adaptations from other intertexts' (Leitch 2017, p. 5). In other cases, the 'metaphor of translation' (Naremore 2000, p. 6) continued, as Leitch (2008, p. 65) notes, in the titles of many critical anthologies, and comparisons between source and adaptation continued to be made.

Although the idea that literature was a field privileged by the academy over the newer media of film persisted into the 21st century – Leitch (2008, p. 64) cites this in his essay, 'Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads' – the status of literature and visual media such as film have changed. Even the status of film, once referred to by Hutcheon (2006, p. 46) as an area of study that could 'shore up literature's crumbling walls', has eroded in the face of the variety of media options now available. Indeed, the traditional studio feature film finds itself increasingly displaced by a variety of digital content, and these provide new areas of scholarship. The lessening of the anxieties around hierarchies has assisted in making fidelity something which can again be discussed.

Some scholars argue that too much has already been said on the topic of fidelity, with McFarlane (2007, p. 15) writing that it no longer needs to be argued at length, Raw (2015) commenting that it has been 'done to death' and Elliott (2014, pp. 24–25; [*emphasis in the original*]) noting that 'the critique of fidelity has become so commonplace that the *critique* of this critique is also widely reiterated'. Rather than a moribund fidelity that has been set aside, there is surely space for 'new thoughts on old issues', as Kaklamanidou (2020, p. 1) writes. The breadth and scope of the fidelity discussion illustrate its continuing resilience within adaptation studies, as this chapter has aimed to show. Leitch (2017, p. 19) has written that the field is now at the point where debates can exist without needing to be definitively settled, with the value being in 'the questions its contributors raise and the debates they seek to clarify'. This can only be a healthy development.

Rather than trying to do away with fidelity, I suggest that it is the conception of it that is problematic. As seen in the previous section, solutions to the 'problem' of fidelity seem to involve excluding some manifestations of the concept and favouring others; for example, excluding or relocating ideas of value, excluding so-called individual opinion to focus

on form, or form to focus on reception or sociological context; attempts to avoid a fidelity of transference, that result in a focus only on differences; privileging source or adaptation over one other; removing a consideration of the source text to alleviate the idea of the adapted text being constantly at a disadvantage; and refocusing fidelity on to the pragmatic use of fidelity by filmmakers and studios, or the desire for it by the public.

I argue that these issues should be reframed holistically. The announced relationship between a source text and an announced adaptation is unique, both in creative and commercial terms. Fidelity represents this intersection. I have shown that the chief difficulty with the 'traditional' concept of fidelity is its conceptualisation as one of transference and copying and the way this is used as a standard of value; however, the manifold applications of fidelity within the disciplinary debate that have developed beyond this traditional view have operated by excluding aspects of fidelity.

Philosopher Alain Badiou's differing concept of fidelity knits the various aspects of fidelity together. So, is Badiou's fidelity yet another solution? Perhaps ... But it is a solution that changes the original terms. Badiou's conception of fidelity within his application of set theory speaks to elements that have proved problematic in fidelity criticism. It rejects correspondence and yet reclaims a concept of value in adaptation, and, whilst not supporting an empty moralism, provides explanations for the strength of responses to perceived failures in adaptation. The next chapter will set out the terms of Badiou's conception.

Chapter 2

Rethinking fidelity: Alain Badiou's fidelity in the service of truth

> To be faithful to an event is to move within the situation that this event has supplemented, by thinking (though all thought is a practice, a putting to the test) the situation 'according to' the event. (Badiou 2002, p. 41)

Connecting truth and fidelity

'Truth' joins fidelity in the pantheon of loaded terminology. Discussions of that elusive concept in regard to adaptation have been even less foregrounded, suggesting that fidelity, for all its difficulties, is still the safer topic of discussion. Restoring a concept of truth to adaptation is controversial; hence it is important to begin by delineating what truth means in a Badiouian sense.

For Alain Badiou, fidelity and truth are linked together. Badiou's truth remains elusive in that a truth cannot be articulated: how, then, can one know it exists? One knows the existence of a truth by its effects. Badiou separates the idea of truth from that of knowledge – knowledge is our everyday understanding of the world, a matter of fact. Truth is something properly inexpressible, and the coming into being of a new truth creates global changes. Badiou's terminology is very specific; hence it is important to understand how he defines the terms 'fidelity', 'truth', 'situation' and 'event'.

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This chapter will examine further what Badiou means by truths, and how an approach of fidelity leaves the door open to allow a truth-event to express itself. This is achieved through Badiou's idea of the irritant, the non-conforming part of the set, that works to create these events through a fidelity. This conceptual framework will lay the groundwork for the next chapter, which will examine how Badiou's schema can be related to a concept of fidelity and truth within film adaptation, and how this can be an approach to considering Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

Whilst Badiou has been politically and intellectually active in France from the 1960s, he began publishing significant works from the 1980s. These became available in translation only in the early 21st century, greatly extending the reach of his ideas and popularity in the English-speaking world. One of the earlier texts to be translated was, indeed, his seminal work in relation to the concept of fidelity, *Ethics* (2002). This work is vital to the concepts discussed in this book, as is Badiou's extended exploration of the truth-event in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (2003b) and his writings on art and cinema, in particular *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (2005b) and *Cinema* (2013), a collection of Badiou's writings on film from 1957 to 2010. Also key is his foundational text, *Being and Event*; this was first published in French in 1988 and published in English only in 2005. Since then, his earlier works continue to be translated into English, along with his most extensive later work, *Logic of Worlds: Being and Event II* (2019). In *Logic of Worlds*, he examines concepts that were alluded to but not fully developed in the earlier *Being and Event*, such as the links between being and appearance. Unlike some philosophers whose ideas change fundamentally during the course of their careers, Badiou's founding conception of the set, the event and their ramifications has remained broadly consistent (Sotiris 2011, pp. 50–51), despite some changes in how he actualises these in their political manifestations (see Bensaïd 2004, pp. 102–103). This consistency adds depth to his work as his published works build on this core system rather than replace it with new ideas; it also allows for some stability when using this as a system for approaching adaptations.

Talking about truth

A philosopher who speaks of universal truths – immediately, the thought goes to a theological paradigm. However, this would be anathema to Badiou – Hallward describes him as a 'militant' atheist (Hallward, 2003, p. xxii) and Barker writes of his 'lingering fidelity' to Maoism (Badiou 2005c, p. xiii) despite 'a series of tactical withdrawals from all forms of political representation' (p. xii). Badiou's radical leftist political views are well known and have shaped every aspect of his philosophy.

Nonetheless, there is an aspect of the metaphysical to his conception of truth. Hallward has written that Badiou's conception of truth does not fit easily within frequently cited models (Hallward, 2003, p. 154), such as correspondence, coherence or pragmatic theories of truth (using Badiou's frame of reference within the Global North – this is not to say other traditions of truth do not exist). Correspondence theories, to put it very broadly, look for a correspondence between what is observed, perceived and proposed and what empirically exists; in other words, they try to ascertain a reality. In the words of the 13th-century friar and priest, Thomas Aquinas, 'A judgement is said to be true when it conforms to the external reality' (David 2016, n.p.). Correspondence theories, however, also include truths that can only be ascertained by argument or philosophising. Plato, for example, seen as an exemplar of correspondence theory, puts forth the argument that absolute truth is only found in the transcendental sphere ('The truth of the matter is, after all, known only to God' [1965, p. 282]) with echoes of it in the physical realm we inhabit. Even so, this truth reveals itself in various ways, and the capability to perceive things as they really are 'is a capacity which is innate in each man's mind' (p. 283). One can see how a theory where truth is somehow beyond one's everyday perceptions is on the same continuum as Badiou's. This understanding of truth is why Badiou has been called a new Platonist (Milbank 2007, p. 129), as it appears to echo Plato's theory of Forms, that is, the idea of a universal truth that exists beyond and apart from any kind of physical appearance. Badiou has himself spoken in support of Plato as a theorist of what is 'not there' (Thumfart 2008, n.p.). However, Badiou's theory is still not a correspondence theory as his truth does not relate to anything perceivable in the physical world – unlike Plato, it is not that the visible is a shadow of the truth but is, instead, properly inexpressible and unpresentable. Seeing its effects is not the same as corresponding.

It is easier to see a disjunct between Badiou and coherence and pragmatic theories of truth. Coherence theories argue that truth can be ascertained by looking at whether there is a consistency between propositions; that is, that 'a belief is true if and only if it coheres with other ideas' (Burgess & Burgess 2011, p. 3). For example, if the statement is 'the cat is flying above' and the general set of knowledge about cats is that cats do not fly, this statement does not cohere and is unlikely to be true. With coherence theory, you can have degrees of truth as 'only the whole system of propositions expresses the truth' (Carr 2008, p. 87). There may, after all, be conditions under which a cat might fly. In this way, it is unlike correspondence theory.

Pragmatic theory is also a version in which no 'absolute or irreversible truths' exist, and a 'proposition is true so long as it proves itself useful' (Walker 1912, n.p.). Pragmatic theories of truth look at how truths may be constructed based on their use value, that is, 'a belief is true if and only if it

is useful in practice' (Burgess & Burgess 2011, p. 3). If an idea can be effectively utilised, it can be considered true. A more extreme example is pragmatist Rorty's view, which is that truth functions as 'a general term of commendation' (Rorty 1990, p. 23). Rorty does not deny that there is such a thing as physical fact, but what is important is 'multiple, if not all possible, ways of describing it' (Groff 2004, p. 5). The pragmatic method established a way of allowing for the examination of both metaphysical propositions and scientific ones employing rational enquiry (Hookway 2016, n.p.). Both pragmatic and coherence theories are clearly at odds with Badiou's conception and his radical statement that 'a truth is *the same for all*' (Badiou 2002, p. 27; [*author's added emphasis*]). Hallward (2003, p. 154) reiterates that Badiou does not fall into any of these three broad schools because his truth 'asserts its own conditions'. What is important is that these schools of thought are not right or wrong *per se* but make, as Kirkham (1992, pp. 2–3) writes, different kinds of enquiries about truth.

Kirkham puts forward the proposition that these philosophers are embarked on unacknowledged, different 'projects' relating to the idea of truth (Kirkham 1992, pp. 2–3). These 'projects', as identified by Kirkham (pp. 20–21), are the metaphysical project, the justification project and the speech-act project, with sub-divisions beneath these. What Kirkham terms justification and speech-act projects are more concerned with the characteristics of statements made about truth, whereas metaphysical projects are concerned with the conditions of truth. The justification project looks for evidence in order to entitle us to believe in the truth of a given proposition – that is, it tries to determine what is characteristic of a true proposition (p. 25), and the speech-act project asks what we *do* when we say 'this is true' (p. 28). Despite the aspects of process in Badiou's conception, these kinds of projects do not appear to be at the forefront of his questioning – his focus is instead on how truths come to be, what 'the necessary and sufficient conditions for something's being true' (p. 25) are. This allows us to see him as embarking on a metaphysical project and helps to clarify that conditional and arguable truths are simply of a different paradigm altogether.

■ The set and the event

Badiou has his own positioning of the terms 'fidelity', 'truth', 'the void', 'situation', and 'event', taking the framework of his conceptualisation primarily from the set theory of mathematician Georges Cantor (Badiou 2005a, p. xiii). Set theory is a way of accounting for infinite and genuinely uncountable presences in mathematics. The uncountable presence is what drives Badiou's thinking on fidelity, truth and the formation of the subject. Badiou's concern with ontology, a seminal philosophical debate which

forms much of the discussion in *Being and Event,* is not the focus of this book. However, the link between fidelity and the creation of the subject will be discussed later in this chapter.

Here follows a brief overview of Badiou's (2005a) conceptual schema, which Badiou explores in detail in *Being and Event*. Badiou's concept of fidelity as a means to realising truth is dependent on this setup. The condition of everything, according to set theory and Badiou (p. xii), is the limitless multiple: 'pure indifferent multiplicities'. This means it cannot be founded on any principle of the one, and thus is a way Badiou can find support (differing here from the model of Cantor [p. 41]) for his own atheism: 'Its being in excess of itself precludes its being represented as a totality. Superabundance cannot be assigned to any Whole' (Badiou 2003b, p. 78). Instead of a one or a whole, all is founded on nothingness or what Badiou terms 'the void' (p. 108). This important concept will be returned to later.

To this indifferent multiplicity comes the set. The primary notion of set theory is that any set of objects can be put together by one's thought or intuition (Badiou 2005a, p. 38) – this is how we can perceive the world around us. This set is what Badiou refers to as 'the one'; 'the one, in respect to presentation, is an operational result' (p. 24). Thus (Badiou 2005a):

> [*B*]eing is what presents (itself) [...], rather than an inherent condition of the universe. What defines the elements of the set is their own belonging; in set theory, elements cannot present themselves: 'element' does not designate anything intrinsic. (pp. 24, 61)

The set does not have to be logically formulated, for example, a set of all things that are blue. It can be as arbitrary as 'the set of words enclosed by a rough circle drawn on the page', as Hallward (2003, p. 87) writes.

A set that is created by the belonging of its elements is thus different from one where you would first define and then count the set. Coming to the set with a preconceived notion is a foreclosing approach. Predetermined defining or foreclosing the set becomes very problematic in Badiou's schema and is a key part of what works against fidelity. This concept of foreclosing will be critical to the following discussion of the film adaptations.

The set is thus determined by its members, what is in it, and not by the set itself; as Badiou (2005a, p. 60) writes, 'Two sets are equal (identical) if the multiples of which they are the multiple, the multiples whose set theoretical count as one they ensure, are "the same"'. So, 'if every multiple presented in the presentation of "a" is presented in that of β, and the inverse, then these two multiples, "a" and β, are the same' (p. 61) – the order or arrangement of the elements is unimportant. The elements within the set can thus be arranged in many ways, and sub-grouped into subsets. If we consider the set, for example, 'adaptations of the works of F Scott Fitzgerald', film adaptations would form a subset of that set. This subset

could then have an almost infinite number of further subsets or groupings, such as 'adaptations depicting a saxophone' or 'non-verbal moments in the adaptations', just to give an idea of how limitless these groupings could be. In set theory, the number of ways elements can be grouped far exceeds the number of elements themselves – 'the set of parts cannot have the same cardinal as the initial set. It exceeds the latter absolutely' (p. 275). This idea helps to explain the limitless possibilities connected to being.

Logically, every set must also include what is there but cannot be counted. Badiou (2008b, p. 85) writes: 'Every multiple comprises at least one element which presents nothing of that which the multiple itself presents'. This 'void, which is the name of inconsistency in the situation (under the law of the count-as-one), cannot, in itself, be presented or fixed' (Badiou 2005a, p. 93). Badiou (p. 77) describes this as the 'empty set', represented by the symbol Ø. This empty set is universally included: 'the void, to which nothing belongs, is by this very fact included in everything' (p. 86). By the same token, it also cannot be excluded (Badiou 2005a):

> For if the void is the unpresentable point of being, whose unicity of inexistence is marked by the existent proper name Ø, then no multiple, by means of its existence, can prevent this inexistent from placing itself within it. On the basis of everything which is not presentable, it is inferred that the void is presented everywhere in its lack. (p. 86)

This void, or empty set, that is both infinite and uncountable, becomes central to Badiou's concept of fidelity and truth. A new truth comes into being by allowing the void to speak. To understand the foreclosing of the void, it is necessary to consider the levels of presentation. Structure is the normal state of the 'world of presentation' (Badiou 2005a, p. 93); that is, why we can perceive a chair as a chair. As defined by Badiou (p. 24), the situation is simply this uncomplicated presentation: 'I term situation any presented multiplicity'. It is the 'state of the situation' which is problematic (Badiou 2005a):

> I will hereinafter term state of the situation that by means of which the structure of a situation – of any structured presentation whatsoever – is counted as one, which is to say the one of the one-effect itself. (p. 95)

This refers to another structure that may be imposed on top of presentation that attempts to structure away the void and deny its existence: 'In order for the void to be prohibited from presentation, it is necessary that structure be structured' (Badiou 2005a, p. 93) – the foreclosing approach to the set I referred to earlier. This is what Badiou refers to as 'representation' (p. 94). Thus, writes Badiou, 'all situations are structured twice. This also means: there is always both presentation and representation' (p. 94), a structure and a 'metastructure' (p. 84). Badiou refers to this as the 'state of the situation' (p. 95), where there is a secondary count on top of the intuitive grouping (invoking the connotations of the 'state' as a controlled,

demarcated, organised grouping). This attempts to structure away the 'anxiety of the void' (p. 94) or foreclose the set: 'The normal regime of structured situations is that of the imposition of an absolute "unconscious" of the void' (p. 56). To illustrate this element that is both *there* and *not-there* (not included in the count of the count), an example might be the French state and those who live in France but are officially stateless – the *sans-papiers* [without papers]. These are referred to frequently but quite tangentially in Badiou's work[12] however feature strongly in his political involvement (primarily in the 1990s) in the 'militant' *L'Organisation politique* (OP) (Nail 2015, p. 111). The *sans-papiers* are not counted as part of the French state, yet they are present. Effectively, they represent the void that the state attempts to structure away through its representation. In an interview with Hallward, Badiou talks of the struggle faced by foreign workers, following on from those of the *sans-papiers*: 'How do we count foreign workers in this country, do we count them for nothing or for something'? (Badiou & Hallward 1998, p. 114). This again illustrates how Badiou's overall conception is deeply involved with his political thought.

What Badiou terms the state of the situation thus tries to suppress the uncountable element. One might ask, why is there this desire to structure away the void? Because the void is the site of potential radical, explosive change. It is the void which *may* (events, for Badiou, are not predictable) force itself out in an event: 'If you attempt to annul excess and reduce it to a unity of the presentative axis, you will not be able to avoid the errancy of the void' (Badiou 2005a, p. 120). An event is Badiou's term for that which allows a genuine change in the world to happen: 'I have named this type of rupture *which opens up truth* "the event"' (p. xii; [*author's added emphasis*]). In this book, I will refer to these as truth-events where clarity would be helpful.

Thus, the pieces of Badiou's schema begin to come together. The truth-event occurs when the void becomes visible: 'for the void to become localizable at the level of presentation [...] a dysfunction of the count is required, which results from an excess-of-one' (Badiou 2005a, p. 56). The void is uncountable; therefore, the 'natural being of the void immediately exceeds the inherent limit of any effective presentation' (p. 74). The 'truth', which is thereby both made and discovered, will require new forms and names. This opening of the void may feel explosive. The new truth is all-encompassing, which is to say universal (Badiou 2005a):

> [...] given that the in-difference of the void cannot determine any natural direction for movement, the latter would be 'explosive', which is to say multi-directional; transport would take place 'everywhere'. (p. 74)

12. Although they are used as a key example of Badiou's concept of the set in Hallward (2003, pp. 96–98, 118) and Norris (2009, pp. 7–8).

Thus, Badiou (2005a) sees truth-events as having global impacts. To give examples of some of these events, Badiou names the French Revolution (p. 180), the mathematical revolution of Cantor (p. 2) and (despite Badiou's own atheism) what he terms the 'Christ-event', which inaugurated Christianity (Badiou 2003b, p. 22). Equally, as will be further discussed in the following chapter, large-scale changes such as modernity, which saw global changes in both aesthetics and politics, meet the criteria of truth-event.

Not every aspect of being can trigger the universalising effects Badiou finds in truths. For example, philosophy (and scholarship in general) is not a creator of truths; instead, as Badiou (2005a, p. 4) writes, philosophy is 'ordain(ed) to the care of truths'. Fortunately, this book does not have to meet the exacting criteria of a truth-event! However, philosophy as 'protector' of truths requires similar stances of authenticity and open-mindedness. It is Badiou's 'generic procedures', namely politics, love, art and science, that are capable of the universalising effects he finds in truths (p. 16). I will examine the concept of artistic (and filmic) truths more deeply in the next chapter.

To summarise, as Badiou (2005a) writes:

> [...] the void, once named 'in situation', exceeds the situation according to its own infinity; it is also the case that its evental occurrence proceeds 'explosively', or 'everywhere', within a situation; finally, it is exact that the void pursues its own particular trajectory – once unbound from the errancy in which it is confined by the state. (p. 74)

Only an event can allow something genuinely new into the world and is, in this sense, revolutionary. The event allows the creation and discovery of a truth: 'A truth is solely constituted by rupturing with the order which supports it, never as an effect of that order' (Badiou 2005a, p. xii); in other words, the event must bring to existence something completely new that is not merely a development of what was there before; although it may be 'retroactively discernible' (p. 56). The truth-event expressed by modernity wrought fundamental changes in everyday life, thought and aesthetics. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which shows aspects of literary modernism, can thus be seen as part of the effects of this seismic truth-event.

Fidelity's relationship with truth

The concept of a relationship between truth and fidelity is not foreign to the study of film adaptation. As discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the idea of a text's 'essence', fidelity also involves ideas of truthfulness in the sense of being in some way true to the source text. In MacCabe's tellingly titled 2011 collection, *True to the Spirit*, MacCabe attempts to bring 'truth' openly into the fidelity discussion, writing that the way in which audiences, cast and crew speak about the making of adaptation is part of what he

would describe as 'true to the spirit', a phrase which he notes avoids 'any notion of a literal fidelity' (2011, p. 7). Nonetheless, in this essay, he goes no further than this into dissecting an idea of truth and the role it plays in fidelity. Andrew (2011) also engages in a discussion which names truth, writing of:

> [*A*] kind of fidelity that goes beyond appearance to a truth that is present in its absence from the image. We should use adaptations, just as we use images [...] to get at the truths to which they point. Cinema brings us closer to a fidelity to truth. (p. 37)

Andrew notably does not conflate ideas of truth and fidelity and instead begins to establish a relationship between them, as does Badiou (this is not to say he has the same conception of truth as Badiou).

To access a truth in Badiouian terms clearly requires some kind of openness to the void, the uncountable, the part that cannot be assimilated in the situation. It is an approach of fidelity that maintains this openness. For Badiou, when a subject embraces a truth-event with fidelity, it allows a truth to be both made and discovered. Badiou (2002) describes how a fidelity can be enacted, writing:

> Let us call this a fidelity. To be faithful to an event is to move within the situation that this event has supplemented, by *thinking* (though all thought is a practice, a putting to the test) the situation 'according to' the event. (p. 41)

Badiou suggests that an encounter must be met authentically – without having previous mental models imposed upon it, without the set being foreclosed. The fidelity that creates and discovers a truth is thus 'not a matter of knowledge' (2005a, p. 329) but of encounter (p. 332).

To further understand what Badiou means when he separates knowledge and truth is necessary. Badiou's (2005a, p. 328) idea of truth differs from what he calls '*knowledge*', our factual understanding of the world: 'Knowledge is realised as an encyclopedia'. Truths (unlike matters of knowledge) cannot be communicated. Truths are not something which can be proved, like knowledge. Facts can be manipulated, but truths cannot (Badiou 2003b):

> We will not ask for proofs and counterproofs. We will not enter into debate with erudite anti-Semites, Nazis under the skin, with their superabundance of 'proofs' that no Jew was ever mistreated by Hitler. (p. 44)

However, if the event is channelled correctly, truths can result in new knowledges: 'Truth punctures a "hole" in knowledges [...] but it is also the sole known source of new knowledges. We shall say that the truth *forces* knowledges' (Badiou 2002, p. 70; [*emphasis in the original*]). Thus, although inexpressible and unpresentable, the new truth has an impact – primarily through introducing something new into the world that did not exist before.

For Badiou, truths are simply not subjective in the sense of 'true for you, but not for me' – this Badiou (2002, p. 51) would regard as 'opinion', which truth

'opposes'. Whilst the work of Barthes hailed the interpretation of the subject in an individualised making of meaning, Badiou breaks with much of the positionality discourse of the later 20th Century. Instead, Badiou states that the truth is the same for all: 'Only a truth is, as such, *indifferent to differences* [...] a truth is *the same for all*' (p. 27; [*emphasis in the original*]). This may be a radical statement depending on your school of thought – once again, it is important to remember the type of truth project Badiou is embarked upon may simply be different from one that defines truths conditionally. The role of the individual subject is vital, for Badiou, in approaching a truth-event with fidelity; however, the event brings into being a truth which is universal, not positional. I will return to this key concept in the next section.

One might ask, what use is the concept of a truth that cannot be communicated, fundamentally linked to the nothingness of the void? Although 'what arises from a truth-process, by contrast [with the idea of opinion], cannot be communicated' (Badiou 2002, p. 51), we can, however, see the effects of truth. Badiou writes: 'If a truth is never communicable as such, it nevertheless implies, at a distance from itself, powerful reshapings of the form and referents of communication' (p. 70). These forms and referents can be observed. Firstly, 'in order to verify whether an event is presented in a situation, it is first necessary to verify if it is presented as an element of itself' (Badiou 2005a, p. 181), as the only element the void can have in a situation is itself. The declaration of the event can 'force the situation itself to confess its own void, and to let forth thereby [...] the incandescent non-being of an existence' (p. 183). Because it represents something new in the world, the event must exist as a term 'immanent to itself', as does that manifestation of an event, the French Revolution (p. 181).

The event requires some kind of interpretation, even if language is stretched to its limits: 'Only an *interpretive intervention* can declare that an event *is* presented in a situation' as the 'arrival amidst the visible of the invisible' (Badiou 2005a, p. 181; [*emphasis in the original*]). Although this attempt to name truth is a dangerous matter because it may begin to reimpose the structure of the state upon the set, if embraced with fidelity, a new truth can become part of everyday life. There arrives:

> [*A*]n arsenal of words which make up the deployed matrix of faithful marking-out. Think of 'faith', 'charity', 'sacrifice', 'salvation' (Saint Paul); or of 'party', 'revolution', 'politics' (Lenin); or of 'sets', 'ordinals', 'cardinals' (Cantor). (p. 397)

Once this new existence has been founded, it brings with it its own sets and subsets.

Badiou's most extended example, the biblical Saint Paul (referred to as Paul in Badiou's text), will be familiar to those from a Judeo-Christian culture. Badiou argues that Paul illustrates the process of engaging with a truth by finding a way to articulate the 'Christ-event'. Once again, it is essential to

remember Badiou's (2003b, p. 5) own atheism – he calls Christianity a 'fable' and Christ a 'magician'. Paul's own conversion on the road to Damascus is a sudden and striking event, seemingly coming from nowhere. Thus, for Badiou, 'the encounter on the road mimics the founding event'(p. 17). In other words, Paul engages in a fidelity with the rupture of the event and this founds his subjecthood: 'Paul's faith is that from which he begins as a subject, and nothing leads up to it' (p. 17). Again, something completely new has been created: 'The Christian subject does not pre-exist the event he declares' (p. 14). The subject puts aside any preconceived idea that would foreclose the set. This demonstrates how a truth-event should be approached.

Paul breaks with both Jewish and Greek traditions that he has experienced (Badiou 2003b):

> [*T*]he real can no more be what in elective exception becomes literalised in stone as timeless law (Jewish discourse) than it is what comes or returns to its place (Greek discourse). (p. 57)

It must, then, be something utterly unthought of in each of these representations. Hence Paul's revolutionary statement, 'There is no distinction between Jew or Greek' (Badiou 2003b, p. 57). Truth cannot be reserved for some, but everyone can engage with the universal, making and discovering it subjectively through a connection of fidelity. Paul is now 'a man who, armed with a personal event, has grounds for declaring that impersonal event that is the Resurrection' (p. 19). In what Badiou terms a 'staggering innovation' where the 'event is addressed to all without exception' (p. 74), Paul radically defines Christianity as open to all. Each person can individually recreate the Christ-event of resurrection (here, the condition of truth as both universal and individually created/accessed through fidelity is met). Of course, the Church later formalised rules and regulations, in Badiou's eyes, dampening Paul's flame (p. 39).

Realising truth-events through fidelity

Badiou's (2002) example of the Christ-event illustrates how events can still be embraced at a later stage:

> Since the event is to disappear, being a kind of flashing supplement that happens to the situation, so what is retained of it in the situation, and what serves to guide the fidelity, must be something like a trace, or a name, that refers back to the vanished event. (p. 72)

Although we can retrospectively find hints of the event prior to it (as with Saint Paul's Jewish and Greek antecedents), these tend to be fully visible and explicable only after the event[13]; whereas after the event, the possibilities

13. As with modernity – see Chapter 3.

of the event continue to be expanded. Fidelity to events that happened long ago is still possible, but they must be met authentically in the present through an 'active fidelity' (Badiou 2005a, p. xiii). Herein lies the germ of an approach that supports a discussion of fidelity within film adaptation.

Fidelity is thus essential to the realisation of truth's possibilities. Truth is *both* discovered and produced through fidelity. Badiou (2002, p. 51; [*emphasis in the original*]) writes that 'in all that concerns truths, there must be an encounter' with the void, whilst truth is 'that which fidelity *produces* in the situation' (p. 42; [*emphasis in the original*]). Thus, for Badiou, truth is neither discovered in a positivist way nor constructed in a postmodern way; 'truth' is both made and discovered, or discovered through a process of making. Fidelity is thus vital to the authentic production of a truth.

In this process, fidelity also forms the subject: 'A subject is nothing other than an active fidelity to the event of truth' (Badiou 2005a, p. xiii). Badiou (2002, p. 51; [*emphasis in the original*]) strongly emphasises the individuality of response: 'To enter into the composition of a subject of a truth can only be something that *happens to you*'. However, he notes that fidelity must not be 'understood in any way as a capacity, a subjective quality, or a virtue' but is a 'situated operation which depends on the examination of situations' (Badiou 2005a, p. 233). Each individual must go through their own *process* of fidelity to an event – although not subjective, truths can only be individually produced and experienced. That said, 'there are many manners of being faithful to an event' (p. 233). Badiou outlines some of the different ways of being faithful when he speaks of 'dogmatic' fidelities, 'spontaneist' fidelities and his preferred 'generic' fidelity (p. 237). Dogmatic fidelities 'pretend' every multiple is connected to the event and hence are institutionalising; spontaneist fidelities suggest only those who made the event can take part in it (p. 237). In reference to art, dogmatic fidelities can easily arise when studying the art of a particular historical period. A spontaneist fidelity might insist that only the makers can truly engage with or realise the truth connection established by their work. Both dogmatic and spontaneist push the concept of fidelity to its limits, without quite breaking it, through bringing in legalistic frameworks – the most 'real' fidelities establish 'dependencies for which the state are without concept' (p. 237). Badiou writes: 'The more real the fidelity is thus the less close it is to the state, the less institutional' (p. 239).

Happily, generic fidelity allows for more of a universal response: 'Such a fidelity starts from a position of not claiming knowledge of which parts of the situation are connected to the Event' (McLaverty-Robinson 2013). With this non-foreclosing approach, fidelity can then gather together and distinguish what in the situation depends on an event (Badiou 2005a, p. 232). A subject must be 'faithful to a fidelity' (Badiou 2002, p. 68) to

produce this indescribable truth. They must 'invent' a new way of being and acting in that situation (Badiou 2005a, p. 42); thus, the subject will be changed by it, becoming 'the militant of a truth' (p. xiii). One might argue that this is an individualistic model of 'truth', but when Badiou asserts that the 'truth' is the same for all, it takes this in a different direction. Paradoxically, the individual reaches the absolute through an active, unprejudiced process of sincere and faithful engagement. This is an experience of great value (Badiou 2003b):

> Whoever is the subject of a truth (of love, of art, or science, or politics) knows that, in effect, he bears a treasure, that he is traversed by an infinite power. Whether or not this truth, so precarious, continues to deploy itself depends solely on his subjective weakness. (p. 54)

Critique of Badiou's concepts

Badiou's concept of fidelity to the event has been invoked across disciplines. Some of these critiques are instructive as to the means and difficulties of enacting fidelity and thus allowing a truth-event to speak. How to actualise Badiou's ideas, most obviously within programmes of political change, remains an issue. Those who seek a new event are troubled by the unpredictability of such events, which may or may not happen despite the void within the set. Tweedie (2012, p. 101), for example, argues that Badiou's version of the 'truth' is so rigid that almost nothing can qualify as a truth-event. To some extent, Badiou (2019, pp. 355–380) has softened these concepts in his later work, *Logic of Worlds*, which examines how the effects of an event appear in the world over time.

Putting Badiou's concept of fidelity to an event to political use raises questions as to whether his 'pure' philosophical ideas can be applied to create genuine political change (Sotiris 2011). Bensaïd (2004) writes that Badiou's absolutist notion of the rupturing event appears to necessitate political miracles. Becoming a 'state-revolutionary' or 'patiently waiting to discern the possibility of the event' seem to be the only options presented (Sotiris 2011, p. 53). Also critical of Badiou's rigorous criteria, Jansen writes in a 2019 article of the possibility that nothing can meet Badiou's standards as an event or as a faithful subject. Eckstrand (2019) argues that fidelity to Badiou's revolutionary truth does not fully consider the resiliency of systems. Jansen (2019, p. 242) notes that a Badiouian approach 'eschews reformism and evokes possibilities of radical change through sudden irruption'.

Badiou's dispute with contextually determined meanings and his focus on universal truths has been ferociously criticised on political grounds by Bensaïd. Bensaïd (2004, p. 98; cf. p. 101) writes that by 'refusing to venture into the dense thickets of real history, into the social and historical

determination of events, Badiou's notion of the political tips over into a wholly imaginary dimension' more allied to a miracle than politics. When Badiou tries to realise his own idea of politics without a party through OP, it could only offer 'banal reforms' (Bensaïd 2004, p. 103). Bensaïd also claims that Badiou's refusal of history is partly through his desire to avoid analysing the historical consequences of Maoism. The result is 'absolutism', with a worrying refusal of 'alliances and relatedness' (p. 105).

Similar concerns are raised by Sotiris, who notes that Badiou prioritises 'scission and antagonism over relation and mutual determination' (Sotiris 2011, p. 38). Sotiris acknowledges that Badiou's ideas take a stand against the way in which historical thinking has been used as a 'neoliberal imperative against the possibility of any form of historical change' (p. 38) but this is also their weakness – the 'absence of any direct causal relation between the situation and the irruption of the event' can 'over-emphasise the transformative effects of subjective decisions' (p. 49). Indeed, approaching through a political naming can get in the way – there is a need to rethink politics to avoid foreclosing the set through 'unexamined commitments', as Dewsbury (2007, p. 448) writes, to Marxism or modernism, which reproduce oppressive structures. Activism can, however, still take place if we 'question those representations that we make of the world and thus the sites upon which we can effectively intervene' (p. 456).

Approaching the issue from the standpoint of social anthropology, Jansen (2019, p. 246) explores more deeply the idea of faithfulness to the trace of a previous event and what gets in the way of this faithfulness: noting that Badiou has little to say about 'fear as an obstacle to faithful subjectivity' or a 'refusal' based on cynicism that rejects fidelity as 'gullibility' and perceives the consequences of fidelity as 'utopian' and unrealisable (p. 247). Unlike the other writers cited, Jansen (p. 246) notes that Badiou's theory does acknowledge the need for a 'critical mass' to realise the potential of a truth-event fully, and in this subterranean way, does include an idea of the collective.

Importantly, Jansen (2019) notes the necessity of 'understanding how happenings are made into *non*-events' (p. 253) and 'tracing the closing off of certain evental possibilities in fidelity to a previous event' (p. 254) – a useful consideration when looking at how Badiou's fidelity in adaptation might fail. Calcagno (2008, p. 1053) sounds similar notes, noting the possibility of a bad event that, instead of creating a subject, 'may consciously aim at and result in the de-politicizing, de-subjectivating or dehumanizing of the subject'. Whilst some may experience a new political identity through change, a new configuration of others may find their subjecthood deliberately negated (p. 1065). Calcagno (p. 1066) hence argues for the importance of the consideration of 'micro-events' and 'failed interventions'. A consideration of Badiou's concept of 'traces' of a previous event that

nonetheless expresses itself may prove to be similar to a ‘micro-event’ or render it unnecessary. The idea of a failed event is interesting and the difficulties in realising a fidelity will be considered later in this chapter.

Wright discusses Badiou’s much-criticised response to history, finding in it more nuance than some, particularly in Badiou’s later writing. Wright (2008) uses Badiou to suggest a faithful ‘evental historiography’ approach which is:

> [*N*]ot a lengthy, quasi-forensic narrative which, through the re-interpretation of old sources and perhaps the discovery of new ones, reconfigures ‘our understanding’ of History. Rather, its ultimate result is a pure, ringing declaration of *universal and therefore timeless import*: ‘all men are created equal’, ‘workers of the world unite’, ‘E = MC^2’, ‘there is no such thing as a sexual relation’, and so on. (p. 90; [*emphasis in the original*])

Noting that fidelity is a situated happening, Wright (2008, p. 91) argues that this must ‘engage with its (historicised) world’.

Many of these considerations are relevant to considering how fidelity may operate within film and literature. However, I believe the answers are already there in Badiou’s writing. Badiou, for example, requires that an event (or its expressions) be true to its contemporary moment *and* universal. Not every act of fidelity requires a truth-event of its own – faithful subjects may make and discover truths through being faithful to events that have already happened. To reiterate Badiou’s (2002, p. 72) words, what is retained of the disappeared event is ‘something like a trace or name’ that ‘serves to guide the fidelity’. I will go on to consider how this process may be facilitated.

Artistic truth-making and film

Badiou asserts that truths can be made and discovered through the ‘generic procedures’ of love, science, politics and art. The generic is universalising (Badiou 2005a):

> The thought of the generic supposes the complete traversal of the categories of being (multiple, void, nature, infinity, …) and of the event (ultra-one, undecidable, intervention, fidelity, …). (p. 16)

Art is, for Badiou, a way of naming truths and the artist-creator also plays a role in articulating a truth by means of fidelity. Thus, Badiou has a place for the arts (poetry, literature, theatre, fine arts) within the procedures of truth. His attitude toward film, which he describes as an ‘impure art’ (Badiou 2005b, p. 83), will be discussed shortly. Badiou’s truth-event may seem to be most easily described by political revolution. However, Badiou (2005a) has a more encompassing viewpoint than this:

> The militant of a truth is not only the political militant working for the emancipation of humanity in its entirety. He or she is also the artist-creator, the scientist who opens up a new theoretical field, or the lover whose world is enchanted. (p. xiii)

Thus, art can become the site of a truth-event through a fidelity to the event. Fidelity requires, as for other truth-events, that art be 'the impersonal production of a truth that is addressed to everyone' (Badiou 2003a, n.p.) as well as being (as with other events) 'as surprising as an ambush in the night'. This truth will show itself by being unthought of previously, part of a new articulation of form and meaning that allows a space for the void relating to the evental site to exist. Badiou (2005b, p. 12) writes that an artwork is a 'situated enquiry' of the 'post-evental dimension'. For example, a modernist artwork might demonstrate new styles and new forms, allowing for expressions that were unthought of in a previous paradigm and yet are functional. As McLaverty-Robinson (2013, n.p.) writes, 'this arrangement is something which "works," but is alien to the current way of doing things. It seems to hold together without guarantees or secure knowledge'. As the event is further enquired about, with a fidelity that does not foreclose the evental site, it produces these new knowledges, new terms and languages. It unfolds new connections across subsets of its own (never forgetting that the void must still exist within any set) (McLaverty-Robinson 2013). True art continues to allow for 'the murmur of the indiscernible' (Badiou 2005b, p. 24), the presence of what is unintegrated and cannot be articulated. Equally, for the reader to partake in this fidelity to the event of modernity, they also would need to approach the artwork with the openness that allows fidelity to operate.

An openness of approach – the allowance of the murmur of the indiscernible. A Badiouian fidelity begins to arrange itself around an approach which does not foreclose the set. This is in contrast to some of the early concepts of fidelity discussed in Chapter 1 that emphasised copying or even loyalty to an existing object. Instead of orientating toward an internal kernel of the essence, an approach of the 'one' that Badiou refers to, the orientation is an outward one, an openness to the void.

Films operate in different, more structured and deliberate ways than books or artworks. They have also been subject, particularly in the case of Hollywood, to more significant commercial imperatives (which is not to say that other art is not influenced by commerce,[14] but it is a matter of degrees). When Badiou refers to film as an 'impure art', there seems to be a hint of Benjamin's thinking on the aura. However, Badiou does not see this impurity as damaging and clarifies that film can also allow for the passage of truths.

By impure art, Badiou (2005b, p. 87) means that cinema is a combination of different forms such as theatre, fine art and literature, and of different techniques that amalgamate the other arts. Badiou writes, 'Cinema is an

14. See Murray (2008), 'Materializing Adaption Theory'.

impure art. Indeed, it is the "plus-one" of the arts, both parasitic and inconsistent' (p. 83). The experience of film is different from that of the other arts: its production is usually within a commercial industry and collaborative processes, and its content includes genre clichés (Baumbach 2013). But this indeterminate intersection, as so often in Badiou's conception, holds a paradoxical strength. Film is, for Badiou (2013, p. 2), 'a profound art form' because it is 'hybrid' – 'All arts flow through cinema. It doesn't just use them or intermingle with them; it defies them and presents them with challenges that are very hard to meet' (p. 7). Indeed, Badiou speaks of the 'capture by cinema' (p. 7) of the other arts. Film's 'impurity' is, in fact, what makes it so invigorating (p. 31).

■ Failures of fidelity

Before leaving this chapter and delving into the applications of a Badiouian fidelity in relation to Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) in Chapter 3, consideration should be taken of what constitutes the obverse of fidelity. Badiou draws on language which may be uncomfortable to some to describe failures of fidelity. This language, however, interestingly echoes that of those offended by the perceived inadequacy of some adaptations of literary texts – and goes some way to explain these reactions. For example, Badiou is not shy to describe the failure of fidelity as 'Evil' and betrayal. Interestingly, as discussed in Chapter 1, betrayal is a term often used concerning adaptations which have been deemed inadequate. Thus, Badiou provides a new rationale for this sort of language and response.

For Badiou, what he describes as 'Evil' is linked to his conceptualisation of 'truth'. Badiou (2002, p. 60; [*emphasis in the original*]) writes that Evil can only be conceived through a concept of the Good: 'Without consideration of the Good, and thus of truths, there remains only the cruel innocence of life, which is beneath Good *and beneath Evil*'. Badiou criticises conventional ethical models that impose predetermined structures around good and evil, thereby foreclosing the set. Because of an 'a priori determination of Evil, ethics prevents itself from thinking the *singularity* of situations' (p. 14; [*author's added emphasis*]). In this Badiou avoids binary notions of good and evil – for him, Evil is largely a failure of fidelity, driven by the desire to foreclose the set fully and silence its void.

What Badiou (2002) terms 'Evil' thus largely stems from this phenomenon of legalistic or inflexible thinking:

> Evil emerges precisely from the way both the collective (*ensemble*) (the thematics of communities) and the being-with (the thematics of consensus, of shared norms) are taken into consideration. (p. 66)

That is, Evil is the equivalent of coming to the set with an already fixed idea of what it should be or imposing a prior mental model onto it, thereby foreclosing the set, or indeed, claiming to name the void: this 'would claim the power [...] to name the whole of the real, and thus to change the world' (Badiou 2002, p. 83). A film adaptation that seeks to avoid change and merely replicate illustrates this approach.

In other words, Evil can emerge when generalised, predetermined categories are reflected onto situations, as with Fascism. Badiou uses this to critique right-wing nationalism: 'The community and the collective are the unnameables of political truth: every attempt "politically" to name a community induces a disastrous Evil' such as Nazism (Badiou 2002, p. 86). However, Badiou also critiques a left-wing liberal pluralism that expresses itself in identity politics. This is because of how this operates as a 'count' of individuals (Tweedie 2012, p. 100), hence also representing a foreclosing approach.

The effect of a foreclosing attitude is to interfere with the process of fidelity because 'truth' must be created individually and discovered actively and, indeed, repeatedly, requiring a sincere attitude and participation on the part of the individual. The individual is called upon to engage authentically and faithfully; otherwise, Badiou (2002, p. 71) writes, the result is a 'betrayal' of self. The word 'betrayal' is seminal here: 'The defeat of the ethic of a "truth," at the undecidable point of a crisis, presents itself as betrayal' (p. 80). Living up to a 'truth' moment requires 'courage' (p. 91). The reaction to a perceived failure of adaptation has been expressed in similar florid terms.

Michel Foucault (1995) describes something similar when he refers to the return as a transforming practice versus the return as a kind of doubling of the original or ornament:

> This return, which is part of the discursive mechanism, constantly introduces modifications and that the return to a text is not a historical supplement that would come to fix itself upon the primary discursivity and redouble it in the form of an ornament which, after all, is not essential. Rather it is an effective and necessary means of transforming discursive practice. (p. 243)

As a film adaptation is also suggestive of some kind of return, this conception steers us away from an idea of a faithful adaptation as replication in which accurate details become very important. Instead, this very focus on particularity becomes extremely problematic. For Badiou (2002):

> [*W*]hen a radical break in a situation, under names borrowed from real truth-processes, convokes not the void but the 'full' particularity of presumed substance of that situation, we are dealing with *a simulacrum of truth* [...] with all the formal traits of truth. (pp. 73, 74; [*emphasis in the original*])

Fidelity to a simulacrum 'regulates its break with the situation not by the universality of the void, but by the closed particularity of an abstract set (ensemble) (the "Germans" or the "Aryans")' (Badiou 2002, p. 74). In terms of film adaptation, this would read as an over-determinism in the relationship with the original. Instead, there must be change, and existing language falls short; new languages and terms must be created (pp. 82–83).

Thus, in terms of a Badiouian fidelity, it is the open and authentic approach to the adaptation which is important. Film adaptations must inevitably introduce changes and adjustments; rather than seeing these failures in correspondence as failures of fidelity, in Badiou's terms, the opposite is true. A focus on the replication of detail can, in fact, work against a fidelity by creating an empty simulacrum.

The next chapter will take a closer look at F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as an articulation of the global truth-event of modernity.

Chapter 3

Fitzgerald and the evental site of modernity

> What makes him a spell-binder? His style sings of hope, his message is despair. (Connolly 1958, p. 16)

A Badiouian approach to *The Great Gatsby* (1925)

This book focuses on adaptations of one particular novel: F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). I believe *The Great Gatsby* and its adaptations are, in ways that I will continue to set out, an excellent fit for considering an application of Badiou's concepts. Before exploring the adaptations of this novel, a closer look at the novel itself will bring greater clarity to a Badiouian expression of fidelity to the event and ultimately to the discussion of the adaptations.

If the film adaptations create a set of their own, one might consider whether the novel is a part of this set or not. Can one have a set of 'announced' adaptations in which the novel is not present? The novel is not an adaptation – and yet it also cannot be excluded from the set. It seems like the novel is both there and not there in the set – allowing it to act equally as that point of non-integration from which a truth can potentially operate. This concept, which will be discussed further in the next chapter, validates an approach in which the novel is a justifiable consideration when approaching adaptation. This chapter will take a small step back to consider

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how *The Great Gatsby* (1925) itself might function as an articulation of the truth-event of modernity. Key to the Badiouian consideration of *The Great Gatsby* are the novel's changing fortunes, which have impacted upon the canonisation and interpretation of this text, resulting in foreclosures of the set. Also important in terms of Badiou are the novel's expressions of modernism in theme and style, which include paradoxical and ambiguous elements.

Clearly, the scholarship relating to both *The Great Gatsby* and modernism is far more extensive and complex than can be covered in a book where the key focus is on the film adaptations. Fitzgerald scholarship is extensive and longstanding (see Curnutt 2004, pp. 11–13). If there is one theme that has dominated scholarship relating to *The Great Gatsby* over the course of many years, it is the theme of the American Dream. Academic interest has been stirred by *The Great Gatsby*'s link to an American identity (Callahan 1972, 2002), the failure of the so-called American Dream of opportunity for all and upward mobility (Bechtel 2017; Leiwakabessy & Ermansyah 2020; Pidgeon 2007; Qureshi 2020; Roberts 2006; and many more), and the linkage of this to other American tropes such as the frontier (Castille 1992). Also prevalent are examinations of Fitzgerald's characterisation, in particular in terms of gender (Macaluso & Macaluso 2018; Onderdonk 2018), sexuality (Froehlich 2010, 2011), and race and ethnicity (Phillips 2018; Schreier 2007; Vogel 2015). There are overlaps between areas of interest. For example, the idea of the frontier is linked to that of the American gangster (Brauer 2003), and examinations of race, history and politics intertwine.

Fitzgerald's ability to evoke mood is also discussed, as is his capacity to create emotion and portray the development of characters (Kerr 1996; Wolfsdorf 2019) psychologically. Ideas of expression connect to discussions of Fitzgerald's style of writing and formal analyses, such as the examination of his use of symbolism (Takeuchi 2016), his formal links to romanticism and modernism (Curnutt 2013; Le Fustec 2018), and enquiries relating to influences on his writing, from classicism (Briggs 1999; MacKendrick 1950) to Joseph Conrad (Mallios 2001; Stallman 1955).

More recently, approaches that ally form to context, such as Mangum's (ed. 2013) collection, *Fitzgerald in Context*, stand alongside ethnographic accounts, such as Marcus's (2020) *Under the Red, White and Blue*, which discusses *The Great Gatsby*'s (1925) relationship to American identity in terms of an examination of self-identity and history. Corrigan's (2014) *So we read on* similarly extends academic norms by mingling ethnography with everyday language, and insights into *The Great Gatsby* (1925) with contemporary accounts of Fitzgerald and his wife, Zelda. Churchwell's (2013) intertextual *Careless People* weaves together incidents from the Fitzgeralds' lives with events of the time and proposes connections to

Fitzgerald's text. The increasingly intertextual style of criticism echoes similar developments in adaptation studies outlined in Chapter 1.

I will focus here on aspects that relate to a Badiouian fidelity and which are relevant to the later film analysis. This later analysis will also take a closer look at how adaptations approached these undecided elements of Fitzgerald's text.

The changing reputation of *The Great Gatsby* (1925)

The Great Gatsby's cultural positioning has affected the film adaptations and fundamentally shaped their conception, production and reception. F Scott Fitzgerald rose to prominence in the USA with the publication of his first novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920), which became an immediate best seller. He maintained this high profile by publishing numerous short stories in fashionable magazines, particularly *The New Yorker*. Fitzgerald was seen as articulating a move away from the values of the 19th century (as well as its novelistic norms) and celebrating the more emancipated attitudes of the youth of the 1920s (Prigozy 2001, p. 25). Fitzgerald made a name for himself by articulating the zeitgeist of a post-World War 1 (WWI) generation, 'a generation grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken' as Fitzgerald himself put it (Fitzgerald 1963, p. 253). These beliefs were, as will be discussed shortly, typical of modernity. Interestingly, few quote the statement before this well-known quote, where Fitzgerald (p. 253) writes of 'a new generation dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success' – indicating the insecurity underlying the newly embraced freedoms.

The roots of Fitzgerald's early fame in the USA lay in the popularity of his early works, as well as the high-living public profile of the writer and his wife, Zelda Fitzgerald (Curnutt 2004, pp. 5–6). However, Fitzgerald always aspired to be taken seriously as a literary figure, with magazine publications considered by him as 'hack work' compared to his more thoughtful and complex novels (Curnutt 2002, p. 33). *The Great Gatsby*, his third novel, was first published by Charles Scribner's Sons (New York City) in 1925. Despite Fitzgerald's high profile at this time, it was not as successful as had been hoped. Although not disastrous (the first printing of the novel sold out within four months), at the time of Fitzgerald's death fifteen years later there were still copies of the small, 3,000 copy second print run in the publisher's warehouse – the novel had sold under 24,000 copies versus the 50,000 of his first two novels (Bruccoli 2002, p. 217; see also pp. 133, 162).

Fitzgerald, writing in 1925, bemoaned of the reviews that 'not one had the slightest idea what the book was about' (1982, p. 362); however, prominent

critics and writers of the time such as HL Mencken (2014, n.p.)[15] and influential modernist TS Eliot saw promise in the book, with Eliot (Bruccoli, 2002, p. 218) in particular writing at the time, 'in fact, it seems to me the first step American fiction has taken since Henry James'. These views helped to ensure that the novel gradually became a critical success – however, its lack of popular success caused difficulties for Fitzgerald. Although the relatively poor sales of *The Great Gatsby* might have been painful for Fitzgerald financially, assessments such as Eliot's marked the movement away from perceptions of Fitzgerald's writing as light and 'popular', and supported *The Great Gatsby*'s later inclusion in an academic canon.

The following 90 years have seen perceptions of both F Scott Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby* change. By the time of Fitzgerald's death in 1940, he had been largely forgotten, unable to find his own books in bookstores (Mizener 1960, p. 4) (see also Fitzgerald 1982, p. 308). The American Depression of the 1930s had sapped the public's desire to be reminded of the irresponsible so-called Roaring Twenties. Fitzgerald himself bemoaned the popular preference for gritty novels by writers such as John Steinbeck (1982, p. 300), whom he refers to as a 'phoney' (p. 602). In a 1938 letter, Fitzgerald (1982, p. 300) writes, poignantly, 'should (my name) be allowed to casually disappear – when there are memorial double-deckers to such fellows as Farrell and Steinbeck'. He asks his editor at Charles Scribner's Sons, Maxwell Perkins, if *The Great Gatsby* could be resurrected to 'make it a favorite with classrooms, profs, lovers of English prose – anybody?' (Fitzgerald 1982, p. 308). Seemingly conflating the fate of Gatsby and himself, Fitzgerald writes: 'But to die, so completely and unjustly after having given so much!'

Almost immediately upon Fitzgerald's death in 1940, however, his reputation started to climb once more (Henry 1974, p. 15). Prigozy (2001, p. 16) charts the revival of interest in Fitzgerald in the 1950s, linking it to the 'post-war period of expansion' stimulating ruminations on 'the price of success and failure in America'. Fitzgerald's work became associated with foundational concepts of American identity such as the so-called American Dream of prosperity, opportunity and upward social mobility, as well as nostalgia for the 1920s, perceived as an age of (albeit temporary) creative expansion and prosperity. In turn, the connection with larger societal issues helped to sustain the academic and educational interest in Fitzgerald's novel, and by the 1970s, *The Great Gatsby* was, in the USA, a 'favourite of high school and college teachers' (Cutchins 2003, p. 296). By 1993, *The Great Gatsby* remained in the top ten of the most commonly-taught novels in United States' high schools (Applebee 1993), suggestive of its continuing acceptance as a key American literary text.

15. Mencken's review was first published in 1925.

In the 21st century, 'Gatsby' is invoked in recreations of the infamous *The Great Gatsby* parties, the loaded submarine sandwich of South African fame (Richardson 2020), and indelibly linked with the Roaring Twenties in the popular imagination ('So, you missed the Roaring Twenties the first time around? Don't sweat it, Old Sport' [*Paperless Post* 2021]; see also Pruitt [2018]). *The Great Gatsby* is no longer simply a novel but a cultural reference, evoking high living and consumer extravagance. On the other hand, the connection of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) to the concept of social mobility has been immortalised in economics[16] as 'the Great Gatsby Curve' (GGC). The GGC was developed by Alan Kruegar in 2012 as an illustration that 'greater income inequality in one generation amplifies the consequences of having rich or poor parents for the economic status of the next generation' (2015).

Whilst the varied cultural references have released it from some of the burden of an expectation of close textual correspondence in adaptation, they have exacerbated other tricky dynamics. There exists a plethora of sometimes conflicting ideas about what *The Great Gatsby* is and should be – a celebration of excess or a critique of the failure of the American Dream – as culturally prevalent notions both preserve and distort aspects of the novel.

Problematising the canon

Alongside popular simplifications, *The Great Gatsby*'s canonical status within American literature is also problematic. Its canonical status as an American modernist text can work against Badiou's concept of fidelity by encouraging a fixed, foreclosed perception of the novel and its themes.

A canon refers to a set of works that have been selected; in literary terms, 'what are popularly called the "classics"' (Guillory 2010, p. 233). Guillory notes that early use of the term was associated with the selection of the biblical canon, encompassing ideas of the 'orthodox' and 'heretical' that persist in the perception of the literary canon. However, he believes this is inaccurate as the operations of selection into the literary canon differ, and the canon is not 'closed forever' like the biblical canon (p. 233). However, the idea of 'heresy' is interesting when considering the religious language used to describe adaptations which are felt to have failed, as discussed in Chapter 1. Canons have a complicated relationship with cultural identity and history, and different nations have their own canonical works. The popularity of anthologies and selections of texts in the early

16. Numerous scholarly pieces show that the use of this term has become widespread since 2012, with the GGC discussed well beyond the American context – for example, in relation to Canada (Connolly, Haeck & Lapierre 2019), China (Fan, Yi & Zhang 2015) and other countries (Rauh 2017).

20th century showed evidence of the appeal of attempts to 'stabilize hierarchies of value' (Kennedy-Karpat & Sandberg 2017, p. 8), as well as readers' desire to establish 'social capital' (Bourdieu 1986, p. 21).

It is this idea of value which is problematic. The Western canon, in particular, has come to represent an 'old-fashioned and suspect literary practice' (Marx 2004, p. 85; see also Leitch 2017, p. 6) of selection based on sometimes naïve and sometimes reactionary choices favouring those holding the dominance of power in these societies – in the case of the West, white middle- or upper-class males. The dominance of certain voices within the canon was hence challenged, particularly from the 1980s onwards. This problematising of the canon has meant that constructions of the canon can no longer 'ignore imperialism' or maintain the idea that canon is 'simply a record' of 'the best that is known and thought in the world' (Marx 2004, p. 82). These concerns are also seen within adaptation studies, with what often feels like a wholescale rejection of the concept of value.

Those who defend the concept of a Western canon, such as Yale academic Harold Bloom, tend to do so in terms of aesthetic value and the pragmatic necessity of making choices amongst a vast range of texts, stating controversially: 'Nothing is so essential to the Western canon as its principles of selectivity, which are elitist only to the extent that they are founded on severely artistic criteria' (1994, p. 21). Guillory, who occupies a very different standpoint on the canon than Bloom, also writes that texts written by those with similar social identities are not all equivalent (1993, p. 17) and notes the tenacity of certain works (2010, p. 236). Yet, Bloom (1994) also uses terms such as 'greatness' (p. 3), 'strong, original literary imaginings' (p. 9), 'strong writers' (p. 11) without interrogating these terms, as though what they refer to is self-evident. As Fendler (1997, p. 4) notes, aesthetics are 'dependent on the respective society' in which they are valued, and hence may be socially constructed.

In the event, as Guillory (2010) writes:

> […] An individual's judgement that a work is great does nothing in itself to preserve that work, unless the judgement is made in […] a setting in which it is possible to insure the *reproduction* of the work, its continual reintroduction to generations of readers'. (p. 237; [*emphasis in the original*])

For a work to remain in the canon, it needs 'active and continual involvement' (Sinaiko 1998, p. 223) – something that is aided by the process of film adaptation, as I will go on to discuss. Despite the characterisation of the canon as unchanging, Guillory (1993, p. 24) notes the changes in the Western canon away from Greek and Roman texts and the acceptance of the novel as a form. More recently, he (p. 177) describes the emergence of a 'canon of theory' and 'master theorists' into literary

criticism from the 1960s onwards; suggesting a canon not exactly in flux but not impervious to change either.

Whilst the traditionalist idea of the inherent greatness of works of the canon may have been effectively problematised, strategies for changing the canon may also be problematic. For example, Guillory (1993, p. 7) notes the difficulties of seeing writers purely in terms of their social identities (in this respect, he chimes with some of Badiou's concerns about identity politics). This would make, to take one example, one female writer simply equivalent to another – an obviously problematic construct that effaces individual voices, nationalities and histories. The danger of invoking stereotypical constructions of race, gender and other social identities may remain present in the choices made in terms of who becomes 'authorised' to write and represent cultures (Marx 2004, p. 84). Identities may still be perceived through the viewpoint of the dominant groups within the discipline; Guillory (1993, p. 4) notes that the entire construction of the pluralist argument around the canon is framed in American terms. Guillory (p. 17) also notes the many identities individuals can hold, and notes that inclusion of a wider range of voices in the canon does not necessarily correspond to, create or reflect a deeper inclusion in academia. A revised canon is not a panacea for social injustice or structural repression. Equally, creating a separate canon (as opposed to revising the canon) can lead to such canons being devalued. If a group is devalued in society, it is likely that 'their' canon will also be devalued (Fendler 1997, p. 4).

The many valid concerns relating to the canon debate can be little more than hinted at here. Canons involve aspects of the pragmatic (selection in a vast array of texts, what is useful to teach in terms of the curriculum) and ideological (ideas of value that are founded on society and exist within a context). Works must continually drop out of the curriculum to accommodate more contemporary materials, and these neglected works may eventually cease to be seen as part of the canon. Approaches to the canon are not necessarily fixed either; it is possible to take a critical look at canonicity whilst teaching canonical texts. The canon is also more flexible and fluid than it is sometimes understood to be, and has at times undergone seismic changes. The development of a discrete American canon also reflects a shift away from the hitherto dominant cultures of Europe[17]. The rocky history of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is in itself testament to the changing perceptions possible in relation to the same text.

The actual canon is largely an imaginary construct, an 'imaginary totality' (Guillory 1993, pp. 36–37). Raw (2015, p. 318) writes that, despite the idea of a canon, there is no 'monolithic entity called American culture'.

17. For a discussion of the origins of the American canon, see Reising's *The Unusable Past* (2013).

Even a traditionalist such as Bloom notes that a definitive list cannot be made, and if there were such a list, it would become 'a mere fetish, just another commodity' (1994, p. 37) – a view which interestingly chimes with Badiou's ideas of what happens when a truth becomes concretised. Those who argue for a canon which is a list that does not exist or cannot be defined, are, again, closer to Badiou's ideas of truth; nonetheless, the canon's overtly institutionalised location would be problematic in Badiouian terms. This is not to say that the canon cannot become a situation with an evental site. It is likely that the major shifts in canonicity were themselves part of larger truth-events. As ever, there is a paradox between the structure of the canon and the unintegrated elements that serve to undermine it from within. Each apparently ordered situation has that within it that can serve to ignite the event that leads to the creation of something entirely new.

Badiou's resolutely unfashionable views on universality seem to overlap with traditionalist ideas about the canon: the idea of some kind of universal appeal within such works that makes them enduring and relevant to 'our common human condition' (Sinaiko 1998, p. 12), a view that Griggs (2016, p. 7) notes that in itself may '"enshrine" the beliefs of specific groups'. Whilst there seem to be similarities between concepts relating to the canon and Badiou's idea of truth, such as ideas of universality and appeal across peoples and geographies, the idea of the canon is not equivalent to Badiou's concept of truth. Presence in a canon would not, for Badiou, imply that a text is, in itself, a truth-event. The idea of a fixed canon that becomes an instrument of ideology or the expression of the current status quo would go against Badiou's concept of truth – it would operate as a foreclosure of the set. By detailing the ill effects of the state's attempts to foreclose the set, Badiou avoids the charge of supporting the canon in its most criticised form; as the static invention of a ruling hierarchy.

To relate these ideas to Fitzgerald, whether the novel is part of the American canon is hence not, in itself, proof of *The Great Gatsby*'s (1925) relationship of fidelity to a truth-event. Instead, the structural functions of the canon may get in the way of apprehending such truths. Once the canon becomes too fixed and ideas of Fitzgerald's themes and significance are cast in stone, this canonicity would work against Badiou's ideas of truth. As will later be explored, the novel's canonisation has had a real and significant effect on the film adaptations. Whilst the more fixed aspects of the canon may serve to structurally repress truths, they cannot stop truths from happening. Thus, a work may have truth moments even if it is a canonical text, but the more fixed elements of the canon will work to suppress these. Where Badiou's fidelity can operate, however, is where there is the possibility to retain something of the unintegrated, the set which is not foreclosed, seen in the paradox and contradiction, that, as I will go on to describe, are a significant part of Fitzgerald's text.

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and fidelity to modernity

Fitzgerald's novel may, of course, fleetingly resonate in fidelity to many truth-events past and present. Not all of these are traceable. However, I will, in particular, look at Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in relation to its fidelity to the seismic event of modernity: a global Badiouian event, reorientating every aspect of life and culture. I propose that *The Great Gatsby* (1925) represents some kind of faithful naming of the effects of truth within the global Badiouian event of modernity ('spoken' within the arts by modernism).

Modernity, with its global consequences and changes in form and perception, fits the profile for a Badiouian event. As typical of a truth-event, modernity was only 'obscurely prefigured' (Norris 2009, p. 168): 'Few people at the turn of the 20th century were able to discern the shape of the cultural era they were entering, and those few saw that shape only in its vaguest outline' (Singal 1987, p. 23). The event came, as Halliwell writes, as a 'rupture' with 19th-century concerns (2007, p. 99). Whilst Badiou may not approve of many of the expresssions of modernity (or, indeed, of Christianity), he recognises that such global changes are the articulation of truth-events. It is not essential to find in Fitzgerald an allegiance to any obvious named change in the world. As Badiou makes clear, the arts are capable of producing truths of their own. However, modernism is a tangible way of looking at some of Fitzgerald's choices which allow the void within the set to speak.

For Badiou, the evidence of the truth-event of modernity is to be found in its rejection of religion and separation of 'truth' from forms of knowledge. Badiou, whilst critical of some of the political processes resulting from modernity (especially those which seek to reinstate the metastructure upon presentation), sees in the event of modernity a fundamental shift in thinking: 'the modernity of a nonconceptual gap between truth and forms of knowledge' (Badiou 2008a, p. 134). Removing the link between truth and knowledge means that 'a truth is generic and not constructible' and hence 'infinite' (p. 136). Badiou references the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan who, according to Badiou, 'pointed out that a truth is essentially unknown, that it is literally a hole in forms of knowledge' (p. 134); a similar concept to Badiou's. By his own admission, Badiou's idea of truth 'began with modernity in the Kantian distinction between thought and cognition' (p. 136). Modernity thus also represents for Badiou (2008b) an affirmation of his atheist stance:

> Modernity is defined by the fact that the One is not [...] So, for we moderns (or 'free spirits'), the Multiple-without-One is the last word on being qua being. (p. 78)

Singal (1987) writes that:

> [*M*]odernists have demanded nothing less than 'authenticity', which requires a blending of the conscious and unconscious strata of the mind so that the self presented to the world is the 'true' self in every respect. (p. 14)

Hence, 'all that pertains to life must be constructed dynamically, as continuous process' (Singal 1987, p. 14). There is something of this in Badiou's experiential concept of fidelity and his concern with authenticity. Modernism is not the same as modernity, however, and functions in part as a critique of it. Nonetheless, it can be seen as part of the namings of the truth-event, the creation of its additional sets and subsets.

American modernism

Modernism as an articulation of the effects of modernity began in the period beginning in the early 20th century (Hand 2012, p. 53). Hints of modernism appeared before this, in later 19th-century movements toward a greater inclusion of the subjectively experienced world (e.g. symbolism and the philosophy of Bergson) (Singal 1987, p. 11). Modernism constituted a seismic change that inaugurated 'a *culture* – a constellation of related ideas, beliefs, values and modes of perception', one of whose manifestations was an 'explosion of creativity' and an utter change in artistic forms (p. 7; [*emphasis in the original*]).

In America, modernism was characterised by a rebellion against 19th-century values of 'thrift, diligence and persistence', stability and optimism, a belief in God, the supremacy of the so-called 'natural' order and an elevation of the human above the physical or 'savage' that had also expressed itself in the repression of sexuality (Singal 1987, pp. 8–9). The 'rampant consumerism and youth culture of the 1920s' was indicative of a desire to experience life intensely and freely, integrating the divisions of the 19th century relating to the physical and mental, 'civilised and the savage' and pre-existing divisions of class, race and gender (p. 12).

In literature, traits of modernism included the challenging of realism through formal experimentation (resulting in texts being perceived as 'difficult in themselves' and not just in their ability to be adapted [Geraghty 2007, p. 48]), an emphasis on selective point of view and unreliable narrators (Nagel 2013, p. 171), and the inclusion of new themes relating to an increasingly secular, more permissive society (Nowlin 2013, p. 186). Although the forms and styles of modernism were manifold, they united in 'taking an active role against tradition' (Hand 2012, p. 53). The past is depicted as 'a revenant that haunts and disrupts the present', revealing modernity's uncertainties, loss of identity, fragmentation and ambivalence, rather than (with some exceptions) making a bold claim on the future

(Halliwell 2007, p. 99). Hand (2012) notes modernism's 'aesthetics of dissonance', structural 'fragmentation and diffusion' and 'radical technical innovation' (p. 53) with existence shown as 'precarious and lacking in closure' (p. 68).

In America, however, literary modernism tended to be expressed in less anarchic and more pragmatic ways. American modernism, as Lee (1992, p. 190) writes, still seeks large audiences and avoids the more extreme 'obscurities'. It expressed itself in ambitions 'to tell America's twentieth century story' (Wagner-Martin 2016, p. 1), with American modernists 'linked thematically by their focus on the intrinsic Americanness of twentieth-century life' (p. 4). Writers innovated, abandoned genres and enjoyed cross-pollination with modernism in Europe, with American expatriates such as Gertrude Stein settling in Paris (Wagner-Martin 2016, pp. 3–4) and the Fitzgeralds spending time in France and Italy in the mid-1920s (Bryer 2004, pp. 33–36).

The sense of a fragmented and insecure world persisted. With the 20th century had come technological innovation, and also anxieties about education, housing and work (Wagner-Martin 2016, p. 8). It should not be forgotten that modernism was often a 'critique of modernity' – using modern forms to express anti-modern sentiments (Nicholls 1995, pp. 166–167). For example, ambivalent attitudes toward technology were often expressed (Singal 1987, p. 8). Writers such as Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos and Fitzgerald wrote of disillusion and disintegration but also aimed to bring together these fractured parts (p. 20). There is a sense of breaking up, followed by 'not disintegration but (as it were) superintegration' (Bradbury & McFarlane 1986, p. 92). There were 'assaults on the stability of the object', remaking it in perceptual ways (Singal 1987, pp. 13–14), a well-known example being the early-20th-century avant-garde visual art movement, Cubism. Experiment ruled in music, with the multiple harmonies of jazz; in the new 20th-century art of film, through montages of unexpected elements; and earlier class boundaries began to fragment (p. 13).

The Great Gatsby's openness to an evental site

As a novel, *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is not obviously 'difficult in itself' in the way of some modernist texts. *The Great Gatsby* has realist elements that mask the difficulties that occur in the process of adaptation. Its modernist qualities are less overt in formal terms than those of other American modernists such as Gertrude Stein or even William Faulkner – but are equally profound in their own way.

Nowlin (2013, p. 179) describes Fitzgerald's work as 'modernist from the outset', with his first two novels both documenting a 'cultural revolution'

and experimenting with 'a mélange of forms' including poetry and satire, 'within a predominantly realist framework'. According to Nagel (2013, p. 171), *The Great Gatsby* employs a typically modernist use of the first-person narrator that is fundamentally unreliable. This bemused some early scholars, with Scrimgeour (1966, p. 83) writing that 'if the reader cannot accept Carraway's statements at face value, then the integrity of the technique of the novel is called into question'. Nick Carraway, the narrator, invokes his memories, 'summaries of events he did not personally witness', and uses 'conjecture, assumptions about character' (Nagel 2013, p. 171). Tanner (2000, p. 176) notes that Nick's account is repeatedly marked by words that leave his impressions deliberately unconfirmed, such as 'I suppose', 'I suspect', and 'probably'. He is not the predominantly omniscient narrator of the 19th century but instead expresses the 'epistemological uncertainty [that] is a hallmark of realism' (Tanner 2000, p. 174). Nagel (2013, p. 171) sees Carraway as also illustrating realism's 'theme of personal growth and ethical maturity'. Nowlin (2013, pp. 185–186) argues that Carraway, as a spectator rather than a participant in events, allows scope for Fitzgerald's irony and 'came closest to achieving the stylistic impersonality that was one of modernism's aesthetic imperatives'.

Stylistically, Nowlin (2013, p. 179) sees Fitzgerald as following 'an artistic trajectory toward […] high modernism' from naturalism. Nowlin argues that naturalism and realism are both 'an early and persistent form of modernism' (p. 179). However, Fitzgerald did not share naturalism's belief in inherited destiny or realism's love of the 'ugly' and 'forceful' (p. 181). Fitzgerald is not immune from earlier influences and, as Curnutt (2013, p. 36) argues, a preference for romanticism in his appeal to 'pathos' and dramatising of 'the intensity of emotion'. This style was criticised by some of his closest literary peers as 'charming', 'clever' and even 'facile' (pp. 34–35), and his use of sentiment for violating 'a fundamental aspect of modernism' (p. 36); and yet the devices Fitzgerald uses to create this emotional intensity, to create a world that is 'fundamentally alive' (p. 42), seem redolent of modernism. Curnutt notes that 'even when evoking modernism's favorite theme of aridity and sterility', as in the depiction of the valley of ashes, the 'constructed musicality of Fitzgerald's prose' works against the reification of language as a 'verbal icon' that may be found in modernism (p. 42). Again, Fitzgerald preserves an openness of approach with contradictory stylistics rather than a dogmatic fidelity to modernism. In doing so, he remains within the spirit of a Badiouian fidelity. At the time of writing what became *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald (1980) wrote in correspondence that he wanted to create 'something *new* – something extraordinary and beautiful and simple + intricately patterned' (p. 112; [*emphasis in the original*]), and 'experiment in form and emotion' (p. 126), again showing a desire to connect with a new spirit of the age and express this through form, as well as the content.

As to content, Fitzgerald's writing is steeped in the 'social norms of the age' (Nagel 2013, p. 169). Fitzgerald depicts the greater degree of social mingling of the era at Gatsby's open parties and makes Daisy and Gatsby's sexual affair apparent, both before and later after Daisy marries, thus challenging the class distinctions and inhibitions of the 19th century. Fitzgerald mocks Tom's simple-minded racial prejudice and need to assert racial superiority, contemporary trends that grotesquely flowered in the fascist European states of the 1930s. Ambivalence toward technology is shown throughout *The Great Gatsby* (1925); for example, Gatsby's car is magnificent, comical and ultimately destructive.[18] Fitzgerald's investment into the new social world of the time is also seen in his references to 'photography, advertising, popular song, cinema, and, of course, jazz' (Nowlin 2013, p. 188). Fitzgerald is not immune to closures – the racism of the description of the scene on the bridge where he describes the rolling 'eyeballs' of the 'Negro' occupants of the passing car (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 67)[19] and the gender and class stereotyping of the working-class Myrtle are both indicative of fixed attitudes of the time.

Fitzgerald shows a modernist destabilisation of the object, less of an assault than the sense of a ghost in the machine. Dimock (2011) refers to Fitzgerald's 'counter-realism':

> [*T*]he uncertain boundaries between the animate and inanimate [...] human attributes, properties of human personalities or properties of the human body being channeled or routed through properties of the machine. (n.p.)

For example, the butler's thumb which presses a lever two hundred times, the ringing phone that 'has been completely assimilated into the everyday world of human Intimacy' (Dimock 2011, n.p.), or, indeed, the 'station wagon that scampered like a brisk yellow bug to meet all the trains' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 41). This attribution of movement and agency to static objects is key to building the ecstatic liveliness of Fitzgerald's world but it also creates a kind of ontological uncertainty. This is reflected in Fitzgerald's characterisation: Daisy is a voice, and Gatsby a suit, or, as Dimock (2011, n.p.) notes, a piece of technology 'related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 8). In assigning human qualities to objects, motion to what is static, compressing space and time, and even giving colours to auditory fields, Fitzgerald's work shows a modernist fragmentation but also reflects a modernist subjectivity, expression and desire to remake the world.

The use of space is also indicative of Fitzgerald's indeterminate approach. On the surface, it may appear to be straightforward in *The Great*

18. Gatsby's car operates as a symbol of modernity – see Clarke (2020).

19. For a discussion of Fitzgerald and race, see Nowlin & Rampersad (2022).

Gatsby (1925), which often references specific locations and relationships between them: 'We went on, cutting back again over the Park toward the West Hundreds. At 158th Street the cab stopped at one slice in a long white cake of apartment-houses' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 31). However, a closer look reveals the fluidity of Fitzgerald's prose: the temptingly concrete references to streets and areas and the impressionistic description of the 'long white cake' of houses. In a film interpretation, the seemingly depictable space of 158th Street must be combined with the less easily rendered 'long white cake' or lose something of the flavour of the text.

Combining disparate elements in fresh and unexpected ways is a typical feature of Fitzgerald's prose. To take another, very well-known, quote: 'In the blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 41). People are fluttering around in space (*movement*), with sound elements (*whispering*), concrete earthly objects (*champagne*) and the extra-terrestrial element of stars that is not just spatial but speaks of space itself. At the same time, people are moth-like and normally green gardens are blue – Fitzgerald (1950) uses colour dissociation (and, elsewhere, *synaesthesia*: the 'yellow cocktail music' of Gatsby's party [p. 42]) to build the intensity of effect (Curnutt 2013, p. 41). All these elements form conceptual links. However, once again the complexity of the relationships within Fitzgerald's text shows a modernist inability to be portrayed in any straightforward way. The unusual representation of space that recurs throughout *The Great Gatsby* is not just there for superficial effect but also forms part of Fitzgerald's (1950) meaning:

> Now it was a cool night with that mysterious excitement in it which comes at the two changes of the year. The quiet lights in the houses were humming out into the darkness and there was a stir and bustle amongst the stars. Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalks really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees – he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder. (pp. 106–107)

The expansiveness of space is linked to Gatsby's expansive internal vision. By tying himself to the concrete reality before him, Gatsby's 'mind would never romp again like the mind of God' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 107). We see something of Gatsby in Fitzgerald's own ability, in words, to collapse and recreate space. This indeterminant quality of space is again expressive of a Badiouian fidelity to modernism. As Nowlin (2013, p. 187) writes, 'its design may be more readily accessible to readers than that of James Joyce's *Ulysses* […] but it is arguably as capricious relative to its scale'. The style and content both work in service of the theme; thus, these elements of the novel are intertwined and serve to illuminate each other.

Jones (1974, p. 236) notes Fitzgerald's ability through metaphor to bring about 'removal, distancing, doubleness of vision'. For example, readers are

'constantly re-evaluating their judgements of Gatsby, Daisy, Nick and Jordan' (Cutchins 2003, p. 296). In the novel, Nick Carraway articulates this doubleness after the rowdy scene at Myrtle's apartment, describing himself as both 'within and without', 'enchanted and repelled' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 37)[20]. The use of oppositions and doubleness extends to other areas of meaning: the 'opposition between blindness and insight' which Nowlin (2013, p. 186) notes. Equally double is the 'impossible idealism trying to realise itself [...] in the gross materiality' (Raleigh 1963, p. 101), the lyrical warmth of Fitzgerald's style versus the sourness of much of the plot, the animation of the inanimate and thematically the contradiction of the celebration and repudiation of material excess. Perhaps most importantly, there is the idiosyncratic character of Jay Gatsby, which humanises a certain idea of capitalism that could be said to lack humanity.

The feeling of tension created by contradictory aspects has long been recognised as part of Fitzgerald's appeal. Fitzgerald's contemporary, literary critic Edmund Wilson (1961, p. 82), writes, 'Fitzgerald is romantic, but also cynical about romance; he is bitter as well as ecstatic; astringent as well as lyrical'. Critic Cyril Connolly (1958, p.16) sounds similar notes: 'What makes him a spell-binder? His style sings of hope, his message is despair'. Fitzgerald (1965, p. 39) himself referred to something similar when he wrote in his 1936 essay *The Crack-Up* about the test of an intelligent mind being the ability to hold two opposing ideas and still be able to function. He links this to being 'able to see that things are hopeless yet be determined to make them otherwise' (p. 39). The romances in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) end poorly – the ecstatic dream of Gatsby himself founders. In pure modernist vein, Jones notes Fitzgerald's 'fusion of meaninglessness and meaning' (1974, p. 236) in a world with 'all Gods dead' (Fitzgerald 1963, p. 253). This recalls the watchful billboard eyes of Doctor TJ Eckleburg in the novel – not, in fact, the eyes of God but those of a commercial oculist; the representation of a lost God which haunts the present (see ch. 7). Fitzgerald's modernist world is one of undecidability, and he keeps this openness through the use of paradox, contradiction and the combination of disparate elements in new and unexpected ways.

Thus, if Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is considered as a Badiouian receptacle for unresolved, apparently disparate elements, allowing for a fidelity by not foreclosing the set, and preserving its fidelity to the void/evental site, what is notable is the contradiction of style versus content and thematically the contradiction of the celebration and repudiation of material excess. These reflect fidelity to the openness of the void within the set, thus allowing the void to 'speak' and articulate the effects of a truth.

20. Luhrmann attempts to make this doubleness explicit in his adaptation, as will be seen in the film analysis.

Social mobility – authorial intention and the American Dream

Another area of doubleness relates to Fitzgerald's theme of social mobility. Fitzgerald's themes have been interpreted and sometimes solidified over a century of literary criticism and relentless study within the American school and college system. It should be noted that the American Dream is not a term which was commonly in use at the time of *The Great Gatsby* (1925), but gained popular currency in the 1930s (Churchwell 2012). Thus, Fitzgerald's theme has been co-opted into a more fixed trope such as the American Dream from a later viewpoint.[21]

The American Dream has been linked to personal freedom, education, the rise of the middle class and success through personal effort – 'equalitarian' America (Wagner-Martin 2016, pp. 84, 90). It is seen to express itself through idealism and the idea of 'endless improvement' (Kuhnle 2020, p. 229). It links to modernism in its rejection of the earlier values of a Puritan America (Sinha 1983, p. 13) that had emerged again with the Prohibition of 1919 and 'a government that assumed legislating morals was one of its rights' (Wagner-Martin 2016, p. 85).

In viewing the novel through the American Dream lens, Gatsby is perceived not just as American but as embodying America itself. As early as 1950, Trilling (1950, p. 251) writes: 'Gatsby, divided between power and dream, comes inevitably to stand for America itself. Ours is the only nation that prides itself upon a dream and gives its name to one, "the American Dream"'. This idea persisted in scholarship, with Stern writing that Gatsby illustrates 'the rare, true American's total commitment to the idea of America, and the inevitability of his betrayal' (1970, p. 169), whilst Richard Gray writes, 'Gatsby tried to inform his life into an ideal, that strangely mixed the mystic and the material. So did America. Gatsby's dream is, in effect, the American Dream' (2011, p. 199). The dream is not merely material – but needs, as with Gatsby, to be 'animated by an ideal purpose' (Mizener 1998, p. 85).

Most see Gatsby's failure as the failure of the Dream, with his fate indicative of 'the tragic consequences of America's naïve optimism' (Wagner-Martin 2016, p. 88). Some also see resilience in Gatsby's determination to keep his dream alive: 'Although frustrated from realising his original goal, Gatsby *is* America in refusing to abandon his dream' (Kuhnle 2020, p. 229; [*emphasis in the original*]). Whilst the link to an American identity and American aspiration has undoubtedly helped

21. This is not to say that Fitzgerald disagreed with the term – referring to the American Dream himself in his notebooks (Batchelor 2013, p. 129).

The Great Gatsby (1925) to maintain a place within an American canon, viewing the novel through this fixed prism has also served to close off some of its openness and possibility, presenting the potential danger of an ultimate closure of the novel to new meanings.

The theme of social mobility relates to Fitzgerald's own experiences, growing up on an uncertain income within the genteel and conservative society of Buffalo, and his later quest to win Zelda Sayre, the daughter of a Southern judge. Fitzgerald's expressed political views are important, in Badiouian terms, as they inform his likely intentions in writing *The Great Gatsby* and hence the authenticity of his approach. This is one of the key areas of difficulty for the adaptors of the novel as they grapple with accommodating the popular perception of Fitzgerald. Perhaps more than many other writers, Fitzgerald has been subject to distortion and misrepresentation.

The popular perception of F Scott Fitzgerald is of a writer who is concerned with money and the wealthy. His high-living public profile and numerous short stories intentionally written for popular magazines contributed to this perception, as do the themes within some of his work. In his short story 'The Rich Boy' Fitzgerald writes of the rich, 'they are different from you and me [...] They think, deep in their hearts, that they are better than we are' (1986, p. 110). The story is a subtle exposition of the power of wealth to insulate and distance, resulting in a life half-lived. It is certainly not an admiring depiction of the rich.

In 1922, Fitzgerald referred to himself as a 'socialist' who was nonetheless nervous about 'the people' (Godden 2001, p. xliii). By 1932, his views did not seem to have changed – commenting on the hero of his novel *Tender is the Night* (published in 1934), he describes Dick Diver as 'a man like myself' and 'a communist-liberal-idealist, a moralist in revolt' (Godden 2001, xliii). In 1934, he spoke of 'trying to reconcile my double allegiance to the class that I am part of, and the Great Change I believe in' (Fitzgerald 1982, p. 437) and, also in the 1930s, describes himself as a Marxist (Godden 2001, p. xliii). Unlike many of his contemporaries, Fitzgerald (1982, p. 249) was nonetheless sceptical of communism, describing it as 'a saddening process for anyone who has ever tasted the intellectual pleasures of the world we live in' and providing an amusing and unflattering portrait of a communist in his 1941 novel *The Last Tycoon*.

The consistency in Fitzgerald's views is striking even if, as Fitzgerald wrote in 1936, 'my political conscience had scarcely existed for ten years save as an element of irony in my stuff' (1965, p. 50). Much of Fitzgerald's feelings about economics went into *The Great Gatsby*. Having initially been turned down by his future wife, Zelda, because of his lack of prospects, Fitzgerald (1965) later wrote:

> The man with the jingle of money in his pocket who married the girl a year later would always cherish an abiding mistrust, an animosity, toward the leisured class – not the conviction of a revolutionary but the smouldering hatred of a peasant. (p. 47)

An awareness of Fitzgerald's stated political attitude helps to point to some of the confusion and misperceptions around *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Fitzgerald's concern with a wealthy set and the vividness of his portrayal of their sumptuous lifestyles has influenced popular perception. As Batchelor (2013, p. 136) writes, the Dream also resides in celebrity, and the Fitzgeralds embodied this, as does Gatsby in his mystery and notoriety. Fitzgerald cultivated his own personal mythology and celebrity (Curnutt 2013, p. 5), resulting in the near-impossibility of separating him from his work (p. 11). These interactions are now hopefully seen as a source of scholarship rather than as a muddying of formal assessments of the novel. The novel emphasises the ambivalence of Gatsby's status. Despite gaining vast wealth, social climber Gatsby finds himself shut out by the Buchanans and their class, demonstrating the limits of absolute opportunity and social mobility. His parties, open to all, are dismissed by the 'old money' Tom Buchanan as a 'menagerie' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 104), whilst even Daisy sees 'something awful' in the 'raw vigour' of West Egg (p. 103). Gatsby's personal openness to life's possibilities and attitude of hopeful expansion is seen as redemptive despite the shady origins of his money. However, ultimately, he is shown to be misguided and the goal of his pursuit worthless, his choices leading ultimately to his own destruction.

The Great Gatsby is hence neither a socialist polemic nor a celebration of consumer capitalism. It is a much more subtle and paradoxical tale, one in which there is both celebration of sensual and material beauty and possibility and an unflinching depiction of the ugliness of a hypocritical and corrupt elite.

Both and neither

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* can be seen as one of the speakings of the global truth-event of modernity. The novel expresses its fidelity to modernity in being both and neither, creative and destructive, hopeful and despairing, and holding these co-existing incompatibilities and others at its core.

This allowing of openness, of allowing the void, the unintegrated part of the set, to speak is key to the novel's maintenance of a fidelity. The openness of the evental void is constantly assailed by attempts to force it into a structural determination, such as that of the canon or of its 'meaning'. These accretions serve to obstruct a faithful response. It is

the novel's openness which must somehow be emulated or tapped into by the adaptations, if they are to allow *The Great Gatsby* (1925) to speak within them the 'trace, or a name, that refers back to the vanished event' (Badiou 2002, p. 72).

The following chapter will look at aspects that work to support this openness or attempt to foreclose the set. It will put forward how these may be applied to film adaptation, and, in particular, the adaptations of *The Great Gatsby*.

Chapter 4

Approaching film adaptation via Badiou

> The only representable figure of the concept of the event is the staging of its undecidability. (Badiou 2005a, p. 194)

Finding fidelity: *The Great Gatsby*

Theory is one thing; putting theory into practice is another. This chapter considers how to apply Badiou's conceptualisation – how his writings on the event, truth and fidelity have been applied to other disciplines, the effectiveness of these applications and what has emerged as problematic in Badiou's schema. A film enthusiast, Badiou has also, over many years, sought to apply his own theory to film. An approach to consider film adaptation, in particular, has been drawn out of this. Adaptations contain their source text as a component of their own set. This part may be left unintegrated and open or foreclosed through a dogmatic representation. Thus, an approach to adaptation organises itself around a consideration of the foreclosures of the set. The elements that serve to illustrate these foreclosures are put forward in this chapter, as well as the method that suggests itself as appropriate for this kind of investigation.

This chapter, then, serves to set the scene for the textual and paratextual investigations that will follow this chapter. It continues by considering the background to the production of the four Hollywood adaptations of *The Great Gatsby* and the previous key works of scholarship in relation

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to the films, and ends by laying out how the *The Great Gatsby* adaptations, in particular, will be approached in this book.

Applications of Badiou

Badiou's theories are controversial, going as they do against many prevalent ideas and theoretical concepts. Tweedie (2012, p. 96) refers to the surge of interest in Badiou in the 21st century, describing Badiou as both 'horrendously old-fashioned and newly fashionable'. Ideas such as universal truths seem to hark back to earlier days in criticism. However, this mixture of revival and newness also lends his ideas a certain energy for taking a new look at longstanding debates, such as that of fidelity in the field of adaptation studies.

Badiou's work has been applied to many other fields. Whilst Badiou's most obvious home is in philosophy and, as discussed in the previous chapter, applications within politics, his concept of fidelity has been referenced across many other disciplines, including social anthropology (Jansen 2019), theology (Holsclaw 2010; Milbank 2007), geography (Dewsbury 2007), history (Wright 2008), music and theatre (Smith 2013; Stuart Fisher 2005), and education (Kesson & Henderson 2010; Vlieghe & Zamojski 2017, 2019). Although Badiou's concept of fidelity is influential in other spheres, at the time of writing, it has not yet been applied to fidelity in film adaptation.[22] When referenced in shorter articles, the complexity of the background to his revised terminology may be a barrier. However, this has not affected some of the more in-depth analyses, such as those by Jansen and Tweedie cited in the previous chapter. Badiou himself counters this in his shorter articles on film by using more widely understood terms an educated audience would understand, such as Lacan's 'the Real'.

Writers outside Badiou's immediate milieu of philosophy and politics must reinterpret Badiou in the terms of their discipline. It is useful to consider how others have attempted this, and what obstacles they faced in applying Badiou's theory. Educational theory is a field where Badiou's ideas have been invoked, with the emphasis on how to embrace Badiou's openness to an event. Kesson and Henderson (2010, p. 219) reference Badiou in arguing for 'a mindset capable of embracing paradox, rupture and uncertainty'. However, their characterisation of Badiou's ideas is not precise, as they portray him as in support of a pluralising approach. Nonetheless, they also echo Badiou's break with the state in their desire to 'break free of the standardized management paradigm' through more 'contemplative' approaches to the curriculum (p. 217). Vlieghe and Zomojski (2017, p. 849) also use Badiou to 'develop fresh ideas about

22. Except in my own published work (Vooght 2018).

the contemporary challenges of education'. They use this to argue against the sidelining of teachers, who are the militants of this truth and have 'a major political relevance for our times' (p. 858). Teaching is addressed as 'the event of falling in love with a subject matter' (p. 855). Echoing Badiou's language, love is portrayed as an 'intervention', an 'encounter' beyond our ability to choose (p. 855). In a later article, they describe this faithfulness as a continual invention and reinvention (Vlieghe & Zomojski 2019, p. 524). Love is also important for Kaufman, whose essay looks at Badiou in relation to Lacan from the standpoint of ethics. Kaufman (2002, p. 148) notes that Badiou 'dwells least on love' as one of his generic procedures, and would like to see more consideration of the 'bad' event or Evil, writing that 'the ethical fidelity of the truth-process may be hard to distinguish from evil' (p. 138). In doing so, she also notes the 'inflexibility' in Badiou's system (p. 135).

In the arts, Badiou has been referenced in relation to applied theatre and music. Stuart Fisher's (2005, pp. 247–248) article initially seems to struggle with the slippery nature of Badiou's concepts, writing that 'we must not be tempted to turn towards a search for a universal definition of truth or goodness' but rather seek truths that are relative to different contexts. However, she ultimately takes a similar approach to other writers, using Badiou to argue for an open-endedness of approach that does not come with the predetermined answers that may, in this case, be created by the beliefs of stakeholders and community expectations (p. 250). Stuart Fisher (p. 251) rightly notes that the truth is more likely to emerge 'as a point of contestation, revealing the complex antagonisms inherent in the client group'. She suggests that 'the applied theatre practitioner must encourage and provoke the client group to move beyond received "opinion" and to engage in a creative process' – an attitude of openness rather than foreclosing the set.

Some of the theological applications of his work would likely be anathema to Badiou. Milbank (2007) critiques his atheism, saying that, as the subject of an idea is not the source of an idea and:

> [...] truth-processes are self-grounding and eternal [...] It is impossible to see how Badiou can avoid saying that this is because these processes do, indeed, glimpse the Eternal. (p. 130)

He also notes how Badiou's schema of the connection of the subject with the universal truth through the event echoes that of the Trinity, the power of the Father with the actuality of the Son, 'upheld by the "event" of the Spirit's dynamism' (Milbank 2007, p. 133). Milbank (2007) notes other connections, such as Badiou's idea that past and future are synthesised in a present, instantaneous moment that 'can occupy no real time, and therefore coincides in some fashion with the eternal' (p. 134) and that the '"compelling" and universal character of truth "arrives" to humans as a gift'

(p. 136). Milbank hence points out some of Badiou's underlying theological appropriations.

Holsclaw (2010, p. 241) also notes that 'Badiou's argumentative structure resembles and relies on the "shape" of Christ and the Trinity, even if using these to deny theism, belying a disavowed dependence'. Holsclaw argues that events are not merely destructive but reconnective of terms existing before in new ways. In the case of Saint (St) Paul, 'these reconnections are not a failed attempt to Hellenize Christianity, but successful inquiries reconnecting terms of Hellenism to the Christ-event' (Holsclaw 2010, p. 238). It is likely that Badiou (2003b, p. 57) would disagree with this characterisation as, for Badiou, events are only prefigured obscurely and he states that Paul breaks with both Greek and Jewish traditions. However, Holsclaw's (2010, p. 240; [*emphasis in the original*]) '*discerning fidelity*' that 'reintroduces the significance of history' (but not the stately, dogmatic kind of history), is worth considering.

Theological interpretations do not come as a surprise, bearing in mind the metaphysical aspects of Badiou's truth project. And, of course, as I hope will be illustrated in this book, drawing upon the conceptual framework of Badiou is not the same as taking Badiou's writing as dogma and foreclosing the set that way! This book's approach, drawing upon two of the foundational disciplines of adaptation studies, literary and cultural studies, might also be at odds with some of Badiou's thinking. Badiou tends to characterise cultural studies as 'beholden to [...] multiculturalism and relativism', showing an anathema for the idea of imposing a 'count' of recognition on the set – this makes sense in terms of his overall philosophy (Tweedie 2012, p. 100). Badiou (2005a) writes:

> Declarations were made to the effect that all cultures were of the same value, that all communities generated values, that every production of the imaginary was art, that all sexual practices were forms of love, etc. In short, the context combined the violent dogmatism of mercantile 'democracy' with a thoroughgoing scepticism which reduced the effects of truth to particular anthropological operations. (p. xii)

Although the trends Badiou describes were originally put forward as an antidote to institutionalised structural repressions, for Badiou, the absence of any system of differentiation is equally egregious. By maintaining this stance against the count, Tweedie (2012, p. 101) writes that Badiou does not recognise that 'the politics of recognition is one mode of remaining faithful to the revolutionary events'. Badiou (2013, p. 33) himself evidences a need for some kind of concept of culture when he writes, 'Cinema is a precious part of the riches of this world that must really be called the world of culture since we have no other word for it'. In other words, culture may be involved in the namings of an event. Badiou's ideas on culture remain in tension with his politics.

Badiou's view of the 'cultural' could be criticised as relying on popular interpretations of cultural studies, rather than an understanding that speaks to the discipline's origins as an analysis of mechanisms of power and control (Pickering 2008, p. 8). Nonetheless, when Badiou refers to truths as universally applicable, it sets him at odds with much of the contextual heft of cultural studies. In this scholarly book, the context of filmmaking will be important to the analysis. However, the angle with which this context is approached will be a Badiouian one – in other words, context will not be an elevation of relativism or opinion but rather looked at as providing evidence of the approach to the set. Contextual information will assist in looking at what happened that may have facilitated or impeded an approach of fidelity.

Badiou's concepts stem from sources and philosophical debates located in the philosophical traditions of Europe, which may be one of his theory's limitations. Badiou references a host of European scholars in his work and, as Tweedie notes, is 'consistently European in orientation' despite his embrace of Maoism (2012, p. 101).[23] Despite this, Badiou 'rejects the mainstream Continental tradition' of ethics (Calcagno 2008, p. 1067), as well as setting himself at odds with 'dominant tendencies in the disciplines of film and cultural studies' (Tweedie 2012, p. 99), showing that whilst he may be a product of these cultures, he is not uncritical of them.

Despite these concerns, I believe that the approach in this book is compatible with the spirit of Badiou's conceptualisation of the set, event, fidelity and truth. With these considerations in mind, the next section will look at Badiou's own application of his ideas to cinema, the one art that, in Badiou's words, can capture all the other arts.

■ Filmic truths

Badiou seeks to apply his conceptualisation to recognisable and everyday examples of possible manifestations of the truth-event, mobilising his own ideas in relation to film and helping to clarify the issues of context and value previously mentioned. Most of Badiou's recorded thoughts on cinema are transcripts of interviews conducted over many years or short articles published in the classic French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma* (1951–current). In this sense, they are, as Tweedie puts it, 'sporadic, solitary, and unsystematic' (Tweedie 2012, p. 99). Taken as a group, Badiou's writings on film are consistent with his concept of the set and fidelity to the event

23. A similar criticism could be made in regard to adaptation studies. Whilst some notable scholars in the discipline are or were based outside of the UK and USA, the locus of the discipline and its key journals have remained, until recently, heavily within the Anglo-American region (Leitch 2017, p. 6; Lewis & Arnold-De Simine 2020, p. 4).

overall (Baumbach 2013). In his short pieces, Badiou shows versatility in communicating these ideas, using terminology an educated public would be more familiar with than his own. Lacan's 'real' (the realm of pure experience which cannot be articulated) often stands in for what Badiou means by truth (see Badiou 2013, pp. 43, 58–59, 127): as when Badiou (2005b, p. 80) writes of 'the Real of the idea's passage'.[24] It is his layman's analysis of film's formal traits that could be seen as haphazard. At one point, Badiou (2005b) writes:

> Formal considerations – of cutting, shot, global or local movement, color, corporeal agents, sound, and so on – must be referred to only inasmuch as they contribute to the 'touch' of the Idea. (p. 85)

In other words, the focus of analysis should remain on openness to the evental site.

Badiou (2005b, p. 78) states that film can allow for 'the passage of the idea'. It can hold the openness to an evental site that is required to realise a truth. Film may indeed be that 'interpretive intervention' that 'can declare that an event is presented in a situation' as the 'arrival amidst the visible of the invisible' (Badiou 2005a, p. 181). Badiou (2013, p. 18) is in no doubt that film is involved in the making of truths: 'Of all the arts, this is certainly the one that has the ability to think, to produce the most absolutely undeniable truth'. Badiou gives some ideas about how this truth is created; film functions through 'what it withdraws from the visible' through cutting, editing and framing, what Badiou calls 'the controlled purge of the visible' (p. 87). This recalls the void as unseen and unrepresentable. It is this gap which weaves 'things which are not usually related into relationship with one another' (p. 136): the paradox and contradiction that is key when allowing the unintegrated part of the set to be heard. This allows for the 'absence' of the idea's 'passage' to speak: 'what I will have seen or heard lingers on to the very extent that it passes' (p. 88). Thus, 'The truth produced by cinema [...] it's transmitted all at once through its movement and reconstitution' (p. 18). Badiou (2013) writes:

> It's not what's said in the film, it's not how the plot is organised that count; it's the very movement that transmits the film's thought. It's the individual element that's transmitted by every important film, but it touches on a form of the universal. (p. 18)

This movement can also be temporal. Films must authentically be expressive of the contemporary moment in which they appear: 'the shimmering of the present captures its own past like a reflection' (Badiou 2013, p. 30) in an 'organic synthesis of present and past' (p. 31). By capturing the past, 'the cinema enables the present to be detachable from all the richness of the

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24. The capitalisation of 'real' is inconsistent in his writings as published in *Cinema* (2013).

past', revealing 'the constantly present force of the idea' (p. 31). 'Temporal dispersion' helps reveal this idea (p. 31). Thus, film shows 'what could be, beyond what there is' (Badiou 2005b, p. 88) and what is 'universal' (Badiou 2013, p. 18), but is also 'associated in an intense, unique way with the contemporary' (p. 6). Badiou notes this paradox: 'a credible progressive art [...] must be an art *of its time* (but the revolution *changes time*)' (p. 46; [*emphasis in the original*]), as does, of course, the event. If we consider this in relation to film adaptation of so-called 'classic' or canonical texts, there is a doubling in the relationship with time. An adaptation must be as much an authentic expression of its own moment as it is the 'trace' of a previous truth-event. The burden of an overtly 'announced' adaptation is even stronger, as it rests on yet another paradox, although one that can invigorate if embraced. An announced adaptation states a desire to remain truthful to the expression of the void in the original, the articulation of the truth-event that has already happened, whilst at the same time, it cannot be a slavish reproduction of the past but must remake and discover the truth within its own moment. The manner in which films engage with the present moment is also important, as this can be done sincerely or superficially.

Badiou's idea of paradox within film is key to these complex ideas of movement and time. Badiou (2013) stresses this openness to paradox and ambiguity:

> Style is nothing but the language in which the contrasting rhythms symbolising the ambiguity of the real come together. The great work, in cinema perhaps more than anywhere else, is a paradoxical creation [...] [even] the definition of cinema is paradoxical. (pp. 24, 207)

Badiou's (2013) comments focus on maintaining this openness, speaking of 'a properly cinematic ambiguous meaning' (p. 29) or 'establishing a situation in which the insoluble is the main focus' (p. 127). Plots which are nailed down, which do not leave any room for mystery, are one way of ensuring the film becomes closed.

Just as a film should not depend wholly on its script, it should also not be only visual: the viewer should 'not be taken in by a certain conventional kind of beauty that in fact produces the absence of man' (Badiou 2013, p. 29). The human subject is important to Badiou (2013):

> [/]n bad films, human presence is wasted, its marshalled to no avail, whereas in a good film, even if it's only for a couple of seconds, that presence is made visible. (p. 6)

In this sense, human presence is more than just its representation. In this, actors are of great importance: 'the gap between what is shown and the subjective fold of such showing' (Badiou 2013, p. 149) can occur through how they 'divert the evidence of the image through their acting' (p. 148). What's more, even overacting, deliberately done, can be powerful as it is

confusing and difficult to read (p. 188) – once again, the law of paradox operates. A standard plot is where the 'hero rises up to confront and vanquish' what Badiou (2013) refers to as 'an extremely powerful exteriority' (p. 17), a 'lonely hero in his relationship with a lawless world' (p. 221). Doing so emphasises the struggle against the closing down that comes from the imposition of a foreclosing representation and an attempt to orientate faithfully toward a truth. As will be discussed, these elements are present in Gatsby's failed attempt to conquer class distinctions.

By Badiou's (2013, p. 24) definition, genre is 'interesting, but not much more', although he celebrates directors such as Ford and Hitchcock whom he asserts have challenged genre conventions. In a key essay of 1957, Badiou argues for the importance of directors, asserting the 'auteur' argument; certain directors can access 'that unique realm of creative genius that distinguishes them definitively from the mere workmen of the genre' (p. 24). He equates their appearance with the miraculous eruption of the event: 'great directors [...] have no history, since what is unique about them is precisely the fact that they appear unexpectedly' (p. 22). His discussion of 'influences' speaks to both the idea of intertexts and an approach to adaptation. Badiou writes that 'if the work is a minor one, the influences may become overbearing' (p. 25) and that 'if we want to regard an influence as having an explanatory power, it always moves from the indeterminate to the determinate, hence from greater to lesser' (p. 25). Badiou asserts that the importance lies not in identifying influences but in identifying why in some director's hands, these go beyond a mere reference or copying (p. 24). In this way, he indirectly critiques some kinds of intertextual approach. Nevertheless, he also accepts that 'auteur' directors may produce mediocre films, and correspondingly writes, 'I accept the situation of being affected by a film that's not part of the pantheon of auteurs' (p. 20). Badiou is genuinely concerned with what goes beyond straightforward presentation and what makes certain works, or moments in a film, connect with a global and inexpressible truth.

It is in this idea of influences that Badiou would differ from a very contextually-driven adaptation studies approach, such as that of intertextual dialogism. As context is an important discussion within adaptation studies, as was detailed in Chapter 1, Badiou's view of it begs some unpacking. For Badiou (2013, p. 25), great films are 'anti-cultural' in that they are not controlled by references to moments or techniques used in other films, which become more stale and obvious as time goes on. Badiou criticises the view that all connections are equally valid as an object of study, setting him at odds with approaches in adaptation studies such as intertextual dialogism.

Context also links with history. Again, there is a paradox in Badiou's thinking – a film must be an *authentic product of its moment in time* – because this relates to the authenticity of intention, which is important

for Badiou. However, he would see a focus on specific historical context as largely irrelevant for the way in which he defines truth: when 'orienting a thought toward the universal in its suddenly emerging singularity', it should be 'intelligible to us without having to resort to cumbersome historical mediations' (Badiou 2003b, p. 36). In other words, one should not need to be a student of history to embrace the 'truth' of works through understanding their context. Thus, Badiou does not believe that works should *depend on* their context to be understood, whilst at the same time believing that films must authentically be expressive of the contemporary moment in which they appear. This paradox makes sense if you look at Badiou's overall schema – authenticity is key, but so is universality. These points on context come into play when approaching an adaptation, and will be considered when looking at some of the *The Great Gatsby* adaptations' tendencies toward foreclosing the set through demanding nostalgia or the invocation of a fixed canonicity.

When it comes to universality, as written about in the previous chapter, such is the inherent nature of truths. How universality, or, in this case, 'generic humanity' (Badiou 2013, p. 207), manifests itself within film is a point of productive tension for Badiou. On the one hand, he is clearly drawn to the more highbrow approaches of, for example, filmmakers Jean-Luc Godard (p. 59), Orson Welles, and Akira Kurosawa (p. 29). On the other, he complains of 'elitist refinements' (p. 62), the 'hystericized' distortions of avant-garde film (p. 101), and wishes to celebrate the 'mass art' that cinema is capable of (p. 8). Badiou is not unaware of the difficulties of commercial film production, writing that 'once the image has been shown to be nothing but a media entity subservient above all to its market', it becomes subject to similar 'inflation' and 'overdose' (p. 62). True cinema 'struggles each and every day against the black and white world of producers, of the commercial industry [...] which challenges its right to be creative and free' (p. 33). Nonetheless, Badiou sings the praises of American cinema, describing it as 'great', 'powerful' and 'sublime' (p. 127). He praises the broad appeal of Chaplin (p. 209), Hollywood movies such as *Titanic* (1997) (p. 149) and *The Matrix* (1999) (pp. 193–201), and the films of Clint Eastwood (pp. 258–260). He nonetheless has concerns about approaching film as mere entertainment or 'mindless voyeurism' (p. 56), which sit uncomfortably with his celebration of mass appeal: Badiou criticises the 'laziness' of film-going, 'the notion that it only exists to fill up the empty moment of the day' (p. 28), but later writes, 'shouldn't we allow that (film-going) is, for the most part, *innocent*?' (p. 136). Ultimately, Badiou writes, being seen by millions 'doesn't tell us anything about the film's value' (p. 2).

Badiou (2003a, n.p.) is torn between his idea that art should be 'as elevated as a star', 'rigorous' and 'surprising', and his political will toward the mass. He turns away from utilitarian notions of 'improving' films, writing that

'so-called "social issue" films stir up controversies that are completely out of proportion to their real importance' (p. 29)[25] and that fictional films teach us more than documentaries (p. 2). These comments again display Badiou's anathema to approaching the set with a name, as in the didactic referencing of a political or ideological agenda. A similar kind of foreclosure may also be found in films that are tightly plotted or scripted; Badiou (2013) notes that audiences can 'sense the weakness of films constructed around an excellent script' (p. 29) and that 'a film is not a story first and foremost' (p. 28). Instead, 'a film's subject is not its story, its plot, but rather what the film takes a stand on' and how it does this through 'its artistic organization' (p. 11).

Importantly, Badiou (2013) believes that film can have moments when it accesses 'truth' and becomes transcendent and universal, 'fleetingly excellent', and also moments in the same film which may be banal or unsatisfying (p. 124): 'in any film at all, even a pure masterpiece, you will find banal images, trite materials, stereotypes, imagines that have already been seen elsewhere, clichés' (p. 211).

In other words, the *whole* film does not have to meet the criteria of fidelity to a truth-event in itself. This is important to a Badiouian approach to film – elements that support or work against fidelity can be identified, even within an ultimately inferior film. A Badiouian approach does not eschew judgement – Badiou (2013, p. 10) writes of films that are beneath scholarly attention, 'horrible or trivial films, about which we would have basically nothing to say' versus those whose 'reactionary dimension is not immediately obvious' which 'need to be critiqued'. These judgements are tricky – 'the question as to whether a film is progressive or reactionary is not an easy one' (p. 9) – but necessary. Badiou writes wryly, 'Identifying (a film's thought) is complicated, of course' (p. 18). In some ways, words will fail: 'philosophy doesn't have to produce the thinking of the work of art because the work of art thinks all by itself and produces truth' (p. 18). It is helpful to remember that although philosophy and, by inference, scholarship, are not ways of generating truths (they are not generic procedures), they have a role in taking care of truths (Badiou 2005a, p. 4). In this way, a scholarly look at the effects of subverting or facilitating fidelity is quite valid as one of the ways of talking about the effects of art (see Badiou 2005b, pp. 4–5).

Thus, I will begin to define features that would indicate the possibility of fidelity to a truth-event in film. Badiou finds moments of 'truth' in film through paradox, ambiguity and allowing the void to speak through absence and choice in selection. These display an openness to the evental site, 'inconsistency is nothing', rather than a foreclosing of the set through

25. As Badiou (2013, p. 57) writes: 'The oppressed peoples of this earth are not objects for the exquisite inner turmoil of European consciences'.

'the (false) structuralist or legalist thesis inconstancy is not' (Badiou 2005a, p. 54). Combining elements is important, cinema's ability 'to show in one and the same shot [...] the indifference of nature, the aberrations of History, the turmoil of human life, and the creative power of thought' (Badiou 2013, p. 17), and the organisation of films is important: 'It's from that precise site – its artistic organisation – that it affirms its subject' (p. 11).

Badiou thus gives several clues as to aspects that would support or work against the ability to be faithful: films should be able to access universal elements rather than requiring context to be understood; they should be experienced as contemporary; they should avoid being overtly didactic (thereby foreclosing the set); they should preserve paradoxes of style and filmic time; they require human 'presence'; they should not slavishly follow pre-existing norms such as genre. Negative signs are overplotting, visual beauty without meaning, excessive specificity in the recreation of the past, and the commercial interferences of film production. Badiou argues for the importance of directorial intention, asserting the once unfashionable 'auteur' argument, and insists that, despite the difficulties in doing so, films of any worth can and should be evaluated.

Writing in response to Badiou's thoughts on cinema, Ling (2006) appears not to accept Badiou's paradoxes – of the need for film to 'organise the passage of the immobile' and allow for the passage of a truth (Badiou 2005b, p. 87) versus the mobility of cinema, with Ling (2006, p. 269) writing, 'in Badiou's cinema, everything passes'. Whilst Badiou's cinema is an art of movement, nonetheless, this critique seems to avoid engaging with Badiou's larger conception of the process of creating and discovering truths and is hampered by the lack of consideration of the role of fidelity in creating the subject. If the void must be inscribed in art as a 'real remainder', Ling (p. 272) argues that the impure art of film is not equal to this task because of its formal requirements. In his later, more extended work, *Badiou and Cinema*, Ling (2013, p. 175) acknowledges the tensions between the concept of cinema as a formal art form versus its address to the 'mass'. Baumbach (2013, n.p.) also notes this paradox, finding more of a solution: 'cinema's "impurity" allows for a dialectic between its potential as a popular art and as a critical art that intervenes'.

With these considerations in mind, the next section will lay out a proposed Badiouian approach to the study of film adaptation. As discussed earlier in this chapter, many scholars comment on the difficulties of putting Badiou's 'pure' theory into practice without diluting or distorting it. As Jansen (2019, p. 242) writes, mobilisations into other disciplines 'necessarily dilute its philosophical purity'. Some scholars take a similar approach to the one I take in this book, noting the importance of not foreclosing the set (Dewsbury 2007) and avoiding institutionalising approaches (Stuart Fisher 2005). Jansen (2019, p. 253) suggests 'lowering the bar' and using Badiou's

work as 'a provocation' rather than the 'Ten Commandments' – surely something which is in the spirit of Badiou's stand against the state of the situation.

Parameters of an approach

Badiou's concept of fidelity rests upon the idea of approaching the set with an openness; without the preconceived ideas or biases that impose a suppressive metastructure on the set, that would foreclose it to the 'passage of the idea' (Badiou 2013, p. 88). As detailed here, Badiou has himself applied this concept to his writings on film. What follows is an approach to the study of film adaptation through which the possibilities of the concept of the open or foreclosed set will be explored. Aspects that may have worked to foreclose the set and frustrate the ability through fidelity to 'speak' the truth-effects of the event, and those which supported this fidelity, form the basis of this approach.

Whilst I am using this approach to consider a specific set of adaptations, my proposal is that a Badiouian approach could be used more extensively to consider film adaptation. The excitement and challenge of creating a successful version connecting to a 'trace' in the originating text has drawn the most well-known directors and writers to this resolutely popular form. The concept of a source text is exciting when viewed in Badiouian terms, as it helps to make sense of some of the primary arguments within adaptation studies' critique of fidelity. The original text holds the space of the void role within the set of adaptations: it does not have its own members or subsets. It has no recognisable place within the set as it is not itself an adaptation. For example, one could argue that the set 'Film adaptations of F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*' must include the original novel itself. And yet the novel is not an adaptation of itself, so it is an apparently incongruous and unintegrated member of the set. The response to this perhaps explains the path pursued by some intertextually orientated scholars, as described in Chapter 1, to claim that the originating text is itself merely another adaptation or version. Badiou might describe this as the desire of the state to structure away the void (quite a different conception from the critics' own belief that they are making a radical departure from conventional ideas of fidelity!) Or, as my own position is now apparent, I argue that the novel as the unassimilated part of the set may indeed perform the function of evental site with regard to the novel's adaptations, and can legitimately be considered in relation to it.

This could be said to be the case for any source text of a set of adaptations. Thus, it could be argued that an adaptation as a film in its own right may well be able on its own terms to make and discover truths, but in order to be successful *as an adaptation*, it also has to contain within it the ability to not to lose its connection of Badiouian fidelity to the source text

as potential evental site. Approaches that seek to excessively pin down the novel and render it a fully integrated part of the set are thus working against the possibility of a Badiouian fidelity. A Badiouian fidelity is hence in stark contrast to 'traditional' concepts of fidelity, providing a new framework for explaining the so-called 'failed' adaptation.

What follows, I will term an approach rather than a methodology. Whilst Badiou does not require scholarship to be a truth-event, it would be at odds with his thinking to create very delineated structures. It is rather the nature of the enquiries that suggest the methods which will be used to consider the films. These enquiries are linked to Badiou's concept of fidelity. They begin with the creator. Are they open to creating and discovering a truth? What are the stated attitudes of the makers involved – in particular directors, but also writers, costumers, producers or anyone that has a tangible impact on production? Do they express an orientation that suggests an openness to the void, or are their approaches limited by other factors? As Hutcheon (2006, p. 109) writes, 'extra-textual statements of intent and motive often do exist' and (again demonstrating the legacy of literary studies) scholars should 'reconsider our sense of literary critical embarrassment about intention and the more personal and aesthetic dimensions of the creative process'. There are many published interviews with creatives involved in the production of films that are revealing of their attitude and intentions in approaching the adaptation.

Badiou's concept of fidelity includes the viewer, who must approach with their own attitude. Do they approach the film with an open rather than foreclosed attitude? Or do they have preconceived ideas of what this adaptation 'should' be like? Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu talks of the critic as an intermediary between artwork and the audience. Film critics have an interest in displaying their 'position in the intellectual field', meaning that they 'defend the ideological interests of their clientele when defending their own interests as intellectuals against their specific adversaries, the occupants of opposing positions in the field of production' (Bourdieu & Nice 1980, p. 278). Film critics can equally affect economic outcomes and the audience's approach to a film. Bourdieu and Nice (1980, p. 265) speak of the art critics' 'verdicts, which, though offered as purely aesthetic, entail significant economic effects'. The reception of the films at the time of release, through the words of film critics and reviewers, is revealing. Box office returns may be considered an indicator of audience approval, whilst not being taken as a judgement on the film's quality.

The context of the film also includes commercial imperatives that may have operated in foreclosing ways. Considering the films' marketing and the impact of product placement, for example, is enlightening as to the suggested framing of the films. Commercial choices are also made regarding the inclusion or amplification of thematic content, such as elements of

romance. Casting is another choice that is often controlled by commercial imperatives. Are the chosen actors capable of expressing human 'presence', something beyond surface appearances?

Formal qualities are an expression of the attitudes and decisions of the makers. The film texts themselves are evidence of the choices made. Whilst filmmakers may dissemble, the film choices themselves may or may not support their statements or operate in unintended ways. Badiou notes that films operate employing subtraction. What are the images adding to or removing from the film? Is there movement rather than stasis? Are they simply visually striking, 'eye candy' as it were, or is there something more than superficial in the images? Equally, images can be plodding, adding nothing to the concrete necessities of the plot; audio choices can support depth and meaning or merely be an unnecessary accretion.

Are the films understandable outside of their immediate historical context? Equally, are they true to their own moment or do they hark back to a nostalgic version of the past? Badiou's truths are globally applicable and impactful, accessible to humankind as a whole. Are the films excessively didactic, preachy or overly plotted? How closed are they to other meanings? Are the films excessively beholden to stolid norms of genre, or do they allow for genres to be disrupted or elided? Unreconciled and paradoxical elements assist in allowing the unintegrated void to speak. Do the films allow this through their organisation of time and space, both omitting and including the unseen?

Whilst considering elements separately may be revealing, isolating elements that are intended to be part of a whole may, of course, also be problematic. The combination of elements and the film's overall organisation is important – as Badiou (2013, p. 17) writes, cinema can 'show in one and the same shot' a range of possibilities and references. Openness may also exist alongside foreclosures of the set.

A Badiouian approach suggests what is needed to allow for the passage of the idea or for the void to speak. Ultimately, the worth of a Badiouian approach is if these factors perform an explanatory function in terms of the adaptation's problems or successes. It can be easier to ascertain what is working to suppress a fidelity rather than what has served to support it and the liberation of its truth; as Badiou (2013, p. 28) writes, 'these signs are, as usual, essentially negative ones'. This book will hence not shy away from discussing possible failures in the context of adaptation. Whilst there may appear to be this negative perspective in analysis, through this, it can be identified what serves to limit the making and discovering of a truth and, by inference, what would better support it.

The most clearly fitting method in approaching these considerations is the time-honoured textual analysis, incorporating its extension into the study of film 'texts'. Not only does this continue to be a favoured method

in adaptation studies to support several different methodologies, but it also lends itself to an exploration of the film itself and its properties. As an open-ended approach with an emphasis on an intuitive encounter, many of its features are in line with Badiou's own writings. Textual analysis is not, however, conducted purely subjectively but is founded on in-depth knowledge of the relevant discipline, theory and literature. Investigations are then based on what emerges from the analysis, driving the research and scholarship deeply into various areas of interest. As with Badiou's (2002, p. 26) multiplicity of human situations, these areas of interest and even interpretation may be nearly endless. However, despite the vast range of combinations, it is possible to be wrong: as Lawler (2008, p. 48) writes, 'There is a range of interpretations to be made, but that range is not infinite'. Belsey (2013, p. 167) agrees that not all readings are equal and that readings are plural 'but not infinitely plural', echoing Badiou's feelings on relativism: 'If truths exist, they are certainly indifferent to differences' (Badiou 2005a, p. xii). If textual analysis, as Belsey writes, 'involves a close encounter with the work itself, an examination of the details without bringing to them more presuppositions than we can help' (p. 160), this seems to fit well with Badiou's idea of avoiding the foreclosure of the set. Badiou's (2005a) emphasis is not about what is, but about what matters:

> Cultural relativism cannot go beyond the trivial statement that different situations exist. It does not tell us anything about what, among the differences, legitimately matters to subjects. (p. xii)

Ways of avoiding individual bias in interpretation include raising awareness of the choices made in what enquiries to pursue and how a Badiouian approach drives these. Also, referencing both a range of scholarly and non-scholarly sources allows for a range of views to be considered. These methods, whilst avoiding any empirical justifications of what is essentially qualitative analysis, will serve to avoid the casual, uninformed 'opinion' of which Badiou strongly disapproves. For Badiou, philosophy 'offers a new relation like a radical form of montage linking irreconcilable elements, not for a vague pluralism but to arrive at a point of affirmation' (Baumbach 2013).

Equally, the context of the films will also be considered via textual analysis. Cultural studies has long taken any manifestation of lived culture as a 'text', whether auditory, visual or printed (Davis 2008, p. 56). I use the term paratext for the texts surrounding the object of study (anterior, at the same time or subsequently produced) (Genette & MacLean 1991, p. 264), as do many other adaptation studies scholars (see ch. 1).[26] The meanings of the films are filtered through these paratexts, which have their own functions. Paratexts are read as texts for their intended effect or meaning, 'shadow' meanings and the

26. Of course, an adaptation is itself a form of paratext as far as the source text is concerned. This would involve a different kind of study.

filters they create around the text of the film. Many paratexts, such as promotional materials, are pragmatic (Genette & MacLean 1991, p. 266), not designed to be lasting and may disappear or be replaced (p. 264). Hence, in their ephemerality, they serve to articulate the context of the time most strongly. Ephemera, which once was intended to shape the audience's attitude to the film they were about to see and thus their reactions, such as trailers or marketing material, may have since vanished into the archive – making archival research a relevant part of the approach. Due to the nature of these, materials consulted are primarily not academic texts. In this book, the paratexts will also be approached in the main through textual analysis.

As laid out in Chapter 1, there has been much critique in adaptation studies of, for example, 'traditional' fidelity criticism, evaluative approaches and comparative methods as the untheorised 'compare-and-contrast exercises' that Leitch notes have long been moved away from (Leitch 2017, p. 18). In this case, however, there are compelling reasons to compare versions and to consider the impact of the source text as the unintegrated, disruptive part of the set. Including paratextual information also disrupts an approach dominated by comparison, such as a book-to-film study, which was the central target of this critique. Comparing versions allows the choices of the filmmaker to be laid bare – what has been included in one version but not another, or how a scene may have been conceptualised differently, serves to reveal the intention and attitude brought to the film that has shaped the choices made in terms of form, content and production, revealing whether this attitude is one of a Badiouian fidelity.

An approach informed by Badiou's theoretical concepts hence allows for evaluations within this framework; an approach more characteristic of literary studies than cultural studies. It thus combines elements of the foundational disciplines of adaptation studies in terms of the more evaluative approach of literary studies, but also speaks to cultural studies' concern with the meaning of cultural manifestations. An approach based on Badiou brings elements from across the interdisciplinary triad of adaptation studies. The differing vocabulary of textual analysis in literary and film studies is brought together with a consideration of a wide range of cultural meaning-making texts that stems from cultural studies. These combined approaches recognise the many aspects involved in the film adaptations of literary texts.

The literary canon and the film industry – a reciprocal relationship

Ellis (1982) writes:

> The adaptation trades upon the memory of the novel, a memory that can derive from actual reading, or, as is more likely with a classic of literature, a generally circulated cultural Memory. (p. 3)

Where the dominance of preconceived notions relating to Fitzgerald's status or the text's content overtake the ability of the filmmakers to allow for undecidability and openness to more subversive meanings, the ability for film adaptations to provide a trace or link to Fitzgerald's text as an evental site is reduced, as are the films' potential to create new truthful moments of their own.

When discussing the film industry, it is instructive to remember the economic imperatives that operate. Here, culture is a matter of industry, and the commercial logic of film production occupies a very different space from the concerns of academia. This helps to explain the preference for choosing recognisable textual properties to adapt, resulting in an 'announced' adaptation. Bourdieu discusses how exchange can happen even without the exchange of money, through the acquisition of cultural knowledge and prestige. What Bourdieu terms 'cultural capital' is the 'symbolic' capital of 'prestige' which relies on 'a known, recognised name, a capital of consecration implying a power to consecrate objects [...] and therefore to give value' (Bourdieu & Nice 1980, p. 262). This symbolic value can be translated into monetary value through the processes of distribution.

Symbols of value may, to some extent, become self-fulfilling; 'in response precisely to being repeatedly reproduced or adapted, there evolves an assumption that the original is valuable qua original' (Foster 2012, p. 121). This assumption simplifies a more complex process of valuation, including the 'public which helps to make its value by appropriating it materially (collectors) or symbolically (audiences, readers) and by objectively or subjectively identifying part of its own value with these appropriations' (Bourdieu & Nice 1980, p. 265). Prestige may influence these consumer choices (Kennedy-Karpat & Sandberg 2017, p. 6).

By encouraging cultural exchange, eventually there are tangible commercial returns on this exchange as creative works become commodified. Kennedy-Karpat (2017, p. 5) notes that 'contemporary winners of cultural prestige enjoy both conceptual and physical rewards' such as cash prizes, additional sales of related products, as well as salary raises for stars and others involved with the production (see also Bourdieu & Nice 1980, pp. 262, 265; Bourdieu 1986, p. 16). One way of tapping into this cultural prestige is through the adaptation of so-called 'classic' or canonical texts – this reciprocally serves the texts by increasing their longevity. Thus, the cultural and commercial relationship serves to bolster both the films and the 'source' text itself. However, this referencing often brings predetermined expectations of what the adaptation should be like. The problematic aspects of canonicity must be taken into account in a Badiouian approach.

Adaptations that announce themselves as adaptations consciously set up their source as a part of the way in which the adaptation will be viewed.

The sources may be popular novels; so-called 'classics'; or lesser-known works by a well-known author, the invocation of whose name may increase the visibility of the film to critics and audiences. *The Great Gatsby* films considered in this book are *self-defined* as adaptations, announcing their relationship to Fitzgerald's text in overt ways: through the words 'From the novel by F Scott Fitzgerald' during the credits, or even by displaying a copy of the book itself, as is most overt in the credits of the 1949 *The Great Gatsby*. This is not the only way in which the connection is made. As Geraghty (2007, p. 4) writes, 'Some of this referencing will be made explicitly in the publicity material and interviews, which ensure that the audience is alert to the fact of adaptation'. As will be seen in the analysis of the paratexts, directors and actors frequently mentioned Fitzgerald's novel in interviews, as did other publicity pieces and advertising.

Approaching film adaptations of F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

As a canonical work that also illustrates an openness to the truth-event of modernity, *The Great Gatsby* is already a site of contradiction and paradox which lends itself well to a Badiouian approach to adaptation. A consideration of the Hollywood adaptations of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* allows for a discussion of foreclosures created by the canonisation of Fitzgerald and fixed views of *The Great Gatsby* in popular culture, and by the operations of commercial Hollywood film production. If the set is approached in a foreclosing way, with rules of how Fitzgerald should be seen or what an adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* should be brought to bear in place of an authentic response, this interferes with the ability to be 'faithful to a fidelity' (Badiou 2002, p. 68) and the potential for allowing the passage to a truth is significantly reduced.

The film adaptations of *The Great Gatsby* are culturally embedded texts that offer a wealth of relevant detail for comparison and analysis. *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is one of the rare novels in the American canon that has been repeatedly adapted. The novel is described as a 'low-hanging fruit' by Leitch (2021, p. 8), suggesting it bucks the trend that he finds of ignoring or radically altering in adaptation the works of American literature (p. 9). This book will consider the four Hollywood film adaptations of this novel, the lost 1926 version directed by Herbert Brenon, director Elliott Nugent's 1949 version, the 1974 version directed by Jack Clayton and scripted by Francis Ford Coppola, and director Baz Luhrmann's 2013 *The Great Gatsby*. The lost 1926 version will be examined by means of the surviving, minute-long trailer, which shows numerous highlights of the action, film reviews of the time, and the archival research conducted by scholars such as Gene D Phillips (1986), Dixon (2003) and Mastandrea (2022). The Hollywood adaptations allow

comparisons to be made across the film as to their differing approaches and proposed solutions when creating a film adaptation of this novel, whilst choosing films from a similar stable of large studio production allows for some commonality in their contextual origins (notwithstanding inevitable changes in the studio system over time). As discussed in the previous chapter, F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) will be taken as the evental site; the part of the set of film adaptations that needs to be met with openness rather than being forced into integration with the set.

Background to the productions

The Great Gatsby was adapted for film by Hollywood in 1926, 1949, 1974 and 2013. Shortly after the book came out in 1925, a stage play based on the novel written by Owen Davis and directed by George Cukor was a 'critical and popular success' (Dixon 2003, p. 288). This was followed quickly by the first motion picture adaptation of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in 1926. The 1926 film has unfortunately been lost, and only the trailer survives. Mastandrea (2022, p. 196) evidences that negotiations for the film adaptation had already started before the production of the stage play, so the success of the stage play was not a factor: 'What had sparked interest in the novel as a film property was not the play but the novel itself.'[27] It was not unusual for works by a popular writer to be quickly adapted, and Fitzgerald had frequently sold picture rights for his short stories. Hollywood at the time was rapacious with a huge number of films in production – in other words, desperate for material (French 1969, p. 55). The point being that there was nothing perceived as particularly striking at the time either about *The Great Gatsby* (1925) as a novel or about choosing this work for adaptation. As Mastandrea (2022, p. 195) notes, other films based on Fitzgerald's novels or short stories had proved successful at the box office.

By 1949, Fitzgerald's reputation was just beginning to recover from the low point it had reached at the time of his death in 1940. Hence, there was some battle to get the film made. Paramount was petitioned by writer-producer Richard Maibaum, 'at a time when most of Fitzgerald's books were out of print and interest in his works was much less than a studio publicist's dream' (Atkins 1974, p. 217). The production was the result of the producer's passion for the text rather than a reflection of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) as it later became, subsumed into American identity and mythology. When released, the 1949 film caused 'not much of a ripple' (Henry 1974, p. 12).

27. This corrects the view of GD Phillips that interest in adapting *The Great Gatsby* was the result of the success of the stage play (Phillips 1986, p. 109, see also Dixon 2003, p. 288) – although the success of the stage play fed into the 1949 *The Great Gatsby* (Dixon 2003, p. 290) and featured in the marketing for this film (see ch.5, Fig.5.2).

Over the following years, however, the reputation of Fitzgerald began to develop something of the status of a 'cult' (Henry 1974, p. 15). *The Great Gatsby* (1925) was, by the time of the 1974 adaptation, a common set text in American schools and universities (Cutchins 2003, p. 296) – this increased audience expectations and hence the adapters' load. Ironically, by the time of Baz Luhrmann's adaptation in 2013, the burden of pleasing an academically-informed audience was perhaps less, as Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* had become an increasingly cultural rather than purely literary reference (see ch. 3).

Film scholarship of adaptations of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

The film adaptations also bear the accretions of their history and how they have been perceived in popular culture and scholarship. Film scholarship around *The Great Gatsby* adaptations has notably seen a lot of cross-pollination between film critics and scholars, with critics moving into scholarship and vice versa. The following notes some key or indicative texts.

The 1974 and 2013 adaptations of *The Great Gatsby* each encouraged a wave of corresponding scholarship. A key foundational text is Atkin's (1974) 'In Search of the Greatest *Gatsby*', whose research into the creation of the soundtrack for 1974's *The Great Gatsby* is particularly valuable, as is her interview with director Jack Clayton. Maslin's (1977) interviews with Elliott Nugent looking back at the 1949 *The Great Gatsby* and analysis of her own feelings about the 1974 adaptation at the time of release, versus a few years later, also provide valuable information about the impact of the hype around 1974's version. This was presented alongside Farber's critique of the 1949 *The Great Gatsby* in Peary and Shatzkin's (1977) *The Classic American Novel and the Movies*.

Rosen's interviews with Coppola and Clayton give much relevant information regarding the fallout following the poor reception of the 1974 *The Great Gatsby*. The negative critical response to this film allowed a later re-evaluation, most notably in Jones (1974), Giannetti (1975), Cunningham (2000) and Stoddart (2004). Giannetti's (1975) sensitive analysis is one of the few to fully explore the film from the viewpoint of what Clayton intended to achieve artistically and why his vision failed, noting that Clayton 'took a calculated risk and lost' (p. 13).

Useful archival research into the lost 1926 version was conducted by Gene D. Phillips (who also took a look at Fitzgerald's relationship with Hollywood as a whole) (1986) and Dixon (2003). Mastandrea (2022, pp. 192-229) has revised inaccuracies in previous scholarship and taken

a globalised perspective that allowed the lost film's plot to be reconstructed. Dixon's comparison of the three (at the time) Hollywood adaptations takes a similar approach to that of Cutchins (2003). These consider narrative elements and paratexts. It is notable that paratexts, such as interviews and contemporary film reviews, have been part of the critical discourse around *The Great Gatsby* adaptations from the 1970s onward.

Welsh's (2007) discussion of the persistence of fidelity, considered in relation to the 1974 *The Great Gatsby* and film adaptation, and later in relation to Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* (2013), took the unapologetic stance of asserting the value of a concept of fidelity. Desmond and Hawkes (2006, p. 251) were equally bold in choosing *The Great Gatsby* (1974) to illustrate what makes adaptations fail, noting, in particular, the failure of point of view and the 'conventional and sentimental' added romance scenes.

More recently, Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* (2013) has excited numerous articles in itself. Polan takes an in-depth look at the effect of 3D within the adaptation (2013), whilst Chibnall concludes Luhrmann is more interested in refreshing the *The Great Gatsby* myth than in the novel (2014). Griggs reprises an auteur emphasis to compare 1976 and 2013 in a chapter that expresses admiration for Luhrmann's version. Giles (2013) concludes that Luhrmann brings out Fitzgerald's 'disjunctive, violent undercurrents' (p. 12) and 'succeeds in representing *The Great Gatsby* as a modernist text' through the film's intertextual referencing (p. 14). MacLean's (2016) perceptive discussion of the effects, not only of the musical numbers but of the orchestral score in Luhrmann's film, is a penetrating study of this aspect of production.

Perdikaki (2018) takes a stance that, in many ways, speaks to the approach in this book, looking at the adaptations in terms of their creative intention and including a consideration of information provided by paratexts and a strong focus on the source text. However, she defines adaptation as 'a creative process dependent on its socio-political context' (Perdikaki 2018, p. 171), and her insistence on context-dependent readings[28] differs from Badiou's conception of universally meaningful truths. Marcus's (2020) autoethnographic study of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, *Under the Red White and Blue*, illustrates another approach to scholarship, placing his findings in deliberately non-academic language. Primarily concerned with issues of American identity, he writes (Marcus 2020):

> Gatsby died for Nick's cowardice, for his weakness; Nick's fantasies were dormant or fabulisms, but in Waterson's introspective face, in the way he

28. As when Perdikaki writes: 'In the case of *The Great Gatsby*, the socioeconomic crisis which had reached its peak when the film was released may have cued the specific reinterpretation on Luhrmann's part' (2018, p. 182).

> sometimes swings his body out of its natural hesitations, or tries to, you glimpse how Gatsby has made his own fantasies shared, a patrimony for all Americans, and at the end they surface for Nick, just barely. (p. 123)

Marcus's approach is successful in subverting scholarly norms to avoid structural repressions and gain greater insight through the inclusion of the self. In making these gains, however, it potentially loses others, such as the ability to enter into coherent debate with other scholars.

Configuring Badiouian elements

The films of *The Great Gatsby* will be analysed in the following chapters. These are divided into a consideration of the films' paratexts and their formal and thematic elements. The reason for this division is the differing nature of the enquiries that are created by the paratexts as surrounding elements, which lead to a different kind of consideration. To inform a Badiouian approach in terms of *The Great Gatsby*, paratextual elements will include the stated intentions of the directors, the marketing and advertising surrounding the films, the impact of star and director personas, and the contemporary responses of film critics. These formed interpretive lenses through which the films were viewed.

Increasingly, such materials are returning to the public domain. For example, *The New York Times* newspaper has published its back catalogue of archival materials with open digital access, giving access to reviews of films as far back as the 1926 *The Great Gatsby*. However, others, such as early trade magazines with reviews of the 1926 *The Great Gatsby*, may only be accessible through archives such as the British Film Institute (BFI) Reuben collection,[29] whilst other archives, such as that of *Sight and Sound* magazine, have online access but reside behind a paywall. Griffin (2013, p. 8) writes that it is important to recognise the 'incompleteness' of the archive and the incompleteness of global access to materials. The aim of this book was not to provide a complete account but rather a representative sample (based on the increasing repetition of ideas within the pieces) through online sampling of cultural texts relating to the films (such as film reviews, blogs, opinion pieces, advertising and marketing). Whilst a formal reception analysis would certainly have its place, I put forward that this is not necessary for a Badiouian approach, which looks more at attitudes and how films are talked about.

There is, of course, the danger that materials stating counter-positions could be missed because of limited accessibility. Works of journalism are geared toward a readership that has political affiliation – those with the

29. Each archive has its own reason for being, which influences its selection of materials, for example, the bulk of the BFI Reuben collection relates to the history of film and distribution in the UK.

financial power or determination to digitise their archive thus have a greater imprint on the narrative at this juncture. Also, many of the online paratexts have not been subject to peer-review in an academic context. Their views or content may be idiosyncratic. However, they form part of the films' paratextual elements, which are essential to the kind of analysis proposed, which looks at the films in relation to the culture from which they emerge and are presented.

The BFI Reuben archive provides microfiche access to the pressbooks circulated at the time of the 1949 and 1976 *The Great Gatsby*. Steedman (2013) writes, 'When you read in an archive, you nearly always read something not intended for your eyes' (p. 26), the 'shadow' side (p. 19) of what is intended to be seen. This certainly applies to the pressbooks, which were not intended to be seen by the public but contained promotional and advertising materials designed for the use of film theatres and journalists to support the marketisation of the films. They are unauthored and undated. The pressbooks provide useful information on how the studios marketed and positioned the films, and what the studios believed to be their saleable aspects.

Each film will be discussed in terms of the creative intentions that were held in approaching the film. This will be evidenced through the use of interviews with directors, screenwriters and producers, where available and recoverable. Was the adaptation approached authentically? Or did conventional ideas of faithfulness to the letter of the text and over-emphasis on the canonical aspects of the text get in the way?

The commercial environment of each film will then be discussed. Commercial imperatives could stand in the way of an authentic, Badiouian openness to contradiction by attempting to smooth out the unintegrated elements of Fitzgerald's source text as well as over-emphasising 'saleable' elements in film. In some cases, references to the canonical status of Fitzgerald's novel in America were a part of this foreclosure of the set.

The impact of star choices will also be considered. Stars might be chosen by the director or assigned by the studio but come bearing the weight of their star image, some of which predicates on its consistency and lack of change (Dyer 1998, p. 98). This persona may form a preconceived notion as it did in the case of Alan Ladd. To be effective, actors must be filmed in a way that 'does justice to human presence', making presence 'visible' (Badiou 2013, p. 6). This can be diluted by stolid marketing or directorial ideas.

The role of film critics as (often self-appointed) protectors and arbiters of culture will be considered, and the different responses that guide as to the films' reception at the time will be considered. Over time, they form one of the remaining tangible elements giving us a sense of how a tone was set for the reception of the films. Contemporary reviews of *The Great Gatsby* adaptations may be the only way of capturing the reaction of the time and

the cultural mood of the moment, even if their readers may not always have agreed with their judgements. Critics play a role in setting the tone in which films are received.

Having considered these paratextual elements, the films will then be treated as objects of analysis. As 'announced' adaptations seeking to establish a connection with Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the films employ strategies for bringing in literary narrative, thematic and stylistic elements. These will be approached through a consideration of how films convey elements of narrative and style through their *mise-en-scène* choices to make filmic meanings. Elements considered will be primarly those that create narrative meaning, such as organisation through length and arrangement, the depiction of space and time, dialogue and voice-over, characterisation, symbolism and how these elements were combined. The choices made in relation to the depiction or choice of inclusion of formal elements are revealing of the director and other creatives' intentions. Whereas directors may dissemble in interviews, formal choices are actions that speak.

Thematic content will then be considered, noting how themes within Fitzgerald's novel, such as class and social mobility, were handled and how later, increasingly solid concepts developed with Fitzgerald's work, such as the American Dream and the Roaring Twenties were limited or exaggerated by the adaptations. For example, the theme of gangsterism, the underside of the Roaring Twenties, was inflated to increase the films' commercial desirability. Choosing representative elements suggested by the modernist aspects of Fitzgerald's prose and the cultural mythologising of the themes of the American Dream and the Roaring Twenties, will provide some boundaries to the many valid possibilities for discussion.

Analysing how the different adaptations treat similar issues raised by the evental site of the novel, such as Fitzgerald's use of paradox, contradiction and ambiguity to preserve openness in meaning and his subversive depiction of the failure of American social mobility, serves to illuminate the overall approach of each adaptation and guide as to its likely success or failure of fidelity. All these choices reveal attitudes to a Badiouian fidelity to the source text as the evental site. If Fitzgerald's subversion is itself subverted into banal or reactionary choices, or even a delimited political schema, again, the state is acting to foreclose the void.

Difficulties and possibilities

Film adaptations may connect to the source text as the unintegrated part of the set or articulate other truth-events or truths of their own. However, it seems at least some of the sense of connection to the past event of the

announced text must operate if the adaptation is to be deemed interesting or successful *as an adaptation*. This chapter looked at how to take a Badiouian approach to fidelity in film adaptation, particularly to adaptations of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

Modernist novels have been identified as being difficult to adapt in film (Geraghty 2007, p. 48; Halliwell 2007, p. 90), and *The Great Gatsby* is no exception. There are numerous references in both academic works and popular culture to the difficulty of adapting this novel. For example, scholars including Houston, Atkins, Cutchins and Dixon agree on the difficulty of adapting *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Houston (1974b, p. 177) speaks of the novel's 'structural weaknesses', and Atkins (1974, p. 227) notes 'the difficulties inherent in the dramatization of Fitzgerald'. Cutchins (2003, p. 297) writes that '*Gatsby* collapses as a film' because of the adaptors' failure to comprehend 'Fitzgerald's ability to evoke feelings with language'. Dixon (2003, p. 293) mourns that 'Fitzgerald's vision is seen as being resolutely non-commercial' and that *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is 'a mysterious and resistant text'. Film critics sound similar notes: the novel's 'fragile plot' (Crowther 1949) was criticised by more than one critic, with Canby (1974, n.p.) writing 'the problem is that "Gatsby" really has a plot no bigger than a pea, which no one seems to notice until it's put on the screen'. These are difficulties the use of Badiou serves to elucidate.

As laid out in this chapter, a Badiouian approach to film adaptation takes the foreclosure of the set as its guiding principle. To analyse films in terms of Badiou thus primarily consists of not identifying the truths which they hold which cannot, after all, be articulated, but looking at whether there was the ability to be 'faithful to a fidelity' (Badiou 2002, p. 68) in terms of Badiou's meaning of the word. This means whether they are approached in a manner that allows for traces or the effects of the truth-event to speak through them or approached and realised in ways that foreclose the set's undecidable elements.

Chapter 5

Paratexts: Before, during, after

> 'You can see where the money is going, and believe me it's going!' – (Laurence 1973, p. 54)[30]

Paratexts and *The Great Gatsby*

Studio-created feature films are surrounded by paratextual elements that create lenses through which a film adaptation is seen. The paratextual elements that will be examined in this chapter illustrate the potential to support or disrupt a Badiouian fidelity. The stated intentions of filmmakers involved with the productions give indications of the lens through which they approached the adaptations. Interviews not only reveal attitudes but are also seen by those intending to view the film, guiding them as to how to view it. Personal preferences of the directors played a notable role; however, these were also forced to adjust to the commercial imperatives operating in film production. The impact of big-name Hollywood stars and their already existing star personas and the 'auteur signatures' of the directors brought other already existing properties into the new formulation. How the films were themselves marketed, and the appropriateness of marketing tie-ins, also formed elements that may have served to undermine meanings put forward by the film itself.

30. Film reporter Laurence, on the set of the 1974 The Great Gatsby.

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The evidence for approach and intention lies in filmmakers' and producers' public statements, journalistic accounts of pre-production and the marketing of the films. Advertising and film critics' contemporary responses in their role as cultural intermediaries give evidence of the prism through which these films were viewed (or intended to be viewed) at the time. These worked to precondition the public response to the films (S Murray 2012a, p. 5). Film critics, in particular, orientated themselves in relation to a 'traditional' concept of fidelity in ways that revealed ideas of what an adaptation 'should' be like.

The chapter will consider how these paratexts highlight ways in which the text could be foreclosed by creating fixed ideas about the text, which interfered with an authentically open Badiouian response. What happened before production – the viewpoints of creatives involved; and what happened post-production – the marketing of the products and the impact of what happened after the release, that is, how contemporary film critics characterised the films, will be considered.

Creative intentions

If accepting Badiou's conceptualisation that the mindset and approach of the individual is essential for the realisation of a fidelity, then the stated intentions of some of the creatives involved in adapting Fitzgerald give us evidence of how they approached the novel. Creative decision-making is essential, is often recoverable, and its study can lead beyond considerations of the medial transfer alone. Dovey (2005) argues that:

> [/]t is not enough simply to debate whether literature and cinema own different 'languages': the filmmaker's decisions *beyond* those relating to the shift in medium are the ones that carry authority, and thus potential political consequences. (p. 164; [*emphasis in the original*])

Brenon (1926)

It is difficult to say much about the directorial attitude in 1926. The adaptation was filmed by what Dixon describes as a 'pedestrian contract director' (2003, p. 288), Herbert Brenon. Brenon was, however, certainly competent by the standards of the time, and was nominated for the Best Directing (Dramatic Picture) award at the first Academy Awards in 1929. Described by a director colleague as 'imperious' (Eyman 1997, p. 235),[31] Brenon noted how he enjoyed directing actors that display temperament: 'I find that the more temperamental an actor is, the easier it is for them to grasp the subtleties of the role and imbue it with life' (Brenon 1926, p. 52) – something

31. Edward Bernds had no fond memories of Brenon (Eyman 1997, p. 235).

to remember when one reads contemporary reviews of the film later in this chapter, which reference ‘overacting’. Brenon apparently insisted on a happy ending, with the Buchanans’ marriage restored to harmony (Mastandrea 2022, p. 222), bemusing some viewers (p. 224). At the time, Fitzgerald was regarded as a popular author and it was not unusual to treat adapted texts without any special deference.

Maibaum and Nugent (1949)

Things were very different in 1949. Whilst the reputation of Fitzgerald was still in recovery, to some extent still affected by post-war austerity, those involved with the project had no doubts about the status of Fitzgerald or the worth of the work itself. Maibaum had a literary background, having been a Shakespearean actor and a university professor (Atkins 1974, p. 217), and he, as well as Cyril Hume, had a hand in the screenplay, which also spoke to Owen Davis’s 1925 stage play (Dixon 2003, p. 290).

Atkins speculates that Maibaum’s contribution was likely greater than that of the ‘Broadway stage orientated’ director Elliott Nugent (Atkins 1974, p. 217). Nugent was, however, a well-known director at the time (Henry 1974, p. 14), albeit for ‘the country-club set tinkling delicately against each other’ (Farber 1977, p. 258). Nugent was also a former actor, and, it seems, an actor’s director: Howard da Silva, playing Wilson, commented that, ‘Nugent has an intuitive feeling which he communicates as an actor. He talks the dialogue to himself, plays out each scene mentally or actually’ (Paramount Studios 1949, p. 5). Nugent had a very high opinion of the material he was working with, which became problematic. He felt it was ‘Scott Fitzgerald’s best novel and perhaps the best of all American novels’ (Phillips 1986, p. 116). Nugent’s attitude appears to reflect a desire to pay homage to Fitzgerald and do justice to what he perceives as not just a good novel but also THE American novel. Perhaps it is unsurprising then that Nugent (Maltin 1969):

> [...] felt very unhappy while I was making that picture. That was at a time when I was depressed, and I felt that I was doing an injury to a man I greatly admired, Scott Fitzgerald. I felt I shouldn’t be making the picture. (p. 10)

The status given to the novel by Nugent encouraged him to feel that a film version could be little more than a poor imitation. Nugent again said when interviewed in 1978, ‘I felt very unhappy when I was making *Gatsby*, I thought I shouldn’t be doing it’ (Dixon 2003, p. 291).

The fact that Fitzgerald’s novel, at the time, did not come bearing the whole weight of American identity it would later accrue allowed for a more open approach to adapting it as a straightforward work of fiction. However, because of the reverence of Nugent toward Fitzgerald, his approach

became more inhibited. Nugent's attitude towards Fitzgerald and his text is unhealthy for an adaptor in terms of Badiou's fidelity, as it treats the text as a static object of veneration.

Clayton, Coppola and Box (1974)

In 1974, with the novel's reputation at a high point, the adaptation commanded big names and a big budget. There is useful information from interviews at the time about the intentions of the director, Jack Clayton and the screenwriter, Francis Ford Coppola. Whilst the screenwriter is often a kind of silent partner in the creation (see the discreet collaboration between Baz Luhrmann and Craig Pearce), the views of both are documented in this case. Interviewed by Atkins (1974, p. 221) prior to the film being released and not yet aware of the poor reception it would receive, Clayton was optimistic and confident, noting, with some satisfaction at this point, 'We've made the book'. By this, as I will show, Clayton naturally meant his own conception of the book (e.g. he elsewhere refers to the book as being about 'class in America' (p. 217), a view not necessarily foregrounded by all the adaptors [Atkins 1974, p. 221]). However, the statement clearly indicates his goal – not to create a film but to render a book. This is an approach of replication. This concept of faithfulness through textual correspondence, of following the detail of the text, was bought into by those involved with the film. Judging by the breathless reportage in *Sight and Sound* film magazine, reporters were encouraged to repeat the line that, 'Coppola has remained very true to Fitzgerald's original book putting nothing in the movie that wasn't in the book' (Laurence 1973, p. 54). The article also reproduces claims that Clayton had prepared himself by 'learning thoroughly all about the work of Scott Fitzgerald and totally absorbing himself in the atmosphere of America in the Jazz Age' (p. 54).

Clayton's feeling of satisfaction was shaken following the reception of the 1974 *The Great Gatsby*, which critics and the public alike savaged. However, the sense of the worth of a 'traditional' conception of fidelity was not relinquished, as can be seen from Clayton and Coppola's comments. In interviews following the critical savaging of the film, Coppola and Clayton both try to justify themselves, blaming each other for the film's perceived failure, Coppola rather more ungenerously than Clayton. In the process, they reveal a lot about their individual approaches. What Rosen (1974a, p. 43) refers to as a 'disparity' of 'sensibilities' shows the impact of an increasingly well-known (Coppola had recently won a screenwriting Oscar for his script of *Patton* [dir. Schaffner 1970]) and hence assertive screenwriter. Coppola (Rosen 1974a), for example, states:

> [*A*] good director would know when something is good and just direct it. Directors sometimes get confused about who's creative and who isn't, and like

> to think of themselves as the prime creator. [...] [/]f the conductor had the power to change the music at will and then the music is very bad, it's not the writer's fault any more. (p. 46)

In Coppola's view, the director is merely a workman, and the scriptwriter is the primary creative. At the same time, he claims he only wrote what Clayton told him to (Rosen 1974a):

> As a writer, I took the premise that I was writing *his* movie and I would do anything he wanted. [...] I would put up two seconds of protest [...] Then I would do it for him because it was his film. (p. 46; [*emphasis in the original*])

Coppola's contradictory statements reflect his desire to deflect responsibility for the film's critical failure toward the director Jack Clayton. However, they also show some of his assertiveness with regard to his own conception.

Clayton, on the other hand, denies that he had a negative influence on Coppola's script, stating that not much of importance was changed: 'I think certain things from the book went back' (Rosen 1974b, p. 49) and that, 'my only reason for working on it is that I believe that everything can be worked on – and indeed he never had the time'. This fact is something Coppola (Rosen 1974a, p. 46) confirms when he states, complaining that Clayton fussed over the script: 'Had I been available, I'm sure he would have invited me to fidget with him'. In fact, Coppola overstates the changes Clayton made to his script and much of his original conception remains. For example, Coppola (p. 46) says that his script would have opened the film by giving numerous clues as to what was to come by showing shots of key objects such as Gatsby's shirts, car, and pictures of Daisy, but Clayton 'changed the beginning' and did not 'get it going in the right way'. In fact, the film does start by referencing most of these 'clues' and a few more.

The interesting part of this rather ugly dispute is its claims toward fidelity. Coppola (Rosen 1974a, p. 46) says that if both writers 'try to be faithful to the book', the scripts will naturally be similar because of having the same elements, 'so any change in the script is a big change'. Coppola (p. 49) implies a lack of faithfulness to the novel on Clayton's part. Yet Clayton is very concerned with faithfulness: when Rosen asks if he made any changes to Coppola's script as she thought the film was 'amazingly faithful to the letter of the book', Clayton answers, 'I made it a tiny bit more faithful' and 'anything that changed was *always* in the book, whether people like it or not' (1974b, p. 49; [*emphasis in the original*]). This was somewhat disingenuous. There were definite changes, especially in regard to the Gatsby–Daisy relationship, although Dixon claims that it was producer and financier David Merrick who was behind the attempts to insert more 'visible romance' into the film (Dixon 2003, p. 293). What is demonstrated here, however, is Clayton's reliance on an idea of accuracy as a defence. His comment, 'certain things from the book went back' (Rosen 1974b, p. 49) is another way of

justifying his changes in terms of fidelity to the original. Clayton really stakes his defence of his version of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* on a 'traditional' conception of fidelity. He also draws on Fitzgerald's own iconic status in America at the time and even the authority of Fitzgerald's daughter, Frances Scott Fitzgerald Smith. Clayton (p. 50) notes that he always consulted her on the script and she 'does love the film' and states, 'I wouldn't have made *Gatsby* if I didn't have a high regard for her father'.[32]

Although Coppola may not have resorted to quite the same level of reverence to the source in order to justify himself, he does also display caution, noting, 'The adaptation of *Gatsby* to the screen is a delicate matter in any event' (Rosen 1974a, p. 46). This may well have resulted in the 'pomposity, strained seriousness' of the screenplay that Dixon notes can be primarily attributed to Coppola (Dixon 2003, p. 292). Whilst it is true that Coppola's (Rosen 1974a, p. 47) statement, 'the art of adaptation is when you can lie or you can do something that wasn't in the original but is so much like the original that it should have been', suggests a different kind of approach to that of Clayton, it is nonetheless about illusion. This is subtly different from the kind of engagement to which Badiou refers. The idea of 'lying' and fooling the audience is indicative of a kind of false 'naming' of the event, very different from Badiou's idea of being open to the rupture of the new.

The language of production designer John Box also reveals the intention to recreate the novel, stating how Fitzgerald's novel was a helpful source (Tuson 2005):

> The book was marvellous […] The setting really was Long Island. We shot it in Rhode Island, some way away from New York, but the settings were right. It was the right architecture, the right house, and it had the gardens. (p. 145)

Although Box's attitude is one of support rather than of asserting his own separate viewpoint, it is clear he is on board with a general push toward a recreation of the detail of the novel, to the extent that if something was not quite right, for example, Nick's cottage, it was built (Tuson 2005):

> It was very important for them to be close to each other, so we built it. Obviously, we researched it and built it with a sense of that American period. (p. 146)

No expense was spared. Gatsby's car, an original 1928 Rolls-Royce Phantom I Ascot dual cowl sport phaeton (albeit repainted and reupholstered), was flown across the Atlantic to be used in the scenes filmed in Pinewood Studios (England) (*BAMF Style* 2014, n.p.). There were similar, exceptional efforts to recreate the exact sound and feel of the jazz of the 1920s – for a complete account of these, see Atkins' (1974, pp. 222, 224–227) seminal article.

32. This was also overstated – Frances Scott Fitzgerald Smith expressed some reservations, in particular regarding the length of the film and the casting of Daisy (Phillips 1984, p.122).

The focus on recreating a historical moment that of the 1920s was clearly energising for those involved. However, it is worth remembering Badiou's (2002) comments:

> When a radical break in a situation, under names borrowed from real truth-processes, convokes not the void but the 'full' particularity of presumed substance of that situation, we are dealing with a simulacrum of truth. (p. 73)

There was a definite effort in the attitude of the 1974 adaptors towards this kind of 'full particularity'. The approach to the film reflected a nostalgic and reverential attitude to the text, and, as suggested by Coppola's comments, an embrace of the simulacrum.

Luhrmann (2013)

By 2013, *The Great Gatsby* (1925) had been a stalwart of American literature for some time and once again was accorded a huge budget and the brightest of stars. However, it could be argued that this audience was also more familiar with Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as a popular cultural reference than with the text itself. Luhrmann's own experience with *The Great Gatsby* (1925) mirrors this kind of flexibility. He describes his early experience of the novel, 'I remember reading the book and kind of not getting it. Then I saw the Redford film [...]' (Welch 2013, n.p.). His view changed further when he, some time later, was given some recorded books (Welch 2013):

> One of them was *Gatsby* [...] It was six in the morning before I stopped listening [...] and, at the end of that experience [...] I went, 'I've got to make this into a movie'. (n.p.)

The experience of Fitzgerald's novel was, for Luhrmann, a mediated one, which may have impeded a faithful response to the text itself.

Luhrmann's slightly contradictory approach perhaps reflects this. Luhrmann tends to use Fitzgerald and his status to justify certain decisions, whilst at the same time pushing his own individual changes when convenient. His attitude to Fitzgerald and his text is rather an instrumentalist one, invoking the name of Fitzgerald when it suits him: as when discussing his use of 3D, 'Fitzgerald would have done it, I've gotta do it' (*Tribute Movies* 2013, min. 2:09) and when referring to the mix of music and pop culture used in the film: 'The inspiration to weave these references together came from F Scott Fitzgerald himself' (Ohneswere 2013). Luhrmann thus claims a link between his own and Fitzgerald's unorthodoxy, further stating (*The Guardian* 2013):

> Jazz, they said, African street music is a fad. Why are you putting this fad in the book? Why are you putting pop songs in the book? So all the choices however 'Baz' they seem and of course I can't disconnect myself from some of my own techniques but my real focus, our focus, was always to [...] reveal the book to the

> extent that we're translating into another medium and making it feel like it felt to read in 1925. (min. 3:19–3:48)

Luhrmann does acknowledge differences between media, noting that he and screenwriter Craig Pearce were 'looking for a way that we could *show*' rather than to tell and that 'how we do is really the big difference in the film' (Ohneswere 2013, n.p.; [*author's added emphasis*]). However, he still claims that even this 'big difference' is the intention of Fitzgerald. The big difference Luhrmann refers to is the overt depiction of Nick Carraway as the writer of the Gatsby story. Luhrmann makes much of slight references Fitzgerald made to Nick writing a book, quoting from the novel: 'Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book […]' and 'reading over what I have written so far […]' (n.p.). However, the results in the film are incongruous because of the viewer's strong awareness of Fitzgerald as the author of *The Great Gatsby* (1925). This change, rather than opening up the text, results in several muddied edges (Ohneswere 2013):

> One of the big devices in the book is that the story is told from the inside of the mind of Nick Carraway (who in our interpretation is very much like F Scott himself). (n.p.)

In fact, Luhrmann's actions foreclose open elements in the text which relate to Nick. Luhrmann both claims and distorts Fitzgerald's intentions.

Sometimes Luhrmann even attributes inaccurately to Fitzgerald, for example, saying, 'Fitzgerald was a lover of all things modern, of cinema' (Ohneswere 2013, n.p.). However, despite his contacts with Hollywood over the years, Fitzgerald (1965) was dubious about the impact of movies, writing in 1936:

> I saw that the novel, which at my maturity was the strongest and supplest medium for conveying thought and emotion from one human being to another, was becoming subordinated to a mechanical and communal art that, whether in the hands of Hollywood merchants or Russian idealists, was capable of reflecting only the tritest thought, the most obvious emotion. (pp. 48–49)

He goes on to write, 'there was a rankling indignity […] in seeing the power of the written word subordinated to another power, a more glittering, a grosser power […]' (Fitzgerald 1965, p. 49). Fitzgerald certainly had doubts about cinema, despite his admiration for intelligent Hollywood producers such as Irving Thalberg.

Despite his apparently free and easy approach, Luhrmann is nonetheless concerned with making a version of *The Great Gatsby* that is recognisable. He does not wish to make a movie that is only tangentially linked to *The Great Gatsby* – his aim is to create an 'announced' adaptation of the novel with all the attendant fanfare of the Hollywood prestige industry. Luhrmann states: 'Our real focus was to reveal the

book' (Ohneswere 2013, n.p.) – a step forward, perhaps, from Clayton's intention to 'make the book'. Luhrmann shared the writing credit with his long-time collaborator, Craig Pearce. He details their approach (Ohneswere 2013):

> First of all, Craig Pearce and I went through the book and said, 'What scenes are absolutely fundamental to the story? What scenes must be in our film? And what scenes can we do without, even if we love them?' (n.p.)

This approach claims a kind of fidelity to the novel's plot, with Luhrmann stating, 'we chose to stay very focused on the linear plot of the book' (Ohneswere 2013, n.p.). And yet, Luhrmann again shows a free and easy attitude to the text when he also claims *The Great Gatsby* is a love story: 'Everyone has their Gatsby. Everyone has their Daisy' (Welch 2013, n.p.); and 'I am compelled toward these tragic romances, the issue of love and all its variances' (n.p.).

Whilst it may seem that Luhrmann is primarily pushing his own agenda, he does show a heightened awareness of the difficulties of adapting Fitzgerald successfully – for example, when he notes that Gatsby's parties operate as a distraction rather than the primary theme (Welch 2013, n.p.). With perhaps more candour, Luhrmann also states, 'if it's a great work, it's there to be done many times in many different ways' (*Tribute Movies* 2013, min. 3:36). This is similar to Coppola's statement that one can do something that was not in the original text but seems to have been. However, instead, Luhrmann foregrounds individual response rather than an idea of tricking the audience – as such, it appears a more open approach to the novel as evental site.

Luhrmann's attitude of a certain (although unstated) irreverence would seem to allow for a more original approach of the type suggested by the use of Badiou. He appears in many ways more conscious than Clayton and Coppola of the complexities of Fitzgerald's work, stating, 'the thing about Jay Gatsby and the book itself is that it's always paradoxical' (Welch 2013, n.p.). However, he consistently returns to the use of a 'traditional' concept of faithfulness to defend himself: when asked why he excluded a scene from the film he says, 'it really wasn't like that in the book' (*Martin* 2014, min. 4:41). This makes for a strangely inconsistent attitude.

In short, one may ponder the sincerity of his engagement with the source text, a novel which, by his own description, he appears to have engaged with tangentially. In Badiou's terms, not only should there be an ability to allow for new meanings and new ideas without predetermined rigidity but there also needs to be an authentic encounter. It is possibly here that one could question whether Luhrmann's approach is truly sincere or whether it tends toward empty simulacrum.

■ Commercial imperatives

The reciprocal creation of value between the literary canon and the film industry was described in the previous chapter. Ironically, part of the films' commercialisation was the way in which 'literariness is evoked' (Cutchins 2003, p. 296). *The Great Gatsby* appears in book form in both the 1949 and 2013 adaptations. The 1949 version begins with a copy of the novel, *The Great Gatsby*, lying on a velvet cloth. The 2013 version saves this for the end, with Nick typing out his own version of a novel called *Gatsby*, then adding the words 'The Great'. Whilst it is not known exactly what appeared in the final movie, the trailer for the 1926 *The Great Gatsby* features credits playing over a bound copy of *The Great Gatsby* and includes the words 'From the novel by F Scott Fitzgerald' (*HypedFor* 2012). These ways of announcing the adaptation are purposeful, establishing a relationship in which ideas about the source text are deliberately invoked. In a reciprocal marketing arrangement, in 1949, 1974 and 2013 the release of the movies also prompted reissues of the book with covers referencing the film. In 2013 there were more layered forms of marketing at work, with a reissue of the original cover for the more 'highbrow' customer and a movie-orientated cover for the Walmart customer (Bosman 2013, n.p.).

It is notable that, as shown in the previous section, when discussing their creations, directors make little reference to the kinds of purely commercial considerations that also had direct effects on their choices and production. Commerce perhaps formed the very reason for being of the 1974 version – Dixon (2003, p. 292) states that 'Paramount still held the rights to *Gatsby*' and the black-and-white 1949 version 'could not be profitably sold to television'. Hence, a new colour version promised better returns. The 1949 black-and-white version was, however, not just dated technically but in other ways – being, as Atkins (1974) notes, afflicted by the 'Hollywood system at the time' (p. 217), with 'tame' parties and the excising of events such as the somewhat sordid scene at Myrtle's apartment (p. 219). Censorship in the form of the prevailing Hayes code was the reason for the excision of this scene, with producer Maibaum stating simply, 'we couldn't show it' (Atkins 1974, p. 219). The moralising was laid on with a heavy hand, with Nick and Jordan viewing Gatsby's tombstone with pity and Jordan turning her back on her immoral ways and marrying Nick. Providing the public with what they appeared to want at the time – whether the glittering parties of the 1926, 1974 and 2013 films or the heavy-handed moralising of the 1949 version – inevitably shaped the approach of the studio and, hence, the filmmakers. This shaping is rather different from the authentic expression of the moment that Badiou requires to express fidelity – instead, it reflects the rules and limiting structures of the state.

Romance as commercial addition – the case of 1974

Various politics behind the scenes also influenced production. Engelstad (2018, p. 33) notes that adaptations, as opposed to original screenplays, tend to be optioned by producers rather than directors – setting forth a different artistic trajectory. David Merrick, producer of *The Great Gatsby* (1974), single-handedly took on the vast cost, at least US$6 million, and the full financial risk (Dixon 2003, p. 292). This gave him a lot of power when it came to dictating what he felt would bring the public into film theatres, and it is clear that Merrick lacked the sensitivity of Maibaum in 1949. Merrick was blamed for the increase in visual romance (p. 293). This is worth taking a closer look at, as the amplifying of the romantic quest theme competes with other aspects of the film, such as the enhanced focus on gangsterism and Clayton's own stated desire to focus on the theme of class in America. It also limits the characterisation of Gatsby.

One of the difficulties of Fitzgerald's text is that the romance is treated in a way similar to the depiction of Gatsby and his world, as something filtered through the consciousness of Nick. Nick relies on Gatsby's reminiscences and even the accounts of Jordan (who is the first to fill Nick in on the history of the Gatsby–Daisy romance). Whilst this is partially merely a device for giving the reader the background, it does allow for a certain slipperyness in saying what happened. Nonetheless, Fitzgerald is not particularly coy in referring to the physical side of Daisy's relationships. At the time of their first romance, Gatsby (Fitzgerald 1950, pp. 141–142) 'took what he could get, ravenously and unscrupulously – eventually, he took Daisy one still October night, took her because he had no real right to touch her hand'.

Equally, Daisy's relations with Tom are given a sexual slant: 'There was a certain struggle, and a certain relief' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 144). And yet, in 1974, the romance between Gatsby and Daisy is presented through 1970s tinted spectacles with a pastel prettiness that is somehow at odds with Fitzgerald's intensely tactile and intimate descriptions (Fitzgerald 1950):

> Now and then she moved and he changed his arm a little, and once he kissed her dark shining hair. [...] [*S*]he brushed silent lips against his coat's shoulder or when he touched the end of her fingers, gently, as though she were asleep. (p. 143)

Coppola mysteriously wanted to make the romance even *less* tactile, noting that it was his 'theory that they shouldn't even touch a lot or kiss or any of that stuff. I wrote a scene about seven or eight pages long of pure dialogue' (Rosen 1974a, p. 47). It was Clayton who had to appease the studio. His attempts to find a middle path were met with derision by many film critics and, indeed, Coppola, who said Clayton's efforts read 'like a Salem commercial' (p. 43). Some of Coppola's conception remains as Gatsby and

Daisy look meaningfully toward each other and reach out their hands to each other but do not quite touch. Figure 5.1 shows the backlit prettiness of the visuals. Despite Prohibition, they sit drinking champagne on the banks of swan-laden rivers. They slow dance, remembering their first meeting. Daisy and Gatsby's sensual stroking of the jelly moulds is another risible addition.

The overriding sense is one of nostalgia as the romance becomes less corporeal. The half-hearted romance between Jordan and Nick goes little beyond flirting. Clayton also uses the grittier relationship between Myrtle and Tom as a contrast to that of Gatsby and Daisy. This is emphatically sexualised. Myrtle is first seen in a closely fitting dress that is gathered at her pubis. She rubs her body against Tom's groin. In the apartment scenes, Clayton's extreme close-up shows her licking her lips and baring her teeth; he cuts to Nick, who appears aroused. When she gets to the lines, 'you can't live forever', she becomes all maudlin, sad, and desperate. Her lip trembling, Myrtle starts to sob. This then leads to a violent fight with Tom. The eventual effect is certainly not arousing (as seems intended by the first part of the scene) but rather disturbing and ugly. The soft-focus Gatsby–Daisy courting scenes and grittier Tom–Myrtle relationship are constantly juxtaposed by Clayton as he cuts back and forth between the two couples. The emphasis seems to be on the chastity of Gatsby's desire, of his need to keep Daisy as an object, and there is also the suggestion of various class and gender stereotyping – nothing to get the audience stirring, however.

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FIGURE 5.1: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (1974) depicting Daisy and Gatsby's romance, with champagne and swans.

The most physical moment between Daisy and Gatsby is during the scene where, following the jelly mould stroking, they at last touch hands, and Daisy suggests dressing in their old clothes to recreate their first meeting. Film critic Canby (1974) writes, 'Since the film is playing so heavily on nostalgia from its opening credits, it has no further reserves of sentiment to draw upon' (n.p.). The nostalgia has deadened the emotion, not stimulated it. Gatsby and Daisy slow dance to the sound of crackly music, then walk outside, where, at last, they exchange a kiss. An exchange of looks suggests they go back into the house, but more dancing ensues there, this time welded at the mouth… with only the upright burning candlestick the scene fades out on to suggest more intimate pleasures. These were the scenes that the studio forced upon Clayton, and they did little to satisfy the audience. In fairness, he integrated him into his overall theme of the fetishisation that both Gatsby and Daisy have toward objects and even each other – however, this theme is itself a problem. Even this tweaking of Fitzgerald's thematic content simplifies and distorts, creating in place of the sensual and imaginative Gatsby a coldly acquisitive one. The overall effect of the romantic treatment was either cold or over-sentimentalised.

Clayton's *The Great Gatsby* begins with various shots of key images relating to the rest of the film, one of which is the scrapbooks with their black-and-white pictures of Daisy. This then leads into other shots of photographs on Gatsby's desk of Daisy and establishes the film's theme of desire. It also establishes an obsessional quality to the camera's gaze which she meets with her own unblinking stare. Although this is partially successful, it also primarily focuses the film on the pursuit of Daisy. To make matters worse, Gatsby is presented as having no concern about Myrtle's death. In fact, the screenplay adds words to make it even clearer that all he cares about is Daisy, with Gatsby stating, 'all I could think about was Daisy' (min. 1:55:34)[33] (Nugent's 1949 *The Great Gatsby* does a much better job of presenting Gatsby's actions as honourable). The 'withering of the American Dream' (Bewley 1963, p. 125) that is expressed through Gatsby's misguided romantic investment in the worthless Daisy is recreated as a fetishisation only (Vooght 2018, p. 30).

Ultimately, the decisions of the director of a film tend to be influenced by studio choices and pressures. Clayton notably says that he (Rosen 1974b):

> [*D*]id not have the final cut on this film. I had instead the option to have the film previewed three times, with six weeks between each preview to make changes. Unfortunately, this couldn't be done because of that inflexible opening date for the film. (p. 50)

33. Time-stamps for film dialogue are taken from the DVD of each film as played on a PC using VLC Media Player (Version 3.0.19 Vetinari). Different devices and software may return a different result. These time-stamps are intended as a guideline only.

Directors' power over their creations is affected by commercial contingencies. Trade magazines reported on the 'internecine warfare' between Paramount executive Robert Evans and Merrick (Atkins 1974, p. 221), and it was well-known that Evans' divorce from Ali McGraw also affected the casting of Daisy. Nonetheless, as shown in Rosen's (1974b, p. 50) interview, Clayton was notably reluctant to criticise Paramount. As a result, Clayton bore much of the blame for the poor reception of *The Great Gatsby* (1974) himself.

■ Star personas

Casting choices were another area not necessarily under the total control of the directors, despite Clayton's claims of control in his interview with Rosen (1974b, p. 50). The films either gained from or were burdened by a star's persona. DeBona (2010, p. 18) notes the difficulties 'if the star image threatens to overwhelm the character around whom there may be a complicated and established visual and historical discourse'. Of course, adding to the issues was Fitzgerald's impressionistic portrait of Gatsby – Gatsby was tellingly described by his editor Maxwell Perkins as 'somewhat vague' (eds. Kuehl & Bryer, p. 83). Daisy is equally insubstantial, a voice rather than a person. To be effective, these characterisations had to somehow retain mystery whilst also coming into concrete focus. Later versions also had to contend with the greater burden of the increasing status of *The Great Gatsby* (1925).

Reflecting this status, the biggest stars of the day – Ladd, Redford, DiCaprio – were engaged to play Gatsby. 'The star image as an intertextual performance text' may work well if an actor's image plays into the film characterisation (DeBona 2010, p. 19). Alan Ladd was personally chosen as the 1949 Jay Gatsby by producer Maibaum, who noted the similarities of Ladd's story with Gatsby's rags-to-riches trajectory. Visiting him at his home, Ladd had shown him 'row upon row of suits and fancy shirts' saying, 'Not bad for an Okie kid, eh?' (Atkins 1974, p. 217). The parallels with the scene in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) where Gatsby shows Daisy his collection of shirts were striking. As a part of his persona, Ladd was 'more convincingly from hard beginnings' than the later Redford (Henry 1974, p. 12). Ladd had lost his father at the age of four and then relocated as a 'destitute family to California in 1920', describing the journey as 'something out of *The Grapes of Wrath*' (Cochran & McCray 2015, p. 19).

Much of the marketing build-up around Ladd, however, related to his gangster star persona. Ladd's cold 'hitman' characters, combined with his angelic features, had served him well in several gangster films (Spicer 2011, p. 170). Figure 5.2 shows one of the images created by the Paramount marketing department (Paramount Studios 1949). The tagline: 'Man of

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FIGURE 5.2: Publicity image from the *Paramount Press Book: The Great Gatsby* (1949): 'Alan Ladd: Man of violence: Blasting his way to the top with a gun!'

violence: Blasting his way to the top with a gun!' suggests a much more action-packed film, not to mention a different conception altogether of Gatsby's character.

Equally part of Ladd's gangster persona were posters that showed curvaceous women swooning at Gatsby's feet. The gangster aspect of Jay Gatsby was hyped up, shaping audience expectations in the wrong direction – in the film, this aspect of Gatsby's characterisation peters out at an early stage. The opening credits show Gatsby firing at rivals from the window of his car, and, fifteen minutes in, he punches a drunk partygoer who appears to know his true identity – but apart from that, there is little reference to a 'man of violence' and the more familiar, thoughtful image of Jay Gatsby prevails. Whilst Fitzgerald's own reputation may have been in recovery, allowing for this looser approach to the depiction of Gatsby's character, Fitzgerald was nonetheless a recognisable name at the time. He is mentioned on the posters more or less prominently – interestingly, sharing a credit with Owen Davis, 'From the novel by F Scott Fitzgerald and the play by Owen Davis'. The connection with Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is maintained, instructing us to compare the two.

Other aspects of Ladd's stardom also affected production in material ways. Ladd was at the peak of his fame and 'mobbed' wherever he went (Dixon 2003, p. 291) – this was given as a reason Gatsby was filmed entirely on set and hence was felt to be claustrophobic: 'the elegant simulaic prison of an overlit Hollywood sound stage'. This gives another example of how contemporary issues that had nothing to do with the literary text shaped production. Ladd's screen idol status also affected the manner in which he was filmed: Dixon (p. 291) writes that with 'endless, languorous close-ups' the film 'traffics in the kind of "pretty boy" iconography that cheapens the ultimate tragedy of Jay Gatz'.

Ladd was not the only star involved; Betty Field (playing Daisy) was a well-known name at the time. Previously known for playing 'tough, no-nonsense' characters, this aspect of her star persona also seemed to conflict with the portrayal of a more delicate and dependent character such as Daisy (Dixon 2003, p. 291). Field's Daisy is high-class and inhibited. The awkward little twirl she gives during the scene where she is, for a moment, fully involved with Gatsby even as her husband is in the next room, illustrates both her genuine happiness in the affair and the limitations of it. Farber (1977, pp. 258–259), writing in the 1970s, found her seriousness appealing and appropriate. As star personas waned with time, their performances could perhaps be seen more clearly. The same has applied to Alan Ladd: his Jay Gatsby was 'criticised in 1949 for being "about as comfortable as a gunman at a garden party"' (Henry 1974, p. 13), yet by the

1970s, combined with the greater familiarity with Fitzgerald's text, this was seen as an accurate interpretation of Gatsby as a parvenu (p. 12). Others agreed: 'Whether by design or not, Ladd appears almost always awkward and ill-at-ease, as Gatsby seemed to be in the world into which he had insinuated himself' (Atkins 1974, p. 220); 'Ladd, simply by imposing his own secretive star presence, perhaps made more of Gatsby than Robert Redford' (Houston 1974b, p. 177). Shelly Winters, as Myrtle, all curves, loud talk and cheap fox furs, was fully in line with her star persona and was perceived as a success in the role. The point is not to say that the stars' personas necessarily derailed a film – they could indeed bring something extra, as Badiou identified – but merely that they introduced a predetermined factor in the audience's perception.

There were similar issues in 1974. One of the primary criticisms of this adaptation was that Robert Redford was felt to be miscast as the social climber Gatsby, being 'already Ivy league' (Henry 1974, p. 12). This was a considerable drawback in creating a believable depiction of Gatsby as a *nouveau riche* character. Redford's screen persona at the time was based on hits such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *The Sting* (1973) and *The Way We Were* (1973), a romantic drama where his role is that of the blonde dreamboat foil to the well-known actress and singer Barbara Streisand. In these films, he is part of a double act, with Paul Newman or Streisand in the latter film – an interesting comparison when considering Gatsby's isolation. Perhaps there was too much of the dreamboat about his depiction of Gatsby. Cutchins (2003, p. 299) writes, 'Robert Redford as Gatsby obligingly produces his award-winning smile'. An example of the kind of breathless press *The Great Gatsby* (1974) received during production is this extract from the film magazine *Photoplay*, by a reporter who had apparently sneaked onto the set of the 'TOP SECRET PROJECT'. Noting that the two stars 'will not talk' (Laurence 1973, p. 26), film journalist Laurence is driven to write of Redford, in the absence of other material, 'he wore a slightly bored expression' (p. 54). This off-screen presence seems not unallied to Redford's eventual performance, as he 'drifts through the movie with an air of detachment and unconcern that is at once disquieting and distancing for the production's intended audience' (Dixon 2003, p. 292).

Ali McGraw's one-time inclusion on the casting list for Daisy suggests that Paramount Pictures was searching for a fashionable face of the 1970s to play Daisy. This aim conflicted with Clayton's portrayal of the moneyed classes as more eccentric and less accessible. The idea of them as peculiar and warped seems to be physically embodied in his direction of Daisy (ultimately played by Mia Farrow). Daisy is portrayed as excessively affected and superficial to an almost freakish extreme; she minces around, her hands awkwardly up in the air, giggles and bridles. Farrow's mannered acting

style was ultimately felt to be at odds with other aspects of the film. Sam Waterstone, playing Nick, was a relative unknown at the time – his performance was received more favourably (see the reviews later in this chapter), perhaps partly because of the lack of preconceptions in the audience's mind.

In 2013, Leonardo DiCaprio seemed a better choice to embody Gatsby's rags-to-riches trajectory. As with Alan Ladd, DiCaprio came from humble beginnings – a broken home and rootless childhood (Catalano 1997; Molloy 2014). In 2013, DiCaprio had already been successful in a wide variety of roles, and, as will be discussed later in this chapter, was felt by film critics to have made a success of his portrayal of Jay Gatsby. What comments on acting technique hide is that there are often additional factors operating in the choice of actors. In DiCaprio's case, he had formerly collaborated with Luhrmann in the successful adaptation of *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and had doubtless proved good to work with. Tobey Maguire, cast as Nick Carraway, is known to be a close friend of DiCaprio's (Perdikaki 2018, p. 176), influencing the casting. Louche Maguire seems to be one-note, lacking Sam Waterson's sensitivity or complexity.

This shows that many factors are operating in the choice of actors, both noble and ignoble. Whilst they may prove a serious distraction at the time of release, the impact of a star's persona may lessen with the passage of time, becoming less overwhelming and significant, allowing a sensitive performance such as Field's to be better appreciated. Indeed, all of the actors' performances in adaptations of *The Great Gatsby* ultimately became integrated into their star persona. Nonetheless, at the time of production, it is a complicating factor that may also interfere with an audience's ability to embrace the film without bringing to it the predetermined meanings that may interfere with their realisation of a fidelity.

■ Director personas

Directors also come with the weight of their own personas, particularly those bearing 'auteur' status (a form of canonisation in itself). British director Jack Clayton, although not a household name today, was then 'an established auteur with a pedigree as a receptive, sensitive cinematic adapter of literature' (Griggs 2016, p. 202). He had also successfully worked with screenwriters such as Truman Capote and Harold Pinter. This should have made him a good fit for an adaptation of Fitzgerald's text. However, three of the four films he made before *The Great Gatsby* (1974) show a preference for dark psychological drama and even the grotesque (Callahan 2016, n.p.). Elements of this preference show themselves in *The Great Gatsby* (1974) in Clayton's uncomfortably tight close-ups, Farrow's mannered performance and Clayton's emphasis on hysteria in the

dramatic scenes. Clayton's intense close-ups can feel invasive and uncomfortable even in the quieter scenes – in the violent scenes, as when Myrtle's nose is broken, they can feel like the viewer is also being assaulted. These interests did not seem to fit the overall conception.

The screenwriter, Francis Ford Coppola, was something of an emerging star at the time of *The Great Gatsby* (1974). *The Godfather* (1972), which established him as a director, came out shortly after his script work for *The Great Gatsby* (1974). The great success of *The Godfather* influenced the assertiveness we see in his post-*Gatsby* (1974) interviews. Coppola was the foil to the sensitive, perfectionist Clayton. Coppola's interest in Mafia scenarios shows itself in the script for *The Great Gatsby* (1974), as will be further investigated in Chapter 8. Both produced their auteur signature in accordance with expectations. However, both Clayton and Coppola were fundamentally subverted in their intentions to provide a critique of the failure of American social mobility, as 'both the film's marketing materials and the casting of screen idol Robert Redford foreground the story's central romance quest' that the studios wanted (Griggs 2016, p. 200), as did some of the other changes Clayton was encouraged to make.

Baz Luhrmann came to film *The Great Gatsby* (2013) already having had a string of commercially successful films. Luhrmann is frequently referred to as an auteur for his distinctive style (Debruge 2013; Griggs 2016; Walker 2014). Interestingly, Walker (2014, p. 42) refers to Luhrmann as not just an auteur but an 'Australian auteur', finding a consistent style in his films of 'theatricality', 'postmodern exuberance' in terms of his *mise-en-scène*, 'musical eclecticism', and 'self-conscious storytelling' that reflects an exuberant Australian sensibility. Audiences come to a Luhrmann movie expecting to see a blend of historical and contemporary mashups, a lively and even bombastic energy and style, and a presiding vision resulting from Luhrmann's close work with the many creatives involved in his projects from his chosen screenwriter to the musicians he works with. In this respect, as I will go on to show, the style of *The Great Gatsby* (2013) proved to be a perfect fit between director and audience expectations, well in keeping with the Luhrmann persona, if not between Luhrmann and Fitzgerald.

■ Marketing *The Great Gatsby* adaptations

A film, especially a large-scale Hollywood production of the measure of these adaptations (at least US$6.5 million was spent on the 1974 *The Great Gatsby*, possibly the largest film budget to date at the time, and a mere US$105 million in 2013), depends for its perceived success or failure on making back its budget within a relatively short space of time. Stam writes that films are 'deeply immersed in material and financial contingencies'

(Stam 2000, p. 56) that are simply of a different order to a book publication. So-called sleeper hits like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (dir. Sharman 1975) may make their money back too slowly to save a studio. Thus, success is often measured primarily in terms of the United States (US) box office, as world profits and distribution may be slower to materialise.

For this reason, the more expensive the film, the greater the pressure to get people through the doors – sometimes at any cost, with misleading marketing and the sacrifice of a film's credibility. The marketing of the films of 1926 and 1949 reflected Fitzgerald's more modest reputation at the time. Pressbooks were produced by the studio Paramount and contained a series of ready-made articles such as pre-prepared reviews and interviews that could be reproduced, for example, by film magazines (known as 'puff pieces'). They included advertisements and images that were sanctioned for use in film theatres' own marketing materials, and information on product tie-ins.

Some of the marketing images that survive the 1926 *The Great Gatsby* (see Figure 5.3) are remarkably spare and aim to emphasise the drama

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FIGURE 5.3: Film publicity poster from *The Great Gatsby* (1926) portraying the love triangle.

of the love triangle scenario. A review in the *Kinematograph Weekly* (1927, p. 50) ends with the rather incongruous lines, 'A new aspect of a triangle drama. How one man's failure brought happiness to two others. Emphasise the dramatic force of the theme' – this suggests that pre-prepared studio material (that is, a puff piece) may have been directly quoted.

Marketing efforts were undoubtedly more elaborate in 1949, with the 1949 pressbook containing several different versions of adverts designed to speak to Ladd's star appeal: Ladd as gangster, Ladd with various attractive women and, indeed, Ladd in just a pair of boxer shorts takes centre stage in one advertisement (Figure 5.4), marketing the film on his desirability alone. A film critic of the time wrote cynically (*Motion Picture Herald* 1949):

> Clearly, then, the thing for an exhibitor to do in proffering '*The Great Gatsby*' to the public is to shout loudly about the star, ignoring all else, and collect the cash from contented Ladd customers. Advertising copy mentioning more than the Ladd presence favourably comes under the head of reckless gambling. (p. 4591)

The promotion of Ladd tended to distort audience expectations as to the kind of film they were about to see. Whilst star endorsements were the norm at this time, the link to the commercial stands directly in contrast to the ultimate message of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) as a critique of the 'careless people' who retreat back into their 'money [...] and let other people clean up the mess' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 170).

The pressbook of 1949 (Paramount Studios 1949) reveals that attendant marketing efforts included some rather dubious ties to Jeris Antiseptic Hair Tonic, American Safety Razor Company (ASR) cigarette lighters and Kitchen-Kraft fitted kitchens (p. 19). The 1949 film was also expected to increase interest in Fitzgerald's novel, forming a reciprocal promotional relationship between the film's release and bookstores and libraries. A headline in the pressbook trumpets without subtlety, 'Exploitation ... National tie-ups open way to local aid' as though the studio's motives are purely altruistic (pp. 18–19). It also ties the marketing to Fitzgerald's status (Paramount Studios 1949):

> The fact that 'The Great Gatsby' is based on the novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald, one of the world's best-read writers, gives you a strong peg for co-op promotion with local book stores and libraries. (p. 18)

What is interesting is to compare the extensive but still relatively modest marketing efforts in 1949 with those that followed. In the 1970s, marketing messages were to become even more confusing. Various delays during the pre-production of the 1974 version caused an already-large budget to skyrocket. Truman Capote had been drafted to write a script that was

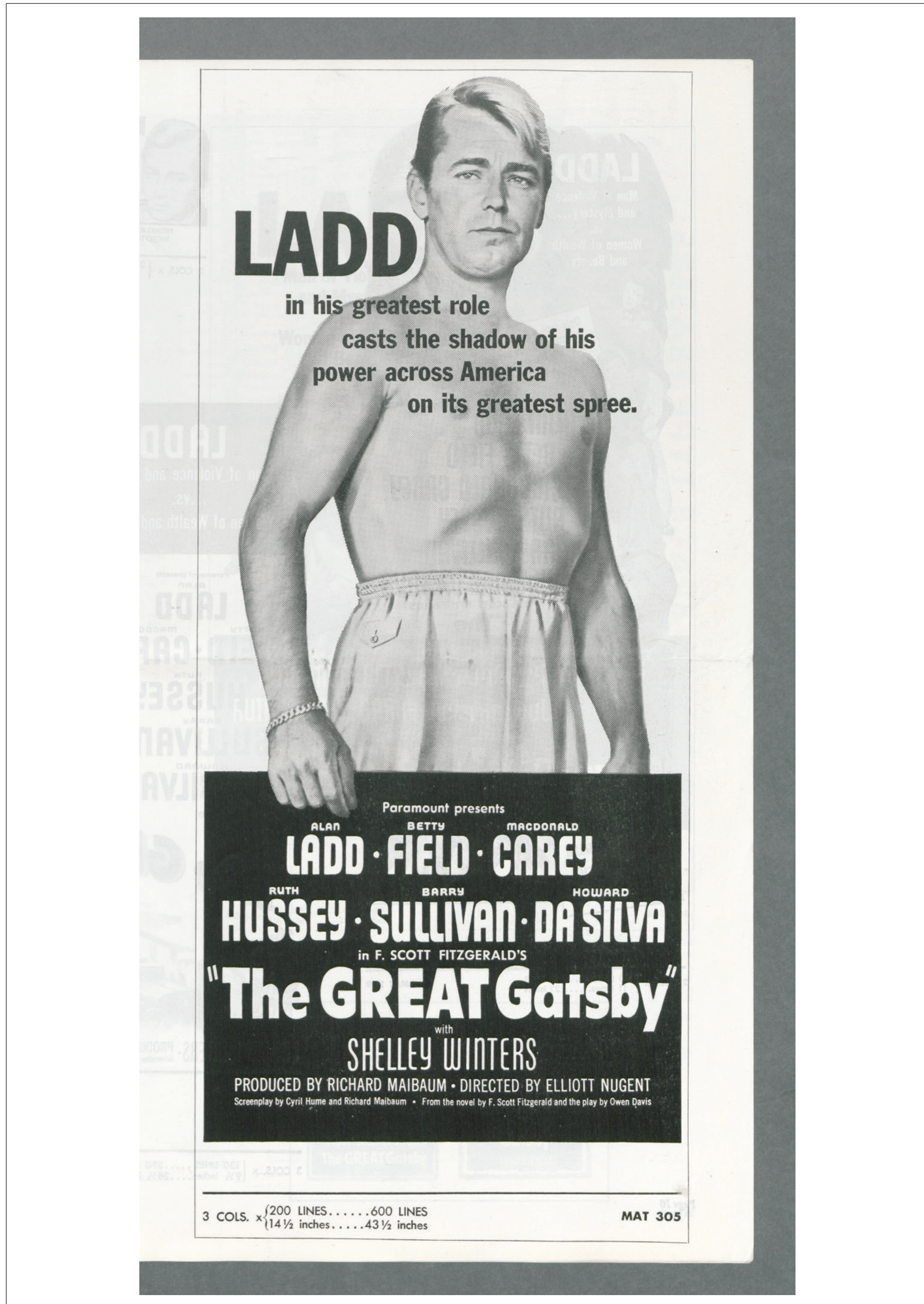

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FIGURE 5.4: Publicity poster from the *Paramount Press Book: The Great Gatsby* (1949) depicting Alan Ladd in boxer shorts.

ultimately felt to be unworkable (Rosen 1974b, p. 49). This caused a delay that added to the costs. Time is a crucial factor in filmmaking, with stars and technicians being kept on retainer, locations that must be rebooked and so on. Clayton commented that US$2 million dollars were lost because of the film's delayed start (Rosen 1974b, p. 49). However, this should not entirely obscure the fact that the overall approach to the adaptation was an expensive one, and deliberately so. Again in Clayton's words: 'Making a period film, with those clothes and those cars, unfortunately, costs money. You need a teamster for every car' (Rosen 1974b, p. 49). Detail and the perception of historical accuracy were considered to be of great importance, which was expensive. Laurence (1973, p. 54), the reporter who sneaked onto the set, wrote that there were 'some tremendous and expensive-looking, as well as expensive, sets. You can see where the money is going, and believe me it's going!'

Atkins (1974) wrote that Clayton's *The Great Gatsby* (1974) was:

> Undoubtedly the most highly publicised and ambitious remake in motion picture memory […] Paramount Studio's publicists linked Gatsby with the sale of clothing and cooking utensils, and made the word 'hype' a concomitant of the film'. (p. 216)

Indeed, the pressbook shows that Paramount Pictures had entered into national promotions with Teflon ('Classic white Teflon: In the tradition of "The Great Gatsby"'), Ballantine's Scotch and Glemby Hair Salons ('After you've seen "The Great Gatsby", get the cut') (Paramount Studios & Newdon Company 1974, n.p.) (see Figure 5.5). Each features an image or reference to the film.

A nervous studio went all out to market the film to the extent that *Time Magazine* devoted its 18 March 1974 cover to what it called '*The Great Gatsby* Supersell'. Clayton himself described the film as 'violently overpublicised' (Rosen 1974b, p. 49). As journalist Laurence (1973, p. 26) put it, 'a huge amount of money is at stake'. In Clayton's words, 'Paramount does have a right […] to try and get the money back with big bookings' (Rosen 1974b, p. 50). These big bookings ensured that the film did well initially, even if there was little trade forward. Although advance publicity resulted in 18.6 million in-advance bookings, according to *Time Magazine* (1974), the overall box office was 20.5 million (*IMDb*, 'Box office: *The Great Gatsby* (1974)' 2021) in the USA and Canada, suggesting that little business was done after the advance sales.

Although 1974's *The Great Gatsby* purportedly made back its money (Phillips 1986, p. 123), it was by no means the great hit predicted. According to Desmond, the film cost US$13 million dollars to make (2006, p. 244) rather than the US$6.5 million that is usually cited on sites such as *IMDb.com* ('Box office: *The Great Gatsby* (1974)' 2021). This would make the film a financial failure. The level of hype suggests that promotion costs (not counted as part of the production cost) were also high.

Promotion

SPECIAL NATIONAL PROMOTIONS

Paramount Pictures has arranged a multi-million dollar series of national product tie-in promotions that will gain the greatest impact when utilized in your local market. The major companies and products involved are as follows:
DuPont—Classic White Teflon ("In the Tradition of THE GREAT GATSBY")
Glemby Hair Salons—"The Gatsby Cut"
Robert Bruce Men's Sportswear—"Gatsby U.S.A." Sports Clothes
Ballantine Scotch—"Gatsby's Parties . . . Ballantine's was there"
All four of these manufacturers have numerous local retailers in your area.

Immediately check out your key local department stores to determine which carry the above product lines, and make arrangements to develop a GATSBY total store promotion that will incorporate not only the above but the books and soundtrack album as well in what will surely be the most effective tie-in promotional project in the history of your theatre.

The GATSBY groundwork has been laid for you, it will now take a bit of initiative, time, and effort on your part to assure that the promotion reaches its full potential of success.

SEE PARAMOUNT PICTURES' "THE GREAT GATSBY" STARRING MIA FARROW AND ROBERT REDFORD

GATSBY TIME

THE ESSENCE OF THE 20'S IN SPORTSWEAR FOR THE 70'S

GATSBY U.S.A. by ROBERT BRUCE

AFTER YOU'VE SEEN 'THE GREAT GATSBY,' GET THE CUT.

First it was a book by the brilliant F. Scott Fitzgerald.
Then it became a major trend in fashion and hairstyling. (In fact, we at Glemby Salons have been credited for introducing the Gatsby cut all over the world.)

Finally, "The Great Gatsby" has been faithfully reproduced as a motion picture by Paramount.
So if you haven't gotten into the new "Gatsby" look yet, wait 'til you see the motion picture.

Then go to any one of the more than 500 Glemby Hair Salons (listed on the right hand page) and ask for the Gatsby cut.
Just tell 'em Daisy sent you.

GLEMBY HAIR SALONS

IN THE TRADITION OF "THE GREAT GATSBY"

There was a time when men wore white flannels and loved the cool elegance of girls in white pleats.
When a summer picnic and a snappy white roadster were signs of a sweet and glorious life.

Paramount recalls those times and brings you "The Great Gatsby."
Du Pont recalls those times and brings you TEFLON* in a shade of that Gatsby era. Classic White.

Still beautifully no-stick and easy-clean. But now beautifully white, as well as black and chocolate brown.

TEFLON in Classic White.
At the same fine stores where you always shop for cookware.

IMPROVED TEFLON II

TEFLON GOES CLASSIC WHITE

DU PONT

Ballantine's Scotch was there.

"The Great Gatsby"

A summer night in Long Island. The sound of a saxaphone suspended over the water. Floodlights and fountains and 40 acres of people. Gatsby was having a lawn party.
Nobody had actually been invited, but they all came. The young, the rich, and the gorgeously eccentric. Men in white flannels up from "the street" and giggly girls fresh from the Follies. Obscure princesses escorted by their chauffeurs dancing in and out of the fountains.
They would never run out of liquor. They would never run out of laughter. Had they invented the "Jazz Age" or had the Jazz Age invented them? Paramount brings it all back in the motion picture, "The Great Gatsby."
Ballantine's was there. Like the era, the scotch with style.

Taste the scotch that was there
Ballantine's

Inspired by scenes from Paramount Pictures "The Great Gatsby"

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FIGURE 5.5: Publicity poster from the *Paramount Press Book and Merchandising Manual: The Great Gatsby* (1974) illustrating national promotions.

The atmosphere of commerce surrounding the 1974 adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* encouraged meanings which veered away from the ambiguities of Fitzgerald's depiction of the rich and toward an unapologetic materialism. Laurence (1973, p. 53) perhaps expresses the popular view, 'Does it need the big treatment? Sure it does. It deals with the age of opulence, of extravagance, of happy carefree people'. Laurence encapsulates the desire for immersive escapist entertainment that many viewers must have hoped for – and, indeed, that films have come to be known for. Instead, viewers were confronted with the eventual sourness of Gatsby's fate.

Another aspect of the Paramount advertising, as revealed in the 1974 *Paramount Great Gatsby Pressbook and Merchandising Manual*, was an intense and deliberate nostalgia. This was problematic in terms of Badiou (2002, p. 73) as evoking 'not the void but the "full" particularity of presumed substance of that situation', and also acting as a denial rather than a remaking of the contemporary moment (Vooght 2018, p. 29). Whereas the advertising in 1949 reflected a scattered approach with different views and depictions of Ladd, the 1974 pressbook shows a very controlled approach in this aspect of promotion (see Figure 5.6). A single tagline is repeated throughout, and this tagline emphasises a nostalgic approach to the theme: 'Gone is the romance that was so divine' (Paramount Studios & Newdon Company 1974, n.p.).

A primary image of Gatsby and Daisy is repeated. Again, this image creates the expectation of romance and escapist entertainment. Nostalgia bathes the images of the past in a rosy glow that sanitises disquieting elements. Raw notes that this creates a kind of façade (Raw & Tutan 2012, p. 8), the sort of evasion that Fitzgerald's theme does not easily allow. Unfortunately, the film trailer presented the romance as the key thematic element. The trailer boldly introduces 'F Scott Fitzgerald's great love story, "*The Great Gatsby*"' (min. 1:44), and further goes on (echoing the more authentically driven words of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*), 'it was a time of hope; it was a time of wonder, it was, most of all, a time of romance – a precious time together' (*YouTube Movies* 2013, min. 1:54). The trailer wholly sold the film on the Gatsby–Daisy romance, leading to audiences feeling misled and betrayed when they were, in fact, presented with a sour story about unlikeable people.

The fashionable setting of the 1920s in America that *The Great Gatsby* (1974) aimed to recreate created additional commercial tie-ins to be exploited: 'Every magazine you open now seems to feature a spread on the languid, floating, shimmering Gatsby fashions from the new movie' (Henry 1974, p. 15). Whilst supposedly aiming for the perfectly authentic 1920s look, inevitably this was conflated with a hint of the 1970s as 'the characters positively suffocate in their coordinated pastels' (Maslin 1977, p. 264). Whilst this reflects

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FIGURE 5.6: Publicity poster from the *Paramount Press Book and Merchandising Manual: The Great Gatsby* (1974) illustrating campaign publicity materials.

the context of the film, it is in a disavowed way that hides behind the supposed recreation of the 1920s. There is more than a hint of irony in commercialisation of the supposedly authentic, rendering it a kind of faux authenticity.

In 2013, this irony played out again. Costume designs for the film were inspired by the 1920s archive designs of clothier Brooks Brothers, emphasised as a firm once used by Fitzgerald himself (Evans 2013, n.p.). Brooks Brothers brought out its own corresponding 'The Great Gatsby Collection' for the man on the street, noting discreetly that they have updated the product: in the words of one contemporary journalist, 'giving the whole collection a sense of authenticity' whilst being brought 'bang up to date' (Burbano 2013, n.d.). The focus on a commercialised, faux historical accuracy is at odds with Badiou's idea of authentic contemporaneity as important for realising a fidelity (Vooght 2018, p. 29).

There is much that is ornamental in the 2013 *The Great Gatsby*. Luhrmann's desire to showcase the work of his producer and Oscar-winning costume-designer wife, Catherine Martin, may have influenced the film's choices. Film critic Chang (2013) notes this impact when he writes:

> Catherine Martin's production design and costumes are as staggering as you'd expect: Don't be surprised if your attention wanders from the nervous drama of Gatsby and Daisy's first reunion to an eye-catching selection of macarons. (p. 79)

There is the problem of the audience getting lost in the detail – at the same time, it indicates a 'levelling' of importance that goes against Badiou's ideas of value. Whilst the costumes are often spectacular and may be seen, as in the case of Jordan, to enhance the characterisation, they also serve as a distraction. For example, in the scene where Gatsby and Daisy reunite, her elaborately scarved head dominates the shot (see Figure 5.7); this takes

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FIGURE 5.7: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (2013) depicting Daisy's elaborate headgear.

away from the emotional content. In another scene, one's eye is caught throughout by a wayward tassel on her headgear (Vooght 2018, p. 29). Whilst an argument could be made that this helps to reinforce Daisy's artificiality, it leaves the audience less likely to forge an emotional connection; it also represents another possible kind of commercial motive in terms of self-promotion and tie-ins with Prada and Brooks Brothers, amongst others.

Marketing tie-ins in the 21st century are far less clunky than seen in the earlier days of Teflon and hair tonic. There are still overt product placement moments, with clearly labelled and displayed Moet champagne bottles, the Yellow Cab Company cab which drops Nick off at home, and Gatsby saying of Daisy, 'she looks like she could be on the cover of *Vogue*' (min. 58:50). However, in general, marketing techniques have become far more insidious and ubiquitous. For instance, film critic Thomson (2013, n.p.) writes, 'I dropped in on an early screening and the Warner Bros had hired people to wear '20s clothes!'. Social media is used to influence consumers, popularising trends such as the post-*The Great Gatsby* (2013) party craze, with the result being an overdetermination of the pleasures of consumerism (Vooght 2018, p. 30). Unlike Clayton, however, Luhrmann relished the marketing as a means to command the big budget he wanted (Griggs 2016, p. 209). The cost of *The Great Gatsby* (2013) was estimated at US$105 million (*IMDb* Box office: *The Great Gatsby* (2013) 2021). Many film critics predicted a failure for this film which proved to be a box office success, according to *IMDb.com* taking US$354.5 million worldwide (2021).

Reviewing *The Great Gatsby* adaptations

Film reviews are other paratexts that inform the perception of the film itself. The favourable response of a film critic is not cited in this book as proof that a film is good; neither does a poor review prove the opposite. Rather, the reviews provide some way of accessing how the films were perceived when they came out (this is not intended to be comprehensive but rather to give an impression of the response – see ch. 4). This gives clues to whether they were approached with an attitude that somehow foreclosed the set. The reviews are also put forward as a part of what may have foreclosed the set for the audience, being one of the lenses through which the films were viewed. As McKee (2001, p. 10) writes in relation to audience research, 'audience members draw from publicly available knowledges in order to make sense of texts'; film reviews form a part of this structuring knowledge.

Film critics' views need not always echo those of the audience but also attempt to shape them. In the case of a film adaptation, film critics may set themselves up as 'guardians' of culture but are also required to align with the

likely views of their readers according to the publications they publish for (Bourdieu & Nice 1980, p. 272). As previously cited, Bourdieu writes that film critics aim to 'defend the ideological interests of their clientele' (Bourdieu & Nice 1980, p. 278). He also rightly notes the use of 'judgements that are kept ambiguous by many reservations, nuances, and academic attenuations' (pp. 275–276). This hedging of bets can be seen in particular in reviews of the 2013 *The Great Gatsby*. Foundas (2013) writes, 'Cinema audiences can prove as fickle and elusive as Daisy Buchanan, too, but it's a *fair bet*' that the cast, soundtrack and 'sheer curiosity' will attract them (n.p.; [author's added emphasis]). All these factors render the judgements of reviews potentially suspect. And yet they are worth considering – they provide a flavour of the criticism and how the films were talked about at the time. They show through which lenses the audience was encouraged to view them; their judgements form a part of the paratextual readings of the text. Particularly of interest is the way in which these reviews talk about fidelity.

Reviewing 1926

The response to the 1926 version seemed broadly neutral.[34] As discussed in the section 'Marketing *The Great Gatsby*', reviews such as the one in the *Kinematograph Weekly* (1927, p. 50) often at least partially replicated what appears to be studio-supplied synopses and material. Amongst the less standardised reviews, it was certainly not considered to be of a very high standard – for example, Hall in *The New York Times* (1926, n.p.) describes it without too much enthusiasm as 'quite a good entertainment'; the *Bioscope* (1927, p. 56) describes it as a 'somewhat involved story' with 'good average attraction' and *Variety* as both 'serviceable' and 'gripping' for the 'average fan' ('Abel' 1926, p. 14). On the negative side, Warner Baxter, acting as Gatsby, was in particular criticised for overacting that was 'bordering on the ridiculous' (*Bioscope* 1927, p. 56).

It is intriguing that a scene that was, in fact, directly taken from the novel of Daisy being drunk on her wedding day came in for the most criticism – perhaps primarily because of prudishness.[35] In the novel, Jordan tells how she found Daisy (Fitzgerald 1950):

> [...] lying on the bed as lovely as the June night in her flowered dress – and as drunk as a monkey. She had a bottle of Sauterne in one hand and a letter in the other. (p. 74)

34. This was echoed by the film's middling box office, neither good nor bad (Mastandrea 2022, pp. 198–199).

35. The frequent display of bare legs met with similar prudish comments from reviewers (see Mastandrea 2022, pp. 208–210).

A film critic in the *Bioscope* (1927, [*author's added emphasis*]) wrote at the time of the film:

> There are one or two episodes which should decidedly be cut, notably one in which the girl is shown lying on her bed drunk on her wedding morning, *for no obvious dramatic purpose*. (p. 56)

However, a contemporary review in *The New York Times* suggests even this scene was exaggerated for melodramatic effect, which may have been part of the problem: 'She takes enough of this beverage (absinthe) to render the average person unconscious and yet she appears only mildly intoxicated' (Hall 1926, n.p.). The Sauterne has also become exaggerated into absinthe. Fitzgerald's description of Daisy is both sad and funny with Daisy's drunken use of 'pidgin' English that ensures she will not be taken seriously: 'Tell 'em all Daisy's change' her mine. Say: "Daisy's change' her mine!"' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 74). Rather than emphasising Daisy's confusion and despair, as well as her childlike qualities and passive capacity to submit to control by others, the scene apparently became comical for the wrong reasons – because of its exaggerated and unrealistic depiction.

Moral attitudes of the time also infected the review in the *Kinematograph Weekly* (1927):

> The trouble is that all the characters are morally unsound. Daisy gets drunk on her wedding morning, kills a woman in car accident, and drives on; Jay is a swindler, and ready to take another man's wife; while the husband is unfaithful, and responsible morally both for Jay's murder and Wilson's suicide. (p. 50)

Interpretations that put the Buchanans morally on a par with Jay Gatsby are clearly problematic. Whilst the film, in fact, aimed to redeem the Buchanans, this was only partially accepted by the audience (Mastandrea 2022, p. 224).

More positively, *The Stoll Herald*'s mention of the story as a 'blend of romance, intrigue and satire' does suggest that at least some of Fitzgerald's humour survived (1927, p. 3). Hall (1926) mentions that:

> [*A*] clever bit of comedy is introduced by a girl asking what Gatsby is throwing into the water, and as soon as this creature hears that they are real gold pieces, she unhesitatingly plunges into the pool to get a share. (n.p.)

However, reviews such as those in *The Stoll Herald* (1927, p. 3) also seem to set forward a subtly wrong interpretation of the theme: 'Gatsby wonders to himself whether all the wealth in the world can compensate for the love he has missed'. This suggests that the film did not adequately convey that Gatsby's wealth was intended to attract Daisy rather than to compensate for her loss, or possibly that the film critic (or the film itself) misrepresented this point.

The limited technical possibilities of the pre-sound era doubtless exacerbated the difficulties of conveying the subtler aspects of Fitzgerald's tale. Another telling criticism of the 1926 *The Great Gatsby* by a film critic

of the time was that the intertitles were poorly written (Cohen 1974, p. 139), suggesting that the quality of Fitzgerald's prose was undoubtedly lost. Whilst there were nods to Fitzgerald's text (it seems the film's last intertitle began with the famed last lines of *The Great Gatsby* (1925), 'So we beat on' [Mastandrea 2022, p. 222]), these were interspersed with vapid comments about Gatsby's death bringing happiness to others.

Overall, the broadly neutral critical reaction, populated mainly with 'puff pieces' (Robinson 2014, n.p.) intended to get punters through the doors of a cinema, was in keeping with the view, appropriate at the time, that the film was popular entertainment rather than an adaptation of one of the works of the American Canon. People who really cared about the novel – like the Fitzgeralds – found the film intolerable: 'We saw "*The Great Gatsby*" in the movies. It's ROTTEN and awful and terrible and we left', wrote Zelda Fitzgerald (Mellow 1984, p.281; [*emphasis in the original*]). This suggests the Fitzgeralds were uncomfortable even before the revised ending.

Reviewing 1949

The Great Gatsby (1949) was again not regarded as anything more than light entertainment: *The Film User* (1952, p. 134) described it as 'dramatic but gloomy' and the *Motion Picture Herald* (1949, p. 4591) as 'average', whilst *The New York Times* (Crowther 1949, n.p.) referred to its 'dutiful plotting'. The reaction to the film appears to have been muted at best, apart from puff pieces such as the one in *To-day's Cinema* (1949, p. 14), which trumpets, 'powerful story [...] eloquent direction, flawless all-round portrayal, revealing crowd-work'. This has the smack of studio-prepared material, especially when the review goes on to state (*To-day's Cinema* 1949):

> Script-writers, directors and stars have combined to do a handsome job on the old Scott Fitzgerald classic, which many exhibitors recall as already a film winner in the pre-talkie days. (p. 14)

References to Fitzgerald's novel feature strongly in the reviews. However, one gets the impression from the contemporary reviews that Fitzgerald – whose reputation was at that point only just beginning to rebound – was viewed as a somewhat outmoded and inconsequential author. *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is described as the 'old Scott Fitzgerald classic' in *To-day's Cinema* (1949, p. 14), and as 'the famed but dated novel by the late F Scott Fitzgerald' in the *Motion Picture Herald* (1949, p. 4591).

The more negative the review, the more positive the film critic seems about Fitzgerald, which, again, is somewhat telling when thinking about the book–adaptation relationship. Having written a scalding review of the film, Crowther (1949, n.p.) speaks of 'F Scott Fitzgerald's classic story', and

Time Magazine (1949) notes that the adaptation represented a missed opportunity to portray the filmic elements of Fitzgerald's text, which, according to them, was not a tricky modernist text with paradoxical and ambiguous elements, but had 'everything a moviemaker could ask for'.

One of the primary criticisms at the time seems to have been the inadequate portrayal of the 1920s. This is interesting considering the studio's pressure on Maibaum to play down this element as unacceptable to the audience of the 1940s (Atkins 1974, pp. 218–219). A film critic for the *Motion Picture Herald* (1949) writes:

> The thing made a sort of sense in the garish period of glittering speakeasies, sophisticated flappers, socially-minded gangsters and decadent socialites, but the picture fails to re-create the period at all convincingly with the result that the things the strictly period-fashioned characters do and say are totally lacking in conviction. (p. 4591)

Crowther (1949), writing in *The New York Times*, makes a similar point:

> Except for a few pictorial tracings of parties and brittle high-life, the flavor of the Prohibition era is barely reflected in this new film [...] The period of the nineteen twenties is briefly and inadequately sketched. (n.p.)

Nugent's direction also came in for consistent criticism, with *Variety* writing that 'Elliott Nugent's direction skips along the surface of the era' (*Variety* staff 1948), whilst the *Motion Picture Herald* states, 'directed with manifest unease by Elliott Nugent' (1949, p. 4591) and Crowther (1949, n.p.) writes, 'Elliott Nugent's handling of the cast and of supposedly significant behaviour is completely artificial and stiff'.

Most film critics noted the dependence on Alan Ladd to carry the film – and their final verdict seemed to largely depend on how they viewed his performance. There were differing opinions here. On the one hand, his performance was not universally panned: 'His personality [...] gives a semblance of meaning to the diffuse story line' (*Motion Picture Herald* 1949, p. 4591); 'Ladd handles his characterisation ably' (*Variety* staff 1948, n.p.). However, Ladd's presence was a definite negative for other critics, and he was characterised in terms of his star persona: 'a charm boy' playing his usual 'stock character' (Crowther 1949, n.p.).

Reviewing 1974

The less-than-positive reviews for *The Great Gatsby* (1949) pale into insignificance next to the 'almost universal critical vitriol' received by the 1974 version (Rosen 1974a, p. 43), which Maslin (1977) noted also extended to the public reaction:

> Outside the theatre, the pavement was littered with crumpled up programs that looked as if they'd been thrown rather than dropped. The audience straggled

> away looking resentful, confused and – above all else – miserably *betrayed*. (p. 262; [*emphasis in the original*])

Having been subjected, as described in the previous section, to an onslaught of hype, the anger when the promised film failed to satisfy the expectations raised was extreme: as scholar Atkins (1974, p. 216) mourns: 'In spite of, or perhaps because of, the supersell, critical judgement […] ranged from lukewarm to devastating'.

A consensus emerged around various aspects of the film that were found wanting – overproduction, emotional numbness and, notably, what was described as excessive faithfulness. It was felt to be ponderous in tone and length. Houston (1973, p. 177) writes 'it embalms the novel'; Cocks (1974, n.p.) that it is 'a dull, dreadful movie'; Maslin (1977, p. 264) that it has a 'cold, narcissistic beauty, admiring its own image'; for Ebert (1974, n.p.), it is a 'superficially beautiful hunk of a movie'.

Ebert also focuses much of his critique around a supposedly failed fidelity to the spirit. The film has 'nothing much in common with the spirit of F Scott Fitzgerald's novel' and 'the movie is "faithful" to the novel with a vengeance – to what happens in the novel, that is, and not to the feel, mood, and spirit of it' (Ebert 1974, n.p.). As Canby (1974, n.p.) says, 'the story […] isn't the reason that "*The Great Gatsby*" haunts us'. Cocks (1974, n.p.) writes: 'The film is faithful to the letter of F Scott Fitzgerald's novel but entirely misses its spirit'.

Thus, plot fidelity did not, for the film critics, capture the elusive spirit of *The Great Gatsby* (1925). If, as sometimes claimed, Fitzgerald's appeal lies primarily in his use of language, Clayton's *The Great Gatsby* (1974) attempts to access this, using large chunks of Fitzgerald's prose transposed verbatim. And yet this was also felt to be unsuccessful by the film critics: 'Much of Fitzgerald's prose has been preserved […] but it only gives the film a stilted, stuffy tone' (Cocks 1974, n.p.); 'a great deal of Fitzgerald's text has in this way been transferred to the screen […]. Yet the novel's substance has largely vanished' (Canby 1974, n.p.). Ebert (1974, n.p.; [*author's added emphasis*]) criticises a film that '*plundered* Fitzgerald's novel so *literally*' containing 'narration by Nick that is based pretty closely on his narration in the novel' with the damning words: 'We don't feel. We've been distanced by the movie's overproduction'.

This overproduction and 'eye-boggling' attention to the detail of the 1920s (Canby 1974, n.p.) proved distracting to many. As Houston (1973, p. 177) puts it, 'Gatsby's particular dream of recreating the past becomes submerged in the movie's dream of recreating the 1920s', with Clayton 'as captivated by the bounties of wealth as Gatsby was' (Ebert 1974, n.p.). 'The automobiles are stunning', writes Canby (1974, n.p.), condemning the rest of the film to obscurity.

Some of the blame was placed on miscasting of the leads. Bruce Dern as Tom Buchanan and Sam Waterstone as Nick came in for more praise, but it tended to be qualified: 'Sam Waterston makes a gentle, intelligent Nick, *but* the role is largely passive' (Cocks 1974, n.p.; [*author's added emphasis*]) and 'even the actors seem somewhat cowed by the occasion; *an exception is* Bruce Dern' (Ebert 1974, n.p.; [*author's added emphasis*]). It is difficult to find a positive review of any depth published at the time: Gow's in the magazine *Films and Filming* is an exception. Gow (1974, p. 46) praises Sam Waterstone's understated performance and the 'strong magnetism' of the film's 'cinematic quality'.

What is notable about the aforementioned, even allowing for cross-pollination between film critics, is the extraordinary level of consensus about the film's problems. Notably, most film critics found fault with the film's attempt at fidelity through the replication of detail.

Reviewing 2013

Despite the problems of 1974, Hollywood brought out another big-budget version of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in 2013. The results divided the film critics rather than meeting with the almost united level of opprobrium that *The Great Gatsby* (1974) attracted.

The more positive film critics tended to view the success of Luhrmann's version as somehow dependent on its decoupling from Fitzgerald's novel, challenging the idea of fidelity's supposed importance in the audience's minds (Hermansson 2015, p. 149). As previously noted, Luhrmann is accorded by some film critics an auteur status that grants him the heft to make his own interpretation of Fitzgerald's novel. Debruge (2013, p. 79; [*author's added emphasis*]) writes, in a positive review, 'whether or not one appreciates what Luhrmann has done with "Gatsby" is almost secondary to the achievement of making such a well-known work *his own*', whilst Fallon (2013, n.p.; [*author's added emphasis*]) is quoted as saying: 'But if you look at it on its *own* terms, it's really interesting'. Robledo (2013, n.p.; [*author's added emphasis*]) writes: 'Commit to it fully as its *own entity*, a *re-invention* as much as Jay Gatsby himself is, and you'll be transported and affected', and McCarthy (2013, n.p.; [*author's added emphasis*]), 'Luhrmann must be given credit for delivering a real *interpretation* of the famous 1925 novel, something not seriously attempted by the previous two big screen adaptations'.

Correspondingly, those who were more critical of Luhrmann extolled the virtues of Fitzgerald. For example, Denby (2013, p. 89; [*author's added emphasis*]) states that Fitzgerald's 'illusionless book resists destruction even from the most *aggressive and powerful despoilers*'. Note the emotive language used that suggests an attack on a hallowed object, indicative of

Fitzgerald's canonisation in the American context. The delicacy of Fitzgerald's novel is set against the heavy-handedness of Luhrmann's approach. For example, French (2013) writes that it 'tramples on Fitzgerald's exquisite prose' (n.p.) and Sexton (2013) that 'beneath such bombast, the book's delicacy disappears' (n.p.). The most vitriolic (and emotive) comments come from Charity (2013), who seems to embody Bourdieau's notion of the critic as custodian of culture when he claims that Luhrmann's film:

> [/]s misconceived and misjudged, a crude burlesque on what's probably American literature's *most precious jewel* [...] Fitzgerald's '*The Great Gatsby*' will *endure this indignity* as surely as it outlasted previous versions. (n.p.; [*author's added emphasis*])

What is it then about Luhrmann's style that was felt to be unsuccessful cinematically in *The Great Gatsby*? Film critics' criticism tended to fall into the following areas – his handling of the cinematic canvas, the lack of build or pacing, the reification and literalisation of Fitzgerald's prose, his direction of the actors and (notably) the shallowness of his conception. They also questioned the effectiveness of his frantic *mise-en-scène* and technical innovations, such as montage and 3D.

A repeated criticism is that the film is 'overstuffed' (Robledo 2013, n.p.) with 'overstatement and noise, both visually and aurally' (French 2013, n.p.). Nathan (2013, n.p.) writes: 'The screen is ready to burst. What decadence! What superficiality!' Denby (2013, p. 89) echoes this: 'So many hurtling, ecstatic bodies and objects that you can't see much of anything in particular'. This overstimulation is felt as 'distracting and hard to enjoy' (Robledo 2013, n.p.). The spectacle was felt to detract from the audience's emotional engagement, ultimately acting more as a distraction than as stimulation.

This over-accumulation of detail (Moore 2013, n.p.) was also felt to impact upon the film's pacing: Morris (2013, n.p.) writes of its 'many climaxes' noting that 'the movie doesn't gather as it goes. This is Luhrmann [...] He thinks every shot, every microcut, is significant'; Charity (2013, n.p.), in a similar vein, writes that 'the movie [...] just keeps hitting the same high notes until we go numb to the din'. The lack of build within the narrative structure appeared to be indicative of an obsession with detail at the expense of creating the moral trajectory of Fitzgerald's story.

Luhrmann is the first of the directors to exploit the potential of the film medium through the use filmic devices such as 3D, non-naturalistic colour and floating text (Vooght 2018, p. 28). Some felt the 3D throws the film 'off-kilter' (Nathan 2013, n.p.) and has 'thrown off his rhythm' (Charity 2013, n.p.). More positively, McCarthy writes of the 3D that it is 'drawing you in as if escorting you through a series of opening gates, doors and

emotional states' (McCarthy 2013, n.p.). As Foundas (2013) writes, Luhrmann uses:

> Every manipulation he can think of – sepia flashbacks, smash zooms, split screens, superimpositions, period newsreel footage, new footage degraded to resemble period newsreel footage –all of it coming at you in three stereoscopic dimensions. Only occasionally does the style seem like an actual response to the text rather than a visual circus operating independently of it. (n.p.)

Also, in a non-realist vein, the superimposition of floating words of Fitzgerald's text on-screen was not met with appreciation (see Chang 2013; Ehrlich 2017; Reinstein 2013). French (2013, n.p.) writes: 'This is a film that tramples on Fitzgerald's exquisite prose, turning the oblique into the crude, the suggestively symbolic into the declaratively monumental, the abstract into the flatly real', embodying the film critic as the self-appointed custodian of culture, but nonetheless hinting at the reifying effects of Luhrmann's strategies.

Film critics noticed this literalisation and reification throughout. Denby (2013, p. 89) writes, 'The filmmakers have literalised Fitzgerald's conceit that Nick wrote the text'. Moore (2013, n.p.) writes that the film has a 'noble literalism. It appreciates the surfaces of Fitzgerald's novel [...] It meticulously presents and builds everything that Fitzgerald describes, using computer generation as a substitute for imagination' (n.p.). Foundas (2013) agrees:

> Scrutinised by the camera's gaze, Fitzgerald's beautifully deployed symbols and signifiers become leaden with portent [...] With Luhrmann at the helm, those devices loom larger and more literal than ever. (n.p.)

For all Luhrmann's postmodern tricks, there is still a plodding commitment to the text. Chang (2013, p.79) similarly describes Luhrmann's film as 'thuddingly literal-minded' with a 'lumbering and unimaginative fidelity to the page'.

Film critics were unsure if the more successful aspects of the film, largely seen as the portrayal of Gatsby himself, were because of Luhrmann's skill or personally brought about by the actor, DiCaprio. Film critics lauded his performance.[36] Seitz (2013, n.p.) writes that 'DiCaprio's Gatsby is the movie's greatest and simplest special effect'. Nathan (2013, n.p.) asserts that DiCaprio 'seems to have a better grasp of the material than his director, sensing the depths beneath the character'. Charisma and an intelligent performance combine to provide an effective Jay Gatsby: 'It is impossible to look away from him [...] he is beautiful, sad, confident and desperate in exactly the way Gatsby should be' (Scott 2013, n.p.). DiCaprio seems to have been the key area of agreement for the critics. There were mixed reactions to the film's other, tacit lead, Tobey Maguire as Nick Carraway:

36. Including Seitz (2013), Nathan (2013), Scott (2013), Morris (2013), McCarthy (2013), Denby (2013), Erlich (2017), Robeldo (2013) and Sexton (2013).

Maguire is either 'a bit too bewildered, too awkward and unknowing' (Brody 2013, n.p.) or 'a fine, lonely Nick Carraway' (Denby 2013, p. 89).

Morris makes an interesting statement when he writes, 'DiCaprio and Maguire are the only Americans in major roles [...] and the accents have no consistent sense of place' (Morris 2013, n.p.). The choice of famed Indian actor Amitabh Bachchan to play the Jewish gangster Wolfshiem, a choice put down to avoiding anti-semitism (French 2013; Denby 2013),[37] left critics bemused: 'This makes no sense, as the gangster's name remains Wolfshiem and Tom later refers to him as "that kike"' (Denby 2013, n.p.). In essence, the Americanness of the tale is felt to be undermined in the hands of the 'Australian showman' (McCarthy 2013, n.p.).[38]

Seeing through the paratexts

Paratexts form part of the lens through which films are viewed. In Badiou's conception, openness to an evental site must be both true to its specific moment in time *and* an open, authentic engagement. If Fitzgerald's novel is taken as the potential evental site for the adaptations, paratextual lenses representing aspects of culture can work against film's ability to be contemporary and yet remain separate from the state's fixed functions. The contemporary environment, which should become an energising factor, may instead interfere with the process of remaining 'faithful to a fidelity' (Badiou 2002, p. 47) as studios and creatives are pushed to make choices that work against a fresh and connected approach to the material.

As I have discussed in Chapter 3, Fitzgerald's canonical status in America served to rigidify meanings around *The Great Gatsby* (1925), claiming it as a part of national identity and mythology. The novel's status, whilst fluctuating, at times interfered by encouraging foreclosures of the set, indicated by Nugent's difficulty in approaching the adaptation and the wild disjuncts between Clayton's desired conception of the film and that of the publicists. Clayton's defence, dependent on a 'traditional' concept of fidelity that he has 'made the book' (Atkins 1974, p. 221), does not stand up well against Luhrmann's desire to 'reveal the book'. Indeed, many film critics gave Luhrmann a free hand to do as he liked with the adaptation, dependent on their acceptance of him as an auteur and a kind of parallel genius to Fitzgerald. Yet in many ways, through his focus on reproducing in film elements of Fitzgerald's prose, Luhrmann

37. In 1926, Wolfshiem became Charles Wolf and in 1949, in the wake of the Holocaust, the character's name was changed entirely to the more indeterminate Myron Lupus.

38. Atkins (1974, p. 226) voices similar concerns about the 1974 *The Great Gatsby*, writing, 'an American classic as a novel, was American in only one aspect of the film's production, the music' (1974, p. 226).

remained book-bound, not wishing to take a radically open approach to the evental site of the novel, but instead seeking to gain from Fitzgerald's cultural value.

The interference or commercial 'noise' around the productions brought more pre-existing frameworks into play, with marketing efforts attempting to categorise each adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* as either romance (1974, 2013) or an action-packed gangster film (1949), thereby creating erroneous audience expectations of a comfortable and familiar viewing experience. The paratexts provided a way of seeing that, in these cases, was foreclosing. These disjuncts were not, as in Fitzgerald's novel, unresolvable elements that enliven each other and support openness but the result of attempts to suppress open meanings. Crass marketing efforts, such as using the adaptations to sell Teflon and hair tonic, focused only on the materialistic elements of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and thus attempted a dogmatic approach to this aspect of fidelity to the text. The attempt to remove the ambiguities of *The Great Gatsby*'s (1925) depiction of consumerism again served to foreclose the set.

Film critics set out their judgements and hoped their readership would see the adaptations through their own lens. By 2013, many critics clearly wished to show a greater intellectual familiarity with the source text and a more nuanced view of a fidelity based on correspondence that made it clear that transposition should not be a goal. Again, film critics who were excessively focused on the need to protect Fitzgerald's cultural position had more difficulty in appreciating the adaptations.

Not all paratexts served as foreclosing. Star personas, at times, enhanced meaning by bringing authenticity and mystery to familiar roles. However, the visibility of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* dominated commercial choices and creative intentions, affecting the films' artistic organisation. This artistic organisation will be explored more fully in the next chapter.

Chapter 6

Textual elements of *The Great Gatsby*

> Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalks really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees. (Fitzgerald 1950, pp. 106–107)

Interpreting elements

In addition to the paratexts surrounding the film, the 'text' of the film itself offers more information on approaches, assumptions and attitudes operating in the attempt to adapt *The Great Gatsby* (1925) that are seminal to the operation of fidelity. As Kranz (2008; [*emphasis in the original*]) notes:

> By seeing what a screenplay, director, producer [...] kept and rejected or changed in a source document, we raise the *probability* that what gets into the film was consciously or unconsciously *intended*. (p. 203)

Whilst directors or producers may dissemble in interviews, the actual decisions taken in creating the adaptations, as evidenced in the film texts themselves, give further clarity on intention and approach.

This chapter will consider elements of Fitzgerald's narrative prose and compare the differing approaches to similar elements across the film adaptations. Aspects such as description, exposition, the handing of length, space and time, dialogue and sound and characterisation will be explored and related to the film adaptations. Themes and symbolism will be discussed in the following chapter. Of course, film elements do not exist in isolation,

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but sometimes considering them in (relative) isolation can be helpful. Chapter 8 will discuss how these elements work together in a key sequence.

Each of the film adaptations presents itself as in some way faithful to and linked with Fitzgerald's novel. This chapter will look at what is revealed by the adaptations' efforts to conform to or vary from the text of the novel and the cinematic means they use to do so.

In summary, this chapter will consider what the additions, omissions and changes from Fitzgerald's text tell us about the conception and intention of the filmmakers and whether these serve to support or foreclose the evental site of the novel.

■ Relating to Fitzgerald's prose

In Chapter 3, I discussed Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as an example of openness to an evental site. *The Great Gatsby* (1925) maintains its fidelity to the event of modernity, as 'named' by American modernism, through its use of paradox and contradiction. These ambiguous and undecidable elements leave the meanings of the novel more open. For the films to be faithful to the evental site of the novel within the adaptation, is a subtly differing position from the novel's faithfulness; for the films, this may involve a faithfulness to Fitzgerald's modernism but also an openness to the potential meanings of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) as the expression of an evental site. As previously discussed, the approach to all these aspects either forecloses or allows for the creation of new meanings. Thus, the film analysis will continue to look for meaningful openness, ambiguity, paradox and contradiction.

As discussed in previous chapters, these adaptations seek to connect strongly with Fitzgerald's text, thereby reinforcing their own commercial and cultural value (see ch. 4). In addition to paratextual elements, the Hollywood film adaptations of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) must also work to bring in recognisable elements to support these connections. This was achieved by incorporating recognisable characters and plot elements and, a much trickier task, by various strategies for incorporating the 'feel' of the novel – for example, the use of large quantities of Fitzgerald's own prose as dialogue and voice-over in the 1974 and 2013 versions, and attempts to transpose the novel's visual and musical references, especially those connected to the 1920s period, into the film's *mise-en-scène*.

Engelstad (2018, p. 37) notes that there is an expectation that in an adaptation not only is the 'source material recognizable in the film, in terms of plot structure, character depiction, and mood' but that the adaptation also 'corresponds to commonly held conceptions about the book or its author' including 'popular ideas'. Perhaps even more tricky was

to incorporate these commonly held ideas about *The Great Gatsby* (1925) – for example, the expectation of glitz and glamour by an audience that was unaware of or loath to acknowledge the ultimately tragic trajectory of the text. To put it baldly, in popular terms 'people seem enchanted enough by the decadence described in Fitzgerald's book to ignore its fairly obvious message of condemnation' (Seward & Quartz 2013, n.p.) – and that is if they have even read the book. As is not untypical of cinema, spectacle and visual aesthetics are privileged over critical and political critique.

Description

Kundu (2007, p. 146) notes that Fitzgerald's 'creative imagination is informed by the processes and aesthetics of film' and Dixon (2003, p. 287) that *The Great Gatsby* has filmic qualities, being 'both suspenseful and highly visual'. Whilst Matterson (1999, p. 53) notes Fitzgerald's 'sharp dialogue, clear setting [...] closeness to dramatic structuring', Kundu suggests a camera-like aspect to Fitzgerald's prose, as it, for example, zooms in or freeze-frames the billboard of Doctor TJ Eckleberg (Kundu 2007, p. 147). These apparent similarities are tantalisingly suggestive of the transferability of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) into the film medium. However, for all the seeming parallels, there is an aspect of the conceptual to Fitzgerald's description that defies the film medium. For example, Fitzgerald's (1950) description of Mrs Wilson, whose 'personality had also undergone a change' when she changes her dress, is both highly visual and yet largely unfilmable:

> Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions grew more violently affected moment by moment, and as she expanded the room grew smaller around her, until she seemed to be revolving on a noisy, creaking pivot through the smoky air. (p. 33)

How do the filmmakers attempt to deal with these aspects of Fitzgerald's prose? Attempts at an approach of equivalence or fidelity to the letter of Fitzgerald's text are likely to illustrate 'Hollywood's tendency to reify imagination' (Cutchins 2003, p. 300) rather than a Badiouian openness to the ambiguity and fissure of an evental site (Vooght 2018, p. 24).

Not all of Fitzgerald's descriptions reference concrete objects. Those that do not perhaps give more room for interpretation but require an entirely different approach in the film medium. Nick's description in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) of Daisy's voice is an example (Fitzgerald 1950):

> It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again. Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth, but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered 'Listen', a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour. (pp. 14–15)

As Cutchins (2003, p. 298) puts it, this description is remarkable for 'its nearly complete lack of concrete details'. Each actress has attempted to somehow interpret these lines, with the most peculiar take being Mia Farrow's strident squawk. Cutchins (p. 298) notes that the novel's Daisy is seen only through the viewpoint of others (in this case, Nick); as such, although she motivates the action, she is in essence 'not really there'. This was no accident. Eble (1964, p. 325) notes in an essay on Fitzgerald's revisions of *The Great Gatsby* that the author made changes that in fact made Daisy less, not more, corporeal. Filmmaking requires these descriptions to become a set of concrete visual and auditory manifestations. Alongside Daisy's voice is Gatsby's smile, another perilous endeavour to evoke (Fitzgerald 1950):

> He smiled understandingly – much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced – or seemed to face – the whole eternal world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favour. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. (p. 49)

The challenge faced by Ladd, Redford and DiCaprio was to convey something of how Gatsby makes Nick *feel* (Cutchins 2003, p. 299). This was most clearly understood by Luhrmann, who includes several reaction shots showing Nick's changing emotions. Reaction shots are a way of adapting a modernist first-person narration to the omniscient camera. Gatsby's smile is given the full ironic treatment by Luhrmann, with Gatsby raising a champagne glass and fireworks exploding behind him, perhaps the only way it can effectively be depicted in this knowing age (see Figure 6.1). At the same time, however, there is a voice-over from Nick, verbalising the character's thoughts:

> His smile was one of those rare smiles that you may come across four or five times in life … it seemed to understand you and believe in you just like you would like to be understood and believed in. (min. 28:50–29:02)

In essence, despite the big treatment, there is still a lack of confidence in anything but Fitzgerald's words, as voiced by the character of Nick, to convey the sense of Gatsby's smile. Spelling it out merely serves to reify the text.

Even the supposed simplicity of the reference to a concrete object causes dilemmas around choices on the film screen. There is often a corresponding lack of subtlety. For example, in the novel, Daisy comes to Gatsby's house for the first time, marvelling at it, responding emotionally to his collection of shirts, viewing his hydroplane and being amused by the picture of Gatsby with a 'pompadour' haircut from his days with

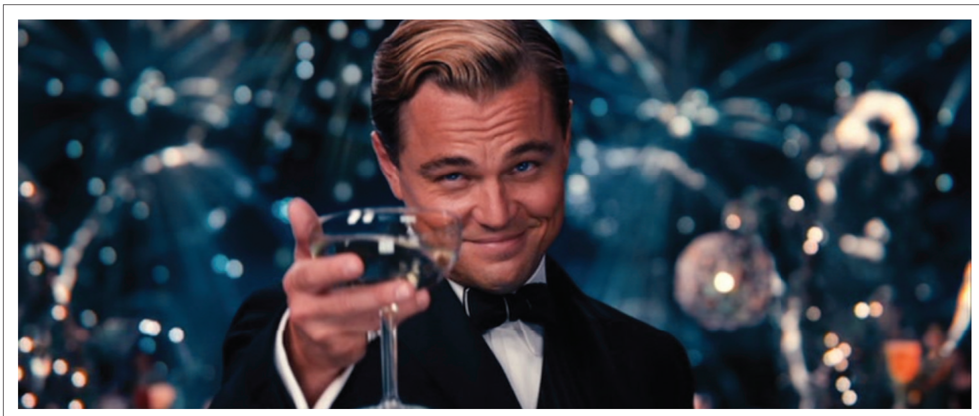

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FIGURE 6.1: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (2013) depicting 'the Gatsby smile'.

Cody: 'I adore it!' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 90). Gatsby then diverts her from this slightly embarrassing reference to his past appearance as well as her assumption that Cody's yacht was his: '"Look at this," said Gatsby quickly. "Here's a lot of clippings – about you." They stood side by side examining it' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 90) (what 'it' refers to exactly is unclear, nor why Fitzgerald might use the singular for clippings – Fitzgerald's writing is not always grammatically sound). This is a tiny moment in the text, which moves swiftly on to a phone call highlighting Gatsby's mysterious business dealings, followed by Daisy's somewhat infantilising flirtatiousness, 'I'd like to just get one of those pink clouds and put you in it and push you around' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 91).

However, in the 1974 and 2013 adaptations of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the directors' decision to show on film the 'clippings' that Gatsby has kept necessitates the creation of these. The on-screen scrapbooks that result require the choice of a particular paper, photographs, layout and handwriting – all of which transform an extremely brief reference into something that may be read, in today's terms, to be an unhealthy manifestation of obsessive stalking rather than an embodiment of romantic idealism. These visually concrete manifestations of the text can also subtly change meanings by changing the emphasis of a scene. Obsessive stalking aside, Clayton and Luhrmann use the clippings to perform filmic functions that go beyond textual references. This adds new meanings and emphases to them that are more meaningful than a mere visualisation of the text.

The scene where Gatsby shows Daisy the clippings occurs about an hour into *The Great Gatsby* (1974). Gatsby and Daisy are having an intense discussion about the past and how he felt at the procession of men who

paid court to her (in the absence of flashbacks, a choice that will be discussed in the following section, the 1974 film includes many such spoken scenes). Daisy says, 'Silly young men, so silly, to let an 18-year-old girl into their hearts'. When Gatsby shows her the scrapbooks, she exclaims, 'I can't believe it's all here! Everything that's happened to me'. Gatsby comments on his 'pictures of you in shining cars – every ball you ever attended'. Daisy responds, 'I wore out a hundred pairs of slippers … Come and sit by me, Jay. Why do you stand or sit as far away as possible?' (min. 59:46–1:00:32). This is followed by a discussion about how it is hard for him to touch her, and they reach out to each other in a shot that calls to mind Michelangelo's 'Creation of Adam' but do not quite touch. Daisy says that if only he still had his uniform, they could dance like they did before. He says he does have his uniform, and she declares that he is sentimental after all. This then segues into a shot of Gatsby and Daisy romancing by the river.

Hence the scene, with its extended emphasis on the scrapbooks, becomes much more overtly about a romantic connection between Gatsby and Daisy – whereas, in the novel, it is a moment within the excitement of showing Daisy everything he has acquired during their separation with the hope of impressing her. The focus in the book is more on Gatsby; even as Daisy is won over, Fitzgerald (1950) writes of Gatsby's dream and how reality must inevitably fall short:

> There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams – not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. (p. 92)

Luhrmann in 2013 also gives the moment with the scrapbooks a greater narrative and structuring function. Its positioning in the film is not dissimilar to the book, coming after Gatsby shows Daisy his mansion, the moment of her tears, triggered by his collection of shirts, and the sombre tone of this brightening again as they look at the photo of Cody and comment on Gatsby's pompadour haircut. However, in the film one does not get the sense that the clippings are, in part, to distract her from this focus on Cody and Gatsby's own past. They operate, instead, as part of Gatsby showing his elaborate mansion to her and are a chance to expand on the film's elaborate stylistics. Although lasting a mere minute, the clippings sequence is stuffed with shots of professionally bound books with ribbons and dried flowers at different angles. Initially, we see Gatsby selecting Volume 18 (far beyond Fitzgerald's 'some clippings' [1950, p. 90]) of these beautifully bound books from the shelf (see Figure 6.2). Daisy looks pleased: 'You saved my letters' (min. 1:02:16).

There is a faint voice-over of the letters being read out in Daisy's voice, 'Come home, I'll be here waiting' (min. 1:02:30). Thus, instead of merely being a reference to Gatsby's ongoing devotion or obsession, the film uses this time to allow for the scene to also tell part of the history of their

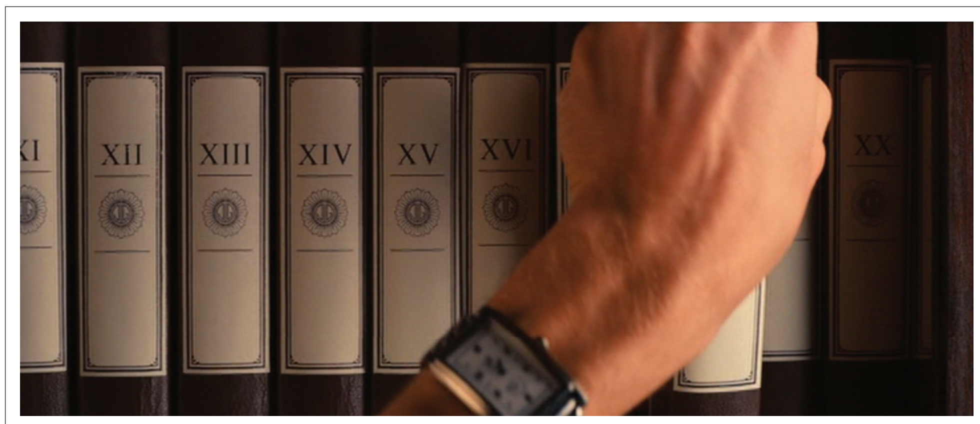

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FIGURE 6.2: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (2013) depicting Gatsby's bound volumes of clippings.

relationship – with our last view of the scrapbook ending on a scrap of newspaper with the headline 'Daisy Fay engaged to marry'. This is then interrupted by a business phone call, which Gatsby answers in a forced and angry tone, seeming rather more overtly threatened than what is suggested by the text. In short, this sequence is far more sombre in tone than Fitzgerald's text and less humorous. It also leaves out Daisy's schoolgirl comment, instead bringing in an angry wind outside that blows open the doors and blows in leaves – a portentous heralding of doom.

Films with their limited time must work hard to make each element count. The film texts reveal what was deemed essential or what it was felt could be repurposed, whilst other moments in the novel are excluded. A minor textual moment has here been expanded upon and given a greater and, in some ways, differing narrative function, whilst at the same time making an unspoken (and, in this case, largely insincere) claim toward textual verisimilitude. The moment is chiefly used in keeping with the greater emphasis on the Daisy–Gatsby romance that the films tend to put forward. Whether or not this was a desirable moment to give a greater emphasis and whether it drives any emotional investment in this relationship on the viewer's part remains in question.

Time and duration

Whilst many of the adaptations attempt to conform closely to the detail of the novel's plotting and events, there is a notable omission in some of them in capturing the novel's feeling of brevity and concision. Whilst *The Great Gatsby* (1925), at just under 50,000 words, is on the short side

for a novel (Fitzgerald was known in America through his short stories for his mastery of impactful brevity), both the 1974 and 2013 adaptations were lengthy for a film. The factor of length is one area where an on-screen faithfulness to the detail of the novel correspondingly creates a serious deviation from the sense of the novel as a whole. The question is primarily how this length is felt and experienced. A film that conforms to the average does not call attention to its length. Likely, length would not become a conscious factor with the audience. A film that exceeds the norm will raise this element to consciousness. It could be said to enter 'blockbuster' territory – which carries with it its own expectations of action-packed entertainment.

Houston (1974b, p. 177) writes, in relation to the 1974 *The Great Gatsby*, the novel is 'very short [...] the film, by contrast, is very long, laboriously extending what Fitzgerald elided'. The average length of a Hollywood film has varied from 90 minutes in the 1920s to 88 minutes (Olson 2014, n.p.) or 110 minutes (Sciretta 2009, n.p.) in the 21st century. *The Great Gatsby* (1974) was two hours and 26 minutes and Luhrmann's 2013 version was two hours and 23 minutes – both significantly longer than average. This again pointed to a fundamental difficulty with the conception of the film. The length suggests either an arthouse film (frequently lengthy but not expected to garner big audiences) or a blockbuster.[39] In arthouse films, there is often an emphasis on scenery or *mise-en-scène* and dialogue rather than action. Clayton's background favoured arthouse film adaptations, which clashed with the studio's desire for a blockbuster to justify their expenditure. Sciretta (2009, n.p.) writes that films attracting the largest audiences are often significantly longer than average. However, Clayton was not on board with this conception of the film, saying, 'I have never made, nor would I entertain making, what is called a blockbuster' (Rosen 1974b, p. 49). The result was a mismatch in expectations between producer, director and audience.

Whilst the 1974 *The Great Gatsby* struggled with these dynamics, at the time of *The Great Gatsby* (2013), Luhrmann was already known for his ability to combine arthouse cinematic material with blockbuster features to draw large audiences, as he did with *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) (Giles 2013, p. 14). Whilst this approach was partially effective, nonetheless, his *The Great Gatsby* was criticised based on repetitive and ultimately disengaging climaxes 'until we go numb to the din' (Charity 2013), whilst Nick has 'become tiresome by the film's second half' (McCarthy 2013), 'endlessly gawping' (Nathan 2013).

39. Based on the top-rated 50 films on *IMDb.com* (Sciretta 2009) or all films listed on *IMDb.com* for each year (Olsen 2014).

The 1949 adaptation, at 91 minutes, shows, perhaps, that Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* can be adapted within a more average film length without the loss of significant pivotal moments or characters (the 1926 version ran to approximately 80 minutes). In fact, the 1949 film includes the minor, yet key, character, Owl Eyes, that was cut from the more extended 1974 version.

Another factor in the subconscious perception of length is the films' pacing. If, as in *The Great Gatsby* (1974), the dynamic action is fairly limited, it may be felt by an audience to be endlessly elongated. Clayton's often static set-up of characters on the screen, as if in a stage play, exacerbated this sense of being slow-moving – see Figure 6.3 for a montage of these shots. The sense Clayton creates is of a tableau, with each shot showing characters in static positions. As film critic Canby (1974, n.p.) writes: 'This deliberate way in which each scene is set up and photographed, sometimes in emphasis-distorting close-ups, adds the intolerable burden of portentousness to the film'. The intention may have been to emphasise the formality of upper-class relations, the emotional distance between characters, or perhaps merely to form a pleasingly balanced image, or indeed all of these – but the result is to create a sense of immobility that affects the film's action.

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FIGURE 6.3: Montage of shots from *The Great Gatsby* (1974) showing the static positioning of the characters.

In 2013, Luhrmann made claims toward blockbuster territory, holding the attention with much moving camerawork and explosive CGI (computer-generated imagery) taking the place of dramatic action. However, whether these decisions enhance or take away from the attempt to adapt Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is questionable. Despite these moves, the film nonetheless feels lengthy, and one of the longest, static scenes, where Tom and Gatsby confront each other in the hot hotel room in New York, comes a full 90 minutes into the film. This scene, lasting over ten minutes, feels prolonged, and whilst there is a moment of physical confrontation (inserted by Luhrmann to enhance the action), on the whole, the emotional tenor is not profound enough to hold one through a long-spoken scene at this point in the film.[40] The scene is important as it exposes Tom's snobbery, Gatsby's false persona and Daisy's lack of moral courage, leading to the complete betrayal of the car crash. There are moments of humour in Fitzgerald's text – for example, at the start of the scene, Daisy talks about the man who fainted at her wedding, Biloxi, who 'made boxes – that's a fact', then stayed at Jordan's house for three weeks until they kicked him out. Jordan notes laconically, 'The day after he left Daddy died', adding, after a moment, 'there wasn't any connection' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 121). Plenty is going on in Fitzgerald's text to hold the interest, but the exposition is plodding in the film, lacking any sense of Fitzgerald's moments of humour and absurdity. Again, paradoxes and contradictions are ironed out, leaving a flattened result. Most problematic is the scene's positioning: as a serious scene, it feels climactic, the moment in which Gatsby's dream is definitively shattered, but the fact that it occurs with nearly an hour of downward trajectory still to sit through contributes to the sense of the last third of the film being over-extended.

Luhrmann, again somewhat disingenuously, claims that his film is on the short side if compared to the novel (Ohneswere 2013):

> We know for a fact that if you read the whole book or perform it that it takes seven hours [...] but we didn't have a seven-hour movie in mind. We had to do it in two. (n.p.)

This is more than a little misleading. A visually represented scene can take much longer than its description in prose takes to read (even aloud) – it may be either longer or shorter.

Another aspect of the time of the novel is how the elements of Gatsby's past are incorporated. Books allow readers to page back or forward if they get lost – this is somewhat different from the one-way trajectory of a film.

40. It should be noted, however, that many of the reviewers of Luhrmann's film who were critical of his theatrics approved of this scene, with Seitz (2013, n.p.), for example, referring to it as 'a more powerful experience than crowd scenes and CGI panoramas', Scott (2013, n.p.) writing that 'the emotional core of the film is laid bare' and French (2013, n.p.) that it is 'one scene that works well'.

Signalling of the moment in time within a film hence has to be overt: sometimes conveyed through displaying a date on the screen, or through a radically different dress, *mise-en-scène* and even often the use of colour. Once Luhrmann has established the look and feel of Nick at the sanatorium, he can return to the wood panelling and blue, snowy colours without needing to restate that this is a flashforward.

Considering Luhrmann's comments about making *The Great Gatsby* contemporary, it is interesting that his beginning presents the tale in very nostalgic tones – a black-and-white film with the lines and smudges on the print and the crackly, sentimental music of yesteryear. The aim of this seems more in keeping with a postmodern pastiche, where styles are referenced without necessarily invoking their meaning, as the overall approach to the film does not appear especially nostalgic. However, for the viewer, it momentarily reinforces a sense of something that is comfortably in the past. Not only that, but Nick looks back on his time with Gatsby – creating a double remove for us who are looking back at Nick. Polan (2013, p. 398) notes that the sanatorium scenes mean that the film, in fact, tells two separate tales and places Nick's story of Gatsby even further in the past. The effects of this can be emotionally disengaging, taking the viewer away from the present, despite Luhrmann's many contemporary touches.

An interesting aspect of the 1974 film was the choice not to use flashbacks at all, perhaps partly because the flashbacks in 1949 were deemed 'awkward and interruptive' (Atkins 1974, p. 219). This is an unusual decision considering its usefulness in film as a storytelling device, not to mention Fitzgerald's own modernist use of narration, with slippages in time and viewpoint. This decision worked against a sense of movement within the film. In the novel, Nick's retelling of Gatsby's confidences conveys the window into Gatsby's past. These reminiscences often slip into present tense and back again, as though they come back to life in the retelling: we are reminded of Gatsby's own statement: 'Can't repeat the past? [...] Why of course you can!' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 106). The same passage where Gatsby makes this statement moves from Nick saying that Gatsby 'talked a lot about the past, and I gathered that he wanted to recover something' to 'one autumn night, five years before, they had been walking down the street when the leaves were falling' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 106), then becomes more present with 'his heart beat faster as Daisy's white face came up to his own', then moves back to Nick's 'through all he said [...] I was reminded of something' (p. 107). Time is fluid; there is a sense of a desire for the past but one which is also very alive and sensually felt in the present, whereas in Clayton's film, the past is really past: as Jones (1974, p. 223) writes, 'the 1974 *Great Gatsby* is frozen in its own unity of time' suppressing the 'movement' through which Badiou argues that film makes its meaning (see ch. 4).

Considering the 1974 film's stated commitment to nostalgia, Coppola's comment when referring to the origins of Gatsby's romance with Daisy may seem strange, noting that he and Clayton were in agreement that 'we wanted to keep that period in the past as a memory rather than as a literal thing' (Rosen 1974a, p. 47). This choice goes against how real the past is for Gatsby – and should be read in light of the studio's choice to present the *entire* film as a nostalgia fest. There is no 'literal thing' (Rosen 1974, p. 47) in the film. The dislike for flashbacks seems to have been partly a personal choice of the director's, as Clayton expressed in his interview with Atkins (1974, p. 223): 'I don't like flashbacks. [...] To have a diary of somebody's life. That's a bore I think'.

The 1974 version rather tries to find other methods of revealing past events, for example, the scene where Gatsby dances with Daisy wearing his officer's uniform, in a recreation of how they first met. However, this establishes a mood of nostalgia rather than a reinvigoration of the present in Badiouian terms. Whilst Fitzgerald is a writer who can be deeply invested in the past, it is a kind of nostalgia that is incorporated into the sensual experience and openness of the self rather than a stale recreation of what Badiou might call functions of the state. The nostalgia theme of *The Great Gatsby* (1974) was strongly emphasised, as previously mentioned, by its tagline: 'Gone is the romance that was so divine' (a line not from Fitzgerald, but from the Irving Berlin song of the period, 'What'll I Do' which is used as one of the main themes in the film[41]). The desire to avoid flashbacks also resulted in the entire sequence with Cody being omitted – represented merely by a picture on the wall in Gatsby's house. This also had an impact on the audience's perception of Gatsby. We do not see the past where he was a struggling nobody, helped but also exploited and bullied by Cody. This reduces our sympathy for Gatsby – and perhaps forms a part of the perception that Redford was miscast and came across as 'already Ivy league' (Henry 1974, p. 12), as several film critics of the time noted.[42] Having said that, nonetheless, there is the indication through the voice-over near the start that the entire film is, in a personal way, retrospective (which is in keeping with its nostalgia), as Nick narrates: 'By the autumn, my mood would be very different ... I would want no more privileged glimpses into the human heart' (min. 10:08).

In contrast to the 1974 version, *The Great Gatsby* (1949) employs lengthy flashbacks, elaborating upon the sequence with Dan Cody to create more romantic tension. Cody's wife, Ella, makes a play for the young Gatsby, and

41. 'What'll I Do' was written for a musical showing in 1924, just shortly before *The Great Gatsby*'s publication in 1925 (Berlin 1923, n.p.).

42. Canby (1974, n.p.) writes for the *New York Times*, 'He looks so Ivy League it's difficult to believe he didn't prep at Choate'.

the sequence clearly establishes Gatsby as a 'boy from nowhere'. It also uses other techniques, such as newspaper headlines, to establish the passing of time. In fact, the entire film could be considered a flashback, beginning as it does with Nick and Jordan observing Gatsby's tombstone and Nick saying, 'It's been a long time, twenty years ...' (min. 1:17). This is followed by a series of vignettes intended to illustrate the 1920s before honing in on the story of Gatsby following his dream, which is begun concretely with the purchase of the house in West Egg. The end of the film shows Jordan and Nick at Gatsby's graveside; however, confusingly for the viewer, this scene takes place shortly after his burial rather than 20 years later, as with the opening scene. To add to the confusion, the fashions they wear in both scenes, that is, the scene at the time of Gatsby's burial in 1928 and the scene at the start, which represents 20 years later, show them wearing clothing more typical of the 1940s.

Of all the films, it most overtly asserts the audience's presence through its concrete establishment of time relationships, but this does not serve to incorporate the audience into the film but rather to keep what they are watching at bay. The motivation for this was, as Maibaum put it, because the 1920s were viewed with opprobrium at the time.

Space

Fitzgerald's prose has a definite conceptual spatial element (see ch. 3) that was apparently little regarded until Luhrmann's version in 2013, which I will discuss later in this section. There are, of course, concrete spatial references in the novel that can be more easily depicted in a film. The book moves firmly in space between the west and east coasts of America, through the so-called valley of ashes, and between the Eggs and New York City – an aspect of travel that all the films include. Whilst conceptual elements of space may be difficult to portray, the concrete physical space of East and West Egg, New York and the valley of ashes allowed filmmakers to construct sets or use suitable locations, as production designer John Box did for *The Great Gatsby* (1974), or to concretise the descriptions through CGI as in *The Great Gatsby* (2013).

Perhaps more problematic for the films than the mansions or castles of West and East Egg was the valley of ashes. In Fitzgerald's text, this is notably not 'The Valley of Ashes' it became in many reviews but simply 'a valley of ashes' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 26) – even its naming shows how it has become more concrete than the original intention. There is an aspect of Fitzgerald's (1950) description that is fantastical:

> A fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. (p. 26)

The filmic interpretation has, as with Luhrmann's 2013 version, at times been over the top. As film critic Nathan (2013, n.p.) writes, 'The Valley of Ashes, the hellish strip of slag heaps and coal-blackened workers [...] is outfitted like a Meat Loaf video'. The fact that nothing looks believably real and is overlit without any sense of mystery takes away from the depiction of the poverty and degradation of the area. The intention of the shot in Figure 6.4 is to show the progression from the greenery of East Egg through the slagheap of the valley of ashes towards New York City – however, the aerial shots add to the sense of being overwhelmed by CGI.

What also renders even these concrete spatial relationships less easily portrayed is that as a modernist text, Fitzgerald's novel represents space not only as it is viewed but as it is perceived. The theme of interior and exterior spaces, including those of the self, is continuous throughout the novel. Characters look in and out at these other spatial worlds – passengers on the train to New York City via the valley of ashes 'can stare at the dismal scene for as long as half an hour' (Fitzgerald 1950, pp. 26–27). At Myrtle's apartment, we see through Nick's eyes (Fitzgerald 1950):

> High over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I saw him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life. (p. 37)

How to film such descriptions? Only Luhrmann really gives it a try, with 21st-century cinematic tools at his disposal. Figure 6.5 shows a montage of images illustrating this sequence's progression. Filming the quoted passage above, Luhrmann shows Nick looking out at the street. Out on the street, another Nick looks back at him. This Nick is dressed for public view. The emphasis on

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FIGURE 6.4: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (2013) depicting an aerial shot of the greenery 'giving way' to the valley of ashes.

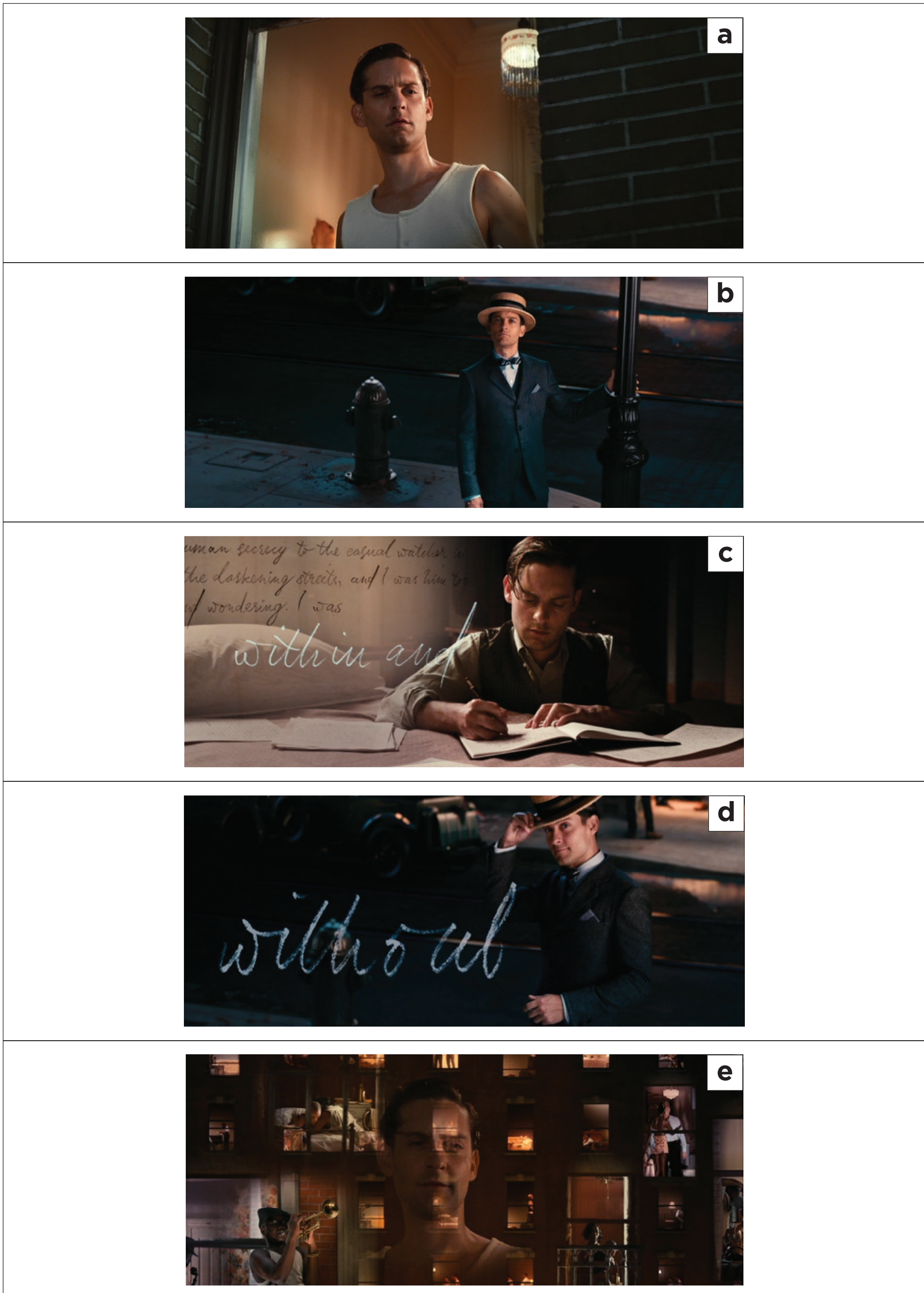

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FIGURE 6.5: Film still photographs montage from the 2013 *The Great Gatsby* (min. 20:55–21:30) depicting the sequence 'I was within and without'.

the cinematic is then taken further as we see the words Nick is writing scroll across the screen. It is notable that the inclusion of words emphasises the screen surface, treating it 'as a veritable page onto which words are inscribed' (Polan 2013, p. 397), taking us to a point in space outside the film, Fitzgerald's novel. We are then moved back onto the street, where the 'character', Nick, tips his hat in recognition of his author, whilst words continue to scroll across the screen. This is followed by Nick superimposed against myriad 'yellow windows', populated by CGI with various vignettes. Dark and light palettes are used to indicate inside and outside, with the last image opening up the inside to the outside and integrating the two. In the film theatre, this sequence would have had the added spatial element of 3D.

Without arguing for the success of Luhrmann's perhaps too straightforward representation of Fitzgerald's words, unlike the other directors, he has clearly tried to grapple with this spatial aspect of the text, the way it enmeshes and collapses both time and space. Film critic Ehrlich (2017) notes that:

> [/]n tune with the strange vertigo of moving forwards and backwards in the same motion, few directors have evinced such a profound appreciation for how someone can be insistently modern and yet still find themselves entombed by the past. (n.p.)

In other words, Luhrmann's spatial approach not only illustrates an aspect of the text but also ties in appropriately to the thematic concerns of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Gatsby's desire to 'repeat the past' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 106).

Earlier productions showed a more mundane use of space and possibly lacked some of the tools to do otherwise. In the 1926 version, the trailer (see *HypedFor* 2012) gives us some clues as to the visual style. It appears typical of early Hollywood production with static sets. A scene in a (not very realistic looking) forest, Gatsby's mansion where the shot is dominated by a long staircase, affording opportunities for some movement as partygoers rush up and down (see Figure 6.6), a shot of Gatsby's swimming pool – again, the sense of space comes from the movement of the extras, jumping into the pool or running up the stairs.

These shots are lively and full of movement – in some ways seem less flat and static than those of the 1949 version – however, it is a trailer, and these may represent highlights in action.

The 1949 version also suffered from the difficulty of being almost entirely filmed on set. This gave a 'stagey' feel to the *mise-en-scène*. The potential for meaning within the claustrophobic was not plumbed (Dixon 2003, p. 292), and it was criticised for 'indifferent' lighting and framing (p. 291). In short, space was not used in particularly imaginative ways. However, there are some evocative moments, such as when Gatsby leaves his decrepit,

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FIGURE 6.6: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (1929) depicting the staircase in Gatsby's mansion.

recently acquired new house and vanishes into the mist, and the swimming pool scenes near the end where Gatsby sits isolated and alone at the far side of the pool. The movement of characters through the sets can be lively, albeit in a stagey way. For example, windows and doors are, at times, effectively used. Characters look out and in; Gatsby overhears Daisy's betrayal standing at the other side of her door, and Wilson approaches the closed internal doors before entering to shoot Gatsby, suggesting an invasion into the safe space inside that Daisy has never left. The 1949 version foregrounds themes of class, propriety and inhibition – the spatial intersections effectively illustrate these. It is telling that Myrtle is killed because she escapes her confinement and runs out onto the open road, whereas, in this adaptation, Daisy tends to be closeted within.

Perhaps least effective were the static tableau effects in the 1974 version, which did little to enhance the storyline or themes and seemed intent on maximising the display of garments and accessories only. These Clayton alternates with uncomfortably tight close-ups of faces during confessional scenes, such as Myrtle describing how she met Tom (see Figure 6.7) and Daisy saying her confessional piece about giving birth. As seen in Figure 6.7, sparkle filters brought a hard and shiny brightness into these and other intimate scenes (Giannetti 1975, p. 18), further reducing depth in favour of the surface effect.

Thus, with the conceptual spatial elements of Fitzgerald's text not explored, and the elimination of flashbacks affecting the movement of the

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FIGURE 6.7: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (1974) portraying a tight close-up shot of the character Myrtle.

film narrative, the effect was to increase the stasis and reduce rather than increase emotional involvement. Whilst there is movement in the camera, which is 'constantly gliding' (Giannetti 1975, p. 18), as will be further discussed in Chapter 8, even this movement appears independent of the movement of events. Only the final journey of the hearse carrying Gatsby through the valley of ashes adds a stately sense of movement and works well as a touching endpiece to Gatsby's trajectory.

Sound

Dialogue and voice-over

The contribution of sonic elements to the meaning and organisation of a film is a key consideration. Elliott (2008, p. 3) rightly wrote that 'the tendency is to treat books as though they are purely words and to treat films as though they are purely images'. This is particularly pertinent when looking at an adaptation of the writings of Fitzgerald, an author whose prose style has long been the subject of scholarship. Daniel (2013) states that:

> I have my own opinions on former film versions, and I think they all fail for the same reason: Fitzgerald's language has already done all the cinematic work for the actors, directors, set designers and producers. (n.p.)

If Badiou's fidelity must be individually realised, Daniel's comment suggests there may be no room for this process to occur. Throughout the history

of the adaptations, it appears that the scripting and delivery of lines ill-served the process of reactivating a fidelity. In 1926, one critic thought that the 'intertitles were both excessive and badly written' with 'bad English [and] inappropriate wording' (Cohen 1974, p. 139). Numerous intertitles would have disrupted the flow of action. Whilst this version may have had the virtue of being the least inclined to reify Fitzgerald's prose, the connection with the original may have become too tenuous.

In 1949, the fast pace of this less lengthy film (in comparison to the later adaptations) required a significant amount of voice-over to spell out rather than enact plot points. To give one example, when Gatsby and his henchmen stop at the gas station, they comment on the nearby sign for the long-vanished oculist, Doctor TJ Eckleberg: 'Did you notice that thing? Them eyes. They get you' (just in case the audience has not noticed the sign sufficiently!) 'Like God bought himself a pair of eyeglasses', says the one man and, 'They follow you', says the other. Gatsby's view is more cynical – 'They're painted that way' (min. 4:53–5:10). The eyes are used very moralistically in the film, which is in keeping with the way the film presents the *The Great Gatsby* theme. They also form an opportunity for characterisation, to show Gatsby's 'toughness' at this point and to create unease in the audience at his inability to recognise or honour this manifestation of fate. Whilst the dialogue thus works harder than it may seem at first glance, this kind of explicit exposition creates a lack of tension and makes the film seem wordy.

For the most part, the language used in *The Great Gatsby* (1949) speaks to the Hollywood style of the 1940s rather than the more refined language of Fitzgerald. As part of the film's intro, the voice-over spells out: 'Out of the twenties and all that they were came Jay Gatsby who built a dark empire for himself because he carried a dream in his heart [...]' (min. 3:59). At times, the urge to claim some of Fitzgerald's dialogue resulted in an odd confluence of Fitzgerald's prose with what can best be described as Hollywood hack writing, loaded with cliché and conventional sentiments. For example, Gatsby says to Nick, 'You don't make much money do you?' (min. 25:07), a line taken directly from the novel (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 80), but then follows it up with, 'Every man has his price, Mr Carraway, what's yours?' (min. 25:42). In contrast, the novel illustrates something of Gatsby's delicacy, with him hesitantly suggesting (Fitzgerald 1950):

> I thought you didn't, if you'll pardon my – you see, I carry on a little business on the side, a sort of side line, you understand. And I thought that if you don't make very much – (p. 80)

Equally, in the novel, this suggestion happens after Gatsby has met with Nick two or three times already, whereas, in the 1949 film, it happens at the first meeting, making Gatsby's approach even cruder. Where there is an attempt at the inclusion of Fitzgerald's prose in this film, such as when

Daisy (not Jordan, as it is in the book) says, ‘You know, I adore large parties – they’re so intimate’ (min. 54:42), the placement seems merely to signal the connection with Fitzgerald’s text as a canonical work, not being in any other way ‘necessary’.

One of the difficulties in adapting the novel was how to include these famously recognisable sentences. Part of each film’s claim to partake in *The Great Gatsby*’s (1925) cultural value, these recognisable textual elements may have a jarring rather than connecting effect. For example, Daisy’s ‘beautiful little fool’ speech crops up in all the surviving films. In the novel, at the end of the lunch with the nerve-jangling ringing telephone of Tom’s mistress, Daisy tells the story to Nick of how she gave birth and says (Fitzgerald 1950):

> She was less than an hour old and Tom was God knows where. I woke up out of the ether with an utterly abandoned feeling, and asked the nurse right away if it was a boy or a girl. She told me it was a girl, and so I turned my head away and wept. ‘All right,’ I said, ‘I’m glad it’s a girl. And I hope she’ll be a fool – that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool. I hope she’ll be a beautiful little fool.’ (p. 22)

Shortly after, she says cynically, ‘“I’ve been everywhere and seen everything and done everything” […] She laughed with thrilling scorn. “Sophisticated – God, I’m sophisticated!”’ (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 22). Nick realises that her particular kind of brokenness, her damage, is, in fact, part of her claim to the elite society she inhabits – it was ‘as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged’ (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 22).

Once again, we find filmmakers ironing out the contradictions of Fitzgerald’s conception and screenwriters embellishing or seeking to clarify Daisy’s utterance. In the 1949 *The Great Gatsby*, this scene occurs just as Nick discovers that Tom has a mistress, and his moral certainty is momentarily discomforted. Tom leaves the house with the obvious intent of seeing his mistress, upsetting everyone. Daisy hugs the child, saying:

> You know what I said when she was born? I said dear Heaven please make her grow up to be a beautiful little fool, that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool (min. 34:39).

This is said whilst clutching her daughter to her. To which Jordan replies, ‘You try very, very hard to make people think you’re one, don’t you Daisy?’ to which Daisy almost nods (min. 34:46). Reification thus occurs not only through the visuals but through the dialogue of the films, with Fitzgerald’s ambiguities and contradictions smoothed out and explained.

Placement is as important as embellishment. With awkward timing, the well-known reference to the new world that the Dutch sailors set eyes on (linked in the novel to the green light) at the end of *The Great Gatsby*

appears a bit earlier in the 1974 film. The dialogue is given chiefly to Nick as he speaks to Gatsby. Awkwardly rewritten as: ‘Can you imagine what this old island must have looked like to those Dutch sailors when they first saw it? Fresh green – like a new world’ (min. 1:54:55), it appears almost randomly at the point when Nick still believes Gatsby has, without remorse, caused the death of Myrtle. Again, it appears there was a desire to reference a canonical passage from the novel, even if the placement in the film undermines its meaning.

Although the 1974 film thus wipes away some of the complexities of Fitzgerald’s text, this version, on the whole, does a better job than earlier versions of preserving Fitzgerald’s narrative tone through the dialogue and voice-over, whilst not always directly quoting the text. Voice-over has a functional use in terms of giving background information or explaining time shifts, but in these films it is also a way of preserving ‘poetic passages’ from the novel (Giannetti 1975, p. 16) and establishing a point of view. However, once again, in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) Nick’s first-person narration is not quite what it seems. His version of events relies on retelling what he has been told by others, such as Jordan and Gatsby himself, and is ‘coloured by his own nostalgic perception of them’ (Griggs 2016, p. 198). At times the narration shifts to a second-person point of view, as when describing Gatsby’s smile (Dixon 2003, p. 299). Thus, Nick’s narration has elements of modernist unreliability, and his viewpoint on the other characters shifts throughout the novel. This is an example of the openness of Fitzgerald’s approach.

In *The Great Gatsby* (1974), significant amounts of the narration taken almost directly from Fitzgerald’s text are reproduced in the voice-over given to Nick. This works reasonably well. The thoughtful, internal quality of a voice-over, beautifully spoken by Sam Waterstone as Nick Carraway, lends itself more appropriately to the elaborate textual language of Fitzgerald’s prose than when this prose is recast as dialogue. For example, in the film, as Nick leaves the first lunch at the Buchanans’, we hear his voice saying, ‘It had been a golden afternoon, and I remember having the familiar conviction that life was beginning over again with the summer’ (min. 10:00). As he leaves, Tom puts his hand on Daisy’s neck as the green light flashes conspicuously next to the dock:

> By the autumn my mood would be very different … I would want no more privileged glimpses into the human heart – only my neighbour Gatsby would be exempt from my reaction. Gatsby, who represented everything for which I had an unaffected scorn – for Gatsby turned out alright in the end – it was what preyed on him, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams (min. 10:08–10:40).

At this point, Nick is at his own jetty and Gatsby appears, in a dinner suit, with a flourish of not very 1920s music.

To compare with Fitzgerald's text reveals some of the strategies of the screenwriter. The majority of words are taken from the introductory section of the novel (Fitzgerald 1950):

> When I came back from the East last autumn, I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction – Gatsby who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn. If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. This responsiveness had nothing to do with that flabby impressionability which is dignified under the name of the 'creative temperament' – it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again. No – Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and shortwinded elations of men. (p. 8)

The line that Coppola has Nick begin with, 'I had that familiar conviction that life was beginning over again with the summer' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 10), in fact, occurs later, but still within the introductory few pages in which we are introduced to Nick and his rather stiff and proper way of seeing the world. It makes sense to move these references in the film to after introducing some of the characters, and Fitzgerald's text is seamlessly abbreviated and knitted together in a new way. The problem lies with the very first words: 'It had been a golden afternoon' (min. 10:00). Whilst these words are not from Fitzgerald's text, they sound quite convincingly as though they might have been – a quick search reveals Fitzgerald, after all, uses the word 'golden' five times in *The Great Gatsby*,[43] although this particular phrase never appears. Thus, the screenwriter has done a convincing job, unlike those of 1949. However, the phrase itself seems utterly out of place, coming as it does after a lunch which, although it began pleasantly with the reunion of Daisy and Nick, progressed to reveal disgraceful white supremacist sentiments, the unpleasantness of Tom's affair and Daisy's unhappiness. One can only conclude that a kind of nostalgically-fed awe at the large mansions, silverware and deferential servants was meant somehow to override any feelings of disquiet amongst the audience. Straightaway, Nick seems misguided and operates as less of a moral compass for the viewer, which is problematic as we must agree with his ultimate assessment of Gatsby. What is notable here is how a shaky conception, based on nostalgia, has coloured many of the small choices within the film.

43. Twice in relation to Jordan's arm/shoulder (Fitzgerald 1950, pp. 44, 77, 91, 115, 144), once as a description of billowy clouds, once in relation to Daisy as 'the golden girl' and once referring to the 'golden and silver slippers' of Daisy and her fellow debutantes in their youth.

The 1974 film thus relies profoundly on voice-over at the start. However, Desmond and Hawkes (2006, p. 247) note that the voice-over is almost dropped after the first quarter of an hour, and 'we forget we are seeing events through (Nick's) eyes, events that change him as a character'. Stoddart agrees, noting that the absence of Nick's narratorial 'gaze' causes the viewer to misperceive Daisy as the victim of Gatsby's obsession (Stoddart 2004, p. 110).

In 2013 there was a similarly frank embrace of the voice-over – somewhat less successfully rendered by actor Tobey Maguire 'talking and talking and talking' (Morris 2013, n.p.). The conceit that Nick is speaking from a sanatorium and therefore has a dry and cracked tone of voice eventually becomes a bit tiresome. As film critic McCarthy (2013, n.p.) writes, 'the final stretch is slowed by too much commentary by Nick, who has become a bit of a bore by now'. Also, Luhrmann is prone to repetition and, for example, Nick repeats the line, previously explored with greater depth during the scenes at Myrtle's apartment, 'Once again, I was within and without', when standing outside in the garden during the tea party at his house (min. 55:58). Clayton is not immune from this tendency either, repeating the 'beautiful little fool' line later in the film – Daisy tells her child, 'beautiful little fools can wear whatever they like', toward the end of the 1974 film (min. 2:00:46).

Bringing Fitzgerald's words into the dialogue, or using the dialogue from the novel verbatim, poses a different kind of challenge. What reads beautifully and meaningfully on the page does not always speak well or convincingly, even with the best actors. The context and set-up for the dialogue are also important. Dixon (2003, p. 289) notes 'Fitzgerald's reliance on dialogue to create mood and atmosphere' and Atkins (1974, p. 217) the 'evocative word-patterns' and musicality of his prose; the attempts to capture this on film seem to be patchy. In 1974, for example, in the first party scene, characters each speak in turn Fitzgerald's words as they sit around the table – rather more like a 1970s dinner party theatre piece. As Maslin (1977) puts it:

> When Clayton shoots a tableful of guests sitting primly at a party, each one carefully enunciating his or her remark in turn, he demolishes the whole feeling of an era in only fifteen seconds. (p. 264)

We see Fitzgerald's words used interchangeably as dialogue or voice-over without always much concern for the nuances of how we conceptualise the read versus the spoken. The use of film medium allows for a greater opening up of choices that means that words do not stand alone – sometimes it feels as if this has been forgotten in the rush to quote Fitzgerald.

Using Fitzgerald's prose verbatim in the film has varying effects. However, the overall effect is clearly different than experienced in the novel,

as the accompanying visual and sound choices add to or divert the meaning in ways deemed suitable for the plot and aims of the film. When text is transposed purely to invoke Fitzgerald's novel as a text of the American canon, it can come across as disconnected from the overall meaning and often jars with other stylistics of the screenplay.

Music and soundtrack

The emphasis on dialogue and voice-over in the films, representing opportunities for the films to ostensibly 'connect' with Fitzgerald's text, should make one ponder the impact of the films' musical arrangements. Is it that, as film critic Morris writes, 'it's obvious the novel is meant to be the soundtrack' (2013, n.p.)? Whilst Fitzgerald quotes snippets of popular tunes in his texts, this 'unheard music', as MacLean (2016, p. 122) describes it, may not conjure up sound for the reader, although it does call attention to the lyrics. Hearing these tunes can enhance the mood still further. Music, with all its allusiveness, may allow for more open-ended meanings in the spirit of Badiou to be called up.

Music is another area in which the film's choices give plenty of clues as to how they were conceived and the (at times) limiting conditions under which they were made. The soundtrack offered another chance to invoke the 1920s – nostalgically or authentically – or to show a relative indifference to the decade. Fitzgerald's in-text references to the music of his time display his youthful sensibilities. In the novel, Fitzgerald refers to a popular song of the time, 'The Love Nest' (perhaps contemporary readers might recall the lyrics: 'Ever comes the question old/ Shall we build for pride/ Or shall brick and mortar hold/ Warmth and love inside?' [Hirsch, Harbach & Mandel 1920, n.p.]), and quotes lines from 'Ain't We Got Fun' (Egan, Kahn & Whiting 1921, n.p.): 'One things sure and nothing's surer/ the rich get richer and the poor get – children' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 92). These locate his text in the early 1920s.

In 1949, songs of the 1920s were played with a 1940s 'big-band' sound in the party scenes (Atkins 1974, p. 218). Atkins (1974, p. 226) also objects to the 'music director's original love theme, performed at the piano by Klipspringer when the novel indicated that he should be playing, "Ain't We Got Fun"'. The 1949 version built sentiment, rather than referencing the more hard-edged lines of 'Ain't We Got Fun' that seem to suit *The Great Gatsby*'s thematic content rather well. Again, we see the pressures of the studio system at the time. This film also reflects the norms of the time in utilising emotive non-diegetic background music far more than the later films. For a contemporary audience, this can seem intrusive.

The 1974 film is the most effective of the adaptations in balancing the musical score with the spoken word, at least at the start, where the musical and lyrical words of Fitzgerald are transposed into Nick's voice-over.

This voice-over, however, diminishes as the film progresses. Sound effects and background music were used far more sparingly but impactfully. Much of the music is diegetic, although 'ghostly [...] snatches' of song haunt the halls of Gatsby's mansion (Atkins 1974, p. 221). Although sixteen songs of the period were used in the film, the tunes 'What'll I Do' and 'Ain't We Got Fun' stand out and summarise the two key counterpoints of emotion.

However, despite its catchy tune, the appearance of 'Ain't We Got Fun' is minor, and we do not properly hear the words except over the closing credits, before the tune segues again into a few chords from 'What'll I Do'. Clayton very much favours 'What'll I Do', which becomes a theme tune for the film, with its lyrics clearly audible: 'What'll I Do when you are far away/ and I am blue, what'll I do. When I'm alone, with only dreams of you that won't come true, what'll I do' (Berlin 1923, n.p.). This reveals Clayton's conception as it is a choice that emphasises the romantic quest theme that is foregrounded in this film. The inclusion of not just sound but lyrics from a key theme tune, and their repetition throughout the film, gives an overwhelming sense of the mood that Clayton wishes to convey. Publicly released in 1924, this song does not feature in the novel. The words come through clearly at several points in the film; for example, in the opening credits, the words, 'Gone is the romance that was so divine', are clearly heard, setting the stage for what is to come.

The attempt to recreate an authentic 1920s sound was painstaking and largely successful.[44] Clayton chose from numerous recordings from the early 1920s and insisted that 'as many old-timers of jazz and popular music as were alive and available' were used (Atkins 1974, p. 226), and Riddle ensured that they were 'orchestrated as they would have been fifty years ago'. This quest for authenticity was largely successful in creating an overarching mood. Unlike other nostalgic anachronisms, which serve to limit meaning, music allows for a greater degree of allusiveness within the present. One could, however, argue that using 'What'll I Do' as a theme tune emphasises only the romantic quest of Gatsby. This was in keeping with Clayton's interpretation and hence effectively underscores that, but the approach as a whole is limiting.

Where the 1974 film more definitely falters is the inclusion of the *The Great Gatsby* 'theme' that occurs each time we see Gatsby appear on his own. Quite the opposite of Clayton's painstaking recreation of an authentic 1920s sound, this theme is more reminiscent of a James Bond film. It seems unlikely this was wholly Clayton's choice, given his perfectionistic approach to recreating the period. Yet again, we see the director forced to compromise and consider the many power players involved in making a film: in this case, the music director, Riddle.

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44. According to Atkins (1974, p. 224), Merrick won the battle with producer Evans on this occasion, allowing for the inclusion of songs of the 1920s period.

For the 2013 version, the music was conceived of as a selling point for the film. Luhrmann gave numerous interviews claiming that he was recreating Fitzgerald's aims in his inclusion of popular music and that the film's contemporary tracks would make 'it feel like it felt to read in 1925' (*The Guardian* 2013, min. 3:46). Despite the supposed centrality of the film's use of contemporary music, Luhrmann himself oversold this inclusion. What happens instead is more of a postmodern mélange. Near the film's start, Nick's voice-over describes the summer of 1922. As he speaks, we see grainy, coloured news footage that might suggest an attempt at creating a documentary-style evocation of a historical moment. However, as Nick's narration pauses, we hear the sound of contemporary music come in – the words, 'Blood stains the Colosseum floor', stand out. This surprises and subverts the expectations created by the documentary effects, but, as will be shown, the trick does not have much staying power.

This was not for lack of thought given to the musical content. Echoing Luhrmann's words, Anton Monsted, *The Great Gatsby*'s executive music supervisor and co-producer, states (Trakin 2013):

> We wanted a blend, a weave [...] Baz and I call it the 'sliding doors' between music that is very true to the period of the movie's setting in 1922 and the music of today. (n.p.)

Noting that jazz was considered adventurous in 1922, they had the 'idea to fuse traditional jazz with modern-day hip-hop, sometimes in the middle of a song' (Trakin 2013, n.p.). According to Trakin (2013), 'that hybrid comes across most clearly on retro-modern songs that fuse old and new like will.i.am's 'Bang Bang', Fergie, Q Tip and GoonRock's "A Little Party Never Killed Nobody (All We Got)", both songs that fuel one of the film's two gala party sequences' (n.p.). However, to the less well initiated, the effects of any 'traditional' jazz inclusion are so subtle as to be unnoticeable, especially as this does not appear to be carried through with other contemporary tracks played in the film, such as Lana Del Rey and Rick Nowel's 'Young and Beautiful' and Florence + the Machine's 'Over the Lover'.

According to Monsted, they did not want to use old recordings 'because they're crackly, mono, and hard to make believable' (Trakin 2013, n.p.). This led to them working with Bryan Ferry, whose 'jazz arrangements' were intended to 'evoke the sound of Fitzgerald's world and celebrate the sound of the '20s' (n.p.). The aim not to be straightforwardly nostalgic is laudable, but Ferry's more languid jazz style does not evoke the jaunty cynicism of 1920s hits such as the iconic 'Ain't We Got Fun'. More importantly, it is simply not that noticeable. For example, during the first party sequence, the music fades in and out, relegated to the background each time Nick speaks. Once again, we find that Luhrmann's claims are in excess of the facts. The film sought a contemporary sound and achieved this, but the

elements intended to suggest the 1920s are elusive. With a broken connection, the ability to evoke a 'trace' that could lead to a fresh reconceptualisation of the 'truth' of the text is missing. The claims to a connection were perhaps too far subjugated to the commercial imperatives that the choice of contemporary music appears to speak to, and the music itself too far relegated to the background.

In the end, the 2013 soundtrack has more of the effect of the non-diegetic background music in the 1949 film – enhancing the mood a little but not setting the overall tone in the way that the key wistful tunes in the 1974 adaptation did. MacLean (2016, p. 120) notes that Luhrmann includes an underscore that is 'evocative of the utopian film scores of the 1930s and 1940s gold age of Hollywood cinema'. As MacLean goes on to say, it is this underscore which is nostalgic (p. 124) – a kind of music that (Flinn 1992, p. 91) 'reveals glimpses of a better, more unified world', 'unveils universal truths or essences' and captures 'the sense of lost integrity and grandeur'. In this case, the contradictions do not seem to add to the power but rather seem to mute each other. We need to return to directorial intention to discover why this might be so when contradiction in Badiou's terms and Fitzgerald's prose so often appears to enhance the interest and complexity. If the contemporary music is purely to '"amp up" the sexiness of the Gatsby myth for a new generation' (MacLean 2016, p. 123), commercially driven and superficial aims work against the embracing of a text in the spirit of Badiou's fidelity.

What dominates the 2013 *The Great Gatsby* in terms of the sound stage, instead, is Nick's continual voice-over. This is not to say that Fitzgerald's words or lyricism dominated, but rather what asserts itself is the style of Maguire's reading: his shaky, cracking voice establishes the key tone of the film and, as it does not change throughout (because Nick is telling the story from his sanatorium), the feeling is eventually too uniform to engage the emotions.

■ Openness in characterisation

With expectations abounding about the key characters, and big studio budgets requiring big-name stars, directors had more latitude with the minor characters: notably, Owl Eyes and Klipspringer, who, through their reactions to Gatsby, are key to our perception of him as a character. Owl Eyes and Klipspringer can remain insubstantial and ambiguous in ways that Gatsby and Daisy cannot on the big screen. As such, they introduce and keep something valuable in the film adaptations by preserving a role that cannot be foreclosed. Mr Gatz, another minor character, also symbolises something unreconcilable between the ideas of modernity and 19th-century ideals of self-improvement and progress.

The character of Owl Eyes is somewhat mysterious and ambiguous. In Badiou's terms, he may form a part of what operates to keep Fitzgerald's meaning fresh and vital – inconsistency and something which cannot be neatly summarised or put into categories. What becomes clear is that he is somehow on Gatsby's side. He appears at the first of Gatsby's parties that Nick attends, somewhat drunk and unsteadily admiring Gatsby's books in the library. The uncut and unopened books are viewed with pleasure by Owl Eyes: 'What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop too – didn't cut the pages. But what do you want? What do you expect?' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 47). When Owl Eyes says about the library, 'It fooled me' (p. 47), he means he thought it would be entirely fake, rather than that he was fooled by the appearance of books that were not actually read: 'I thought they'd be a nice durable cardboard'. It is hard, if not impossible, to know quite how to take him – and equally difficult to categorise him.

Toward the end of this party, there is a car wreck that emphasises the increasing chaos and disintegration of the party. Owl Eyes appears getting out of the car in the company of a death-like man. Nick narrates that Owl Eyes is 'pleasant' and 'puzzled' by the situation (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 54) and the lost wheel: 'The fact was infinitely astonishing to him – and I recognized first the unusual quality of wonder and then the man' (p. 55). This will be echoed in Gatsby's 'capacity for wonder', referenced in the final few paragraphs of the novel (p. 171). This again suggests a kind of confusion, doubleness and openness in characterisation that links to Fitzgerald's modernist qualities. Comically mistaken for the car's driver, Owl Eyes does little to clear up this misconception. As Gatsby shows Daisy his mansion, Owl Eyes becomes another agitating, disturbing influence that disrupts the splendour (shortly before they bump into Klipspringer, who performs a similar role). Nick narrates: 'As Gatsby closed the door of "the Merton College Library" I could have sworn I heard the owl-eyed man break into ghostly laughter' (p. 88).

Throughout the party scene, Owl Eyes creates a sense of mystery by displaying almost the opposite kind of reaction to what might be expected. He is equally out of key with the world at Gatsby's funeral, the only 'friend' to attend Gatsby's funeral besides Nick and Gatsby's father (Fitzgerald 1950):

> Owl Eyes spoke to me by the gate. 'I couldn't get to the house,' he remarked.
>
> 'Neither could anybody else.'
>
> 'Go on!' He started. 'Why, my God! they used to go there by the hundreds.'
>
> He took off his glasses and wiped them again outside and in.
>
> 'The poor son-of-a-bitch,' he said. (p. 166)

Once again, it is clear that in some mysterious way, Owl Eyes supports and appreciates what Gatsby stands for. His owl-eyed spectacles seem to link

him to the gigantic Doctor TJ Eckleberg billboard, a symbol that is repeated in each of the films. Like the billboard (which will be further discussed in the next chapter), Owl Eyes is ambiguous – apparently connected to innocence and wonder, but also to death and judgement. He cannot be categorised because of the amorality of his support for Gatsby. How this uncategorisable character is interpreted and depicted within the adaptations is telling.

In *The Great Gatsby* (1949), Owl Eyes appears, very briefly, at the party as a kind of support to Daisy and Gatsby's liaison (rather than, as in the novel, at the first party where only Nick and Jordan attend). Daisy asks Gatsby, 'Isn't there someplace we can be alone in this great big house?' (min. 58:37) and they go into the library. At this point, their relationship is light-hearted; Daisy views it as a fun affair rather than something serious, as she hesitates when Gatsby asserts that she 'never loved' Tom. This conversation is interrupted as they become aware of Owl Eyes at the top of some moveable steps. In this film, Owl Eyes retains his sense of humour and some of the mystery, saying, 'I got up here all right, but I don't seem able to get down' (min. 59:27). He comments on Shakespeare as 'exquisite' but does not make his perplexing comments about the uncut books. Seeing them together, he says he 'won't say a word'.

As Owl Eyes leaves the room, he bumps into Tom Buchanan outside. Tom has been blatantly flirting with twin women. He describes his affair with Myrtle to Nick as, 'Just for laughs you know', saying that he 'gets a lot more restless these days' (min. 56:17). The emphasis on his more extreme philandering behaviour allows the viewer to minimise Daisy's moral indiscretion. Owl Eyes tells Tom not to go in (as he attempts to take the twins in there) because of '*l'amour*' (min. 1:00:36), definitively emphasising that Daisy is having her own romantic moment. Tom continues trying to make an assignation with the twins, asking them to meet him tomorrow, and Owl Eyes, swaying with his wine glass, says acidly, 'I'll go there and wait for you' (min. 1:00:47). There is laughter, but Tom's suspicions are then aroused as he sees Daisy and Gatsby coming out of the library together. The painting on the wall behind them shows a woman with a dropped neckline, a way of suggesting what has been happening in the room during this time of censorship (see Figure 6.8).

Thus, there is retained a sense that Owl Eyes is on Gatsby's side and that he is a quirky and somewhat mysterious character. He is given an extended set piece which is fairly effective. His unexpected presence adds something good, conveying humour, an important element in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and mystery. However, the scene with the wrecked car is excluded, and he also does not appear at the graveside – which has become, in this version, a moralistic moment where Nick and Jordan comment on Gatsby's poor choices. Some of the potential power of this character is hence lost.

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FIGURE 6.8: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (1949) depicting the character Tom seeing Daisy and Gatsby leaving the room.

In 1974, scenes with Tom Ewell as Owl Eyes were filmed but were not included in the final cut. The reason given by Clayton was that 'we do not have a short picture' (Houston 1974a, p. 79). Clayton also noted, with his typical perfectionism, that he was sad to cut the car crash, however, it was the 'only scene where none of the principals are present' (Houston 1974, p. 79) (this is not entirely true – as Nick was observing). The effects of Owl Eyes removal may be hard to gauge, but one can guess. Clayton's use of harsh lighting and extreme close-ups removes an aspect of mystery and otherworldliness in favour of the concrete, tactile and solidly reified.

In 2013, Owl Eyes is once again robbed of his full impact, although there is a scene with him in the library. Because Luhrmann chose to abbreviate the ending (once again, length had become an issue), Gatsby's funeral is not shown. Owl Eyes appears at the party and at the crash scene. The question is, does his appearance add anything? Unlike in the 1949 version, in 2013, Owl Eyes is placed in the first party, which Daisy does not attend, in the same position as in the novel. Nick and Jordan fall into the library whilst joking about Gatsby, at which point, from up the circular stairs, Owl Eyes drops a book saying, 'You won't find him. This house and

everything in it is all part of an elaborate disguise'. When Jordan asserts that she's met Gatsby, Owl Eyes asks, 'Which one? The prince? The spy? The murderer? I cannot find anyone who knows anything real about Mr Gatsby'. As they ask what is the point of the Gatsby parties, Owl Eyes joins them, looking out at the party from the window, saying, 'Oh that, my dear, is the question' (min. 26:26–27:13). It's not one that Owl Eyes appears to have the answer to. There is none of the humour that would be possible in this scene. Owl Eyes concretises the mystery of Gatsby rather than contributing to it. The music immediately cuts in with the words, 'Are you ready?' and 'A little party never killed nobody'.

There is the desire of Luhrmann throughout not to lose touch with the fact that the party is continuing. There are a couple of somewhat jarring quick cuts to the party during their conversation, and as Owl Eyes questions what the party is for, the camera cuts back to the party in question with several more scenes. After a few shots of the party, we see that Nick and Jordan are now back in the party outside and dancing. Owl Eyes appears just once more – as Nick tries to leave the party, he passes by the wreckage of the motor car, which forms a major element in Fitzgerald's description of the party. In this case, it is barely noticeable. We hear a muffled thud, then see the wreck for just a second with a crestfallen Owl Eyes standing at the top of the vehicle. However, there is an immediate cutaway to Jordan waving from her car (you can already see her at the back of the car crash shot). Hence the crash scene scarcely registers. We see her shouting to Nick, 'Come and see me! We'll have tea next week – I'm in the phone book' (min. 32:56). The wider shot again shows the crash, but our eyes are led to Nick, who turns toward the waving Jordan leaving to the right of the screen. Nick is focused entirely on Jordan and, in the following shots, mirrors her *joie de vivre*.

Little to nothing is seen of the death-like man. This cutting is likely intentional, either to keep the viewer's focus on the growing Nick–Jordan relationship or to emphasise his blindness to the signals of destruction (just as he does not register when a hard-faced man calls Gatsby to the phone a little earlier in the scene). Nonetheless, the effect is the same on the viewer – the crash has no emotional impact, and the elements of horror and increasing chaos that Fitzgerald effectively evokes through this disturbance are absent.

From Luhrmann's handling of Owl Eyes in the film, one can extrapolate that he is uncomfortable with the ambiguities the character requires. He is, rather, given a solid narrative function (emphasising the mystique around Gatsby) and little else. This seems pointless as the mystery around Gatsby's identity has already been emphasised in several ways before this scene.

Klipspringer is an even more minor but memorable character. His function is to illustrate an attitude of exploitation towards those who are

foolish enough to be lavish with their wealth, as Gatsby is. As Nick narrates, when naming the many large and small visitors to Gatsby's parties, 'A man named Klipspringer was there so often and so long that he became known as "the boarder" – I doubt if he had any other home' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 61). He has occupied Gatsby's mansion and, although on the surface apparently awkward and 'embarrassed' (p. 91) is, in fact, quite uninhibited in the way in which he takes advantage of Gatsby's generosity, giving us, again, a sense of contradiction. When Gatsby shows Daisy around his mansion for the first time, Nick narrates (Fitzgerald 1950):

> We went upstairs, through period bedrooms swathed in rose and lavender silk and vivid with new flowers, through dressing rooms and poolrooms, and bathrooms with sunken baths – intruding into one chamber where a dishevelled man in pyjamas was doing liver exercises on the floor. It was Mr Klipspringer, the 'boarder'. I had seen him wandering hungrily about the beach that morning. (p. 88)

Klipspringer, dishevelled, hungry and liverishly unwell, pops up in the luxury of Gatsby's apartment as a manifestation from the subconscious, a sign that all is not well beneath the beauty and ease.

Somewhat later in this sequence, Gatsby tells Klipspringer to play the piano so that he and Daisy can dance – although Klipspringer first protests he is sleeping, then that he does not play well, then that he is out of practice (Fitzgerald 1950, pp. 91–92). He is eventually ordered into playing and chooses to play first 'The Love Nest' and then 'Ain't We Got Fun', contemporary popular tunes. Here Gatsby appears to have the upper hand on his sponge of a guest, but the final scene with Klipspringer does not evidence this. He calls the mansion, initially reluctant to even give his name, and Nick assumes that he is calling to find out when Gatsby's funeral is. When he is evasive, Nick presses him (Fitzgerald 1950):

> What I called up about was a pair of shoes I left there. I wonder if it'd be too much trouble to have the butler send them on. You see they're tennis shoes and I'm sort of helpless without them. (p. 160)

Nick hangs up on him. Once again, Klipspringer's demeanour is 'nervous' and frightened (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 160) rather than bullish, but his selfishness is none the less egregious for that. His lack of scruples is grotesquely comic but also demonstrates something darker, as one of those who 'preyed' on Gatsby (p. 8).

In the 1949 *The Great Gatsby*, Klipspringer loses all of his narrative function. He becomes a piano-playing member of Gatsby's *coterie*, playing music deemed more suitable to the 1940s, and is deferential to Gatsby, who served with him in the war. He tells Nick about Gatsby's service (this is emphasised, creating more sympathy for Gatsby with an audience just coming out of WWII), how he lost Daisy whilst he was abroad and how Gatsby met Lupus (the Wolfshiem character). He is merely a narrator of the

moments Nick was not present for, losing any sense of his original purpose in the text.

Klipspringer retains more of the role he has in the novel in *The Great Gatsby* (1974). Again he is told to play the piano whilst Gatsby shows off his house to Daisy, this time playing 1921's 'Ain't We Got Fun' rather than the music director's composition of the 1949 film. Some of the moments where he abuses Gatsby's hospitality remain – for example, when showing Daisy around the mansion, they come on Klipspringer exercising in a dining room, and Gatsby says, 'Klipspringer here is left over from a party I threw in April. He was here for two weeks before I discovered he'd moved in' (min. 53:44). This is met with a delighted giggle from Daisy. As typical in this film, where all are waited on or watched, Klipspringer is not alone, but rather in the company of a servant – and later Daisy and Gatsby pass through an archway with two 'bodyguards' on either side. The large, empty, cold rooms with the deliberately echoing footsteps emphasise something different from the warmly sensual text of the novel (remember the 'lavender silk' and 'vivid' flowers of Fitzgerald's description [1950, p. 88]) – making Gatsby's hollowness and isolation far more overt, and depriving the viewer of some of the pleasures of the senses.

Klipspringer appears briefly at Gatsby's later party that Daisy attends. Although Atkins (1974, p. 224) writes that he appears in person at the film's end to ask for her shoes because he is 'more obnoxious in person than over the telephone', this no longer appears in the film – perhaps Atkins saw a preview showing. This scene was cut, as were the scenes with Owl Eyes. Unfortunately, deleted scenes have not been made available for this film, as it would be fascinating to ponder the effect of their inclusion. The impact of leaving out this small yet key moment is to render Gatsby's death in the style of heavy tragedy, without Fitzgerald's attendant moments of dark farce. The farce around Klipspringer adds a necessary poignancy to Gatsby's death – his misguided and fantastical self-creation may otherwise seem undeserving of such heavily tragic treatment. Nonetheless, as will later be examined, the funeral and scenes with Gatsby's father in the 1974 *The Great Gatsby* are affecting, perhaps less complicated but retaining some depth and complexity.

In 2013, Klipspringer again barely features in the film. Introduced by Nick during the first party as a 'genius descendent of Beethoven', his role is more similar to the 1949 *The Great Gatsby* film than to Fitzgerald or the 1974 film, that is, as a useful character to bring a diegetic soundtrack into the film. He next shows up briefly to play the organ when Daisy visits Gatsby, who tells his staff to wake up the 'symphonic genius' (min. 59:14). The organ starts up again after the shirt-throwing scene and the scene in which Gatsby shows her his clippings when the mood has already turned sombre; the tennis shoes rest on top of the organ, perhaps as a record of

an earlier intention of the director to bring Klipspringer back after Gatsby's death, or perhaps merely as a knowing reference to the book. The request for shoes is not taken up at the end, and Klipspringer does not appear. Klipspringer has even less of a role than he did in 1949, and something is undeniably lost. There is a recognition of the impact of these minor yet memorable characters in that they appear in the films, albeit often straightened out and simplified. However, their function in the text, which appears to highlight the contradictions in Gatsby's character, is largely removed (most obviously in the 2013 *The Great Gatsby*), leaving them feeling, at times, like redundant additions.

Mr Gatz is another minor character, appearing suddenly only at the end of the novel, posing a problem for the filmmaker as this goes against conventional screenplay wisdom, which is to introduce key characters within the first fifteen minutes (the tardy arrival of Gatsby himself also strains this convention to its limits). He is the most straightforward of the minor roles in many ways, a 'solemn old man very helpless and dismayed' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 158). However, there is tension between his perception of his son and the reality. His genuine love for Jimmy, as he calls him, shines through and his presence highlights Gatsby's rejection of foundational values in favour of the ephemeral shallowness of a rich elite (Fitzgerald 1950):

> 'He had a big future before him, you know. He was only a young man but he had a lot of brain power here.' He touched his head impressively and I nodded.
>
> 'If he'd of lived he'd of been a great man. A man like James J. Hill. He'd of helped build up the country.'
>
> 'That's true,' I said, uncomfortably. (pp. 159–160)

Nick's discomfort relates to the fact that Gatsby had, unbeknownst to his father, gone wrong, and yet the conversation with Gatsby's father also makes the point (which is reiterated in the sequence that follows where Mr Gatz shows Nick Gatsby's childhood journals) that he had great potential. The conversation is also symbolic, with Gatsby's father representing an older America in contrast to the America that has, alongside Gatsby perhaps, left solid values behind – this is drawn out in the 1974 *The Great Gatsby* where the actor (Roberts Blossom) is dressed and presented in a way that somewhat resembles Abraham Lincoln (see Figure 6.9). Gatsby's childhood journal speaks to a 19th-century idea of order that haunts this 20th-century modernist novel.

The scene also contains the important admission from Nick, 'We were close friends' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 159), as Nick, towards the end of the novel, becomes clearer about where his loyalties lie. The entire character of Mr Gatz is left out of the 1949 version, with Maibaum declaring it 'unnecessary' because of the lengthy flashbacks the film used instead

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FIGURE 6.9: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (1974) of Gatsby's father: portraying an older America.

(Atkins 1974, p. 219). This reasoning is similar to Luhrmann's in 2013. In the 1949 *The Great Gatsby*, the idea that Gatsby had a greater and nobler potential is put into Gatsby's own mouth as he announces that he will 'take the rap' and call the police, saying:

> I owe that to a kid named Jimmy Gatz. Me, Nick. Me. What's going to happen to kids like Jimmy Gatz if guys like me don't tell them we're wrong … Maybe after I do my time and start over … (min. 1:28:45)

The inclusion of Mr Gatz expressed this sentiment far more subtly. In the 1974 version, the effectiveness of the final scenes with Mr Gatz emanates from the greater depth which Clayton instils in them. Firstly, the audience is given sincerity in emotion from Mr Gatz and Nick, and genuine love for Gatsby, which is a relief after the unpleasant shallowness of many of the other characters. Secondly, the suggestion of the values of an older America, and the stately progression of the hearse through the burning valley of ashes, call to mind larger symbolisms. They retain something of Fitzgerald's ambivalence in the depiction of 19th-century ideas of diligence and persistence associated with Gatsby's childhood and Mr Gatz versus 20th-century ideas of freedom and self-expression. Here, two separate worlds collide and the emotional impact registers. Clayton's efforts show that invoking such larger and more provocative meanings is not impossible. In this version, Nick also gets to voice his 'close friends' admission of loyalty – an important moment of commitment. In 1949, the need to keep Nick's disapproval of Gatsby overt did not allow for this.

In 2013, scenes with Mr Gatz were filmed but they did not make the cut into the final film. They are available on the published DVD and YouTube (*Martin* 2014). The clip shows excised scenes as part of an interview with Luhrmann where he explains his directorial decisions. What Luhrmann refers to as 'wonderful' deleted scenes (*Martin* 2014, min. 1:00) show Gatsby's father arriving and nearly being assaulted by the heavies at the door (reminding us a little of Coppola's 1949 interpretation of *The Great Gatsby*) and asserting, 'I'm Jimmy's *father*' (min. 1:32). We then see him noting Gatsby's generosity to him as he ogles the vast rooms and cries over Gatsby's coffin. Luhrmann states that (*Martin* 2014):

> The only problem with this is apart from drawing away from Nick and Gatsby was that we've learnt all these things already and we couldn't see that until we'd actually done it. (min. 3:26)

In the deleted scenes, we see the list of Gatsby's youthful goals for self-improvement read out as he is interred (with no signs of Owl Eyes or Klipspringer in this ending). Luhrmann notes that it was hard to leave this out, but 'we know he was born with ambition, we've been told earlier – again it was a very hard decision, it was in the film for a very long time' (*Martin* 2014, min. 3:55). Having furnished a far more concrete, visually realised emphasis on Gatsby's poor origins, Luhrmann felt that these scenes were redundant. The concern was with tangible, storytelling necessities more than hints and allusions – expressing a general tendency of Luhrmann's to concretise. However, as previously noted, excluding these finishing scenes also does not allow for a tie-up with the earlier scenes with Owl Eyes and Klipspringer, making the earlier scenes feel less impactful.

■ All that is air becomes solid

A Badiouian focus helps explain some of the areas where the films got into difficulty without asserting that they should follow the book and display textual correspondence. Indeed, it shows that correspondence, where it is obvious, usually extends only to surface depictions or has been commandeered to perform other roles within the screenplay. Changes are not in themselves indicative of a lack of Badiouian fidelity and may even support it. However, changes that serve to close down Fitzgerald's openness will work against the possibility of a Badiouian fidelity.

In this chapter, I explored the persistent attempts in these film adaptations to reify aspects of Fitzgerald's text. These and some of the other changes served more as foreclosures than as an opening up of possibilities. Attempts to draw upon the cultural value of Fitzgerald's name and novel seem to have often resulted in solidifying elements of his prose. The films employed various strategies to represent aspects of Fitzgerald's prose within the

adaptations. These included attempts to bring his descriptions to life or represent concepts of space and time in concrete, visual terms. Another attempt was to bring Fitzgerald's actual words into the films through dialogue, voice-over or even lettering on the screen. These strategies had varying effects. Aspects that lightened Fitzgerald's prose, such as his humour, were generally abandoned or given a brief showing in slapstick mode, as in *The Great Gatsby* (2013). Instead, a more sombre mood was created by either setting the films later or having the characters look back on previous events.

An approach of romantic nostalgia dominated 1974; whilst *The Great Gatsby* (1949) was impacted by the moral codes and preferences of the time. In the 2013 *The Great Gatsby*, conflicting reifying and open approaches ultimately resulted in an emotional superficiality. Where the films do allow for more ambiguity, as in 1949's depiction of Owl Eyes, Luhrmann's flexible use of space in the 2013 *The Great Gatsby*, and Mr Gatz in the 1974 film, the effects allow for greater openness to operate.

The transposition of minute details from the text, approaching the text with prior ideas about its meaning and cultural value within the canon, taking an overtly nostalgic attitude and favouring a spectacular *mise-en-scené* over intimacy are all manifestations of a 'traditional' kind of fidelity based on replication. Nonetheless, the films are intermittently successful in their goal of making a Badiouian connection to *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Luhrmann's film makes a partially successful effort, through the use of montage, overlays and 3D, to bring to life the conceptual elements of Fitzgerald's depiction of space, whilst Clayton effectively conjures up a sense of loss in the passing of the old certainties of the 19th-century paradigm. Nugent's Owl Eyes manages to keep something of the humour and mystery of the character. All the films have moments where they are able to stage the undecidability of the event.

Chapter 7

The eyes of Doctor TJ Eckleberg and the American Dream

> 'Did you notice that thing? Them eyes. They get you.'
>
> 'Like God bought himself a pair of eye glasses.'
>
> – Script, 1949 *The Great Gatsby* (min. 4:53)

Seeing through the eyes

How the films handle the more overt symbolism and thematic content of the book is another area where the transference of specific detail from the novel can be foreclosing and hence lacking in impact. This chapter will look at some of the thematic concerns associated with *The Great Gatsby* (1925), taking a closer look at Fitzgerald's theme of social mobility (later described as the American Dream) and the interpretation of the period of the 1920s in which the novel is set. These have been chosen as they speak to the foreclosing lenses through which *The Great Gatsby* has been approached – the desire to represent Fitzgerald's novel and claim some of its value, whilst maintaining commercial and cultural palatability.

Themes like the American Dream, for instance, and symbols such as the eyes of Doctor TJ Eckleberg are obvious motifs for essays in the classroom, essential for a commercial film that seeks to be useful to this audience, and hence cannot be abandoned. Whilst *The Great Gatsby* invites the reader to

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make moral judgements alongside Nick, the moralistic interpretation of Fitzgerald's symbols exceeds and reduces what was intended. Here, more than ever, we may see the intrusion of the state (Hallward 2003):

> The state of the ruling class means that it represents, or arranges, the existing elements of its situation in such a way as to reinforce the position of its dominant parts. (p. 96)

In other words, the state would intend to reinforce commonly held beliefs about the sanctity of marriage and the necessity of punishment for transgressing these norms.

Themes and symbols will be considered through a comparative analysis of their representation in the different films. This comparison will serve to highlight differences in approach. Novels typically allow for more than one theme to be effectively explored. *The Great Gatsby* (1925), for example, explores themes of social mobility, class, American history and culture, masculinity and race in America, poverty and exploitation and so on. Because of their length and the way they are experienced in linear progressive time, films tend to favour a stronger focus on one or two particular themes.

Adapting social mobility and the American Dream

Fitzgerald's novel – perhaps even *the* theme of the novel, one might say, in Badiou's (2013, p. 11) words, what it takes a stand on – is the depiction of Gatsby's exclusion from the elite based on his class and origins. Whilst Nick, poor but genteel with family connections to the Fayes and 'advantages' growing up (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 7), is accepted into the Buchanan's circle, Gatsby emphatically is not, and Tom frequently voices his disdain for Gatsby in class-bound terms. Gatsby's attempt to fit in – his references to studying at Oxford, his repeated phrase 'old sport' and the expensive but not entirely correct clothes, are demonstrably unconvincing. Even his parties are too inclusive, too all-encompassing in the range of characters they attract, which include 'the Chester Beckers and the Leeches', 'a bum named Etty', tobacco importers, Snell who visits 'three days before he went to the penitentiary' and many, many others (Fitzgerald 1950, pp. 60–62). Tom picks apart each of these: the 'menagerie' of his parties (p. 104), the 'circus wagon' of his car (p. 115), his 'pink suit' (p. 116) and Oxford – 'Oxford, New Mexico', Tom declares (p. 116). Daisy's attraction to Gatsby allows her to ignore some of these *nouveau riche* traits, but she is also, notably, turned off by the parties he holds. The final nail in the coffin is Tom's belittling description of their affair as Gatsby's '*presumptuous* little flirtation' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 129; [*author's added emphasis*]). Other characters also suffer from the class divisions that dominate *The Great Gatsby* (1925) – there is the poverty and degradation of the valley

of ashes and Tom's misuse of Wilson's trust and desperation. This is not an America where all are on the up and those who are, have something to hide.

This theme of the American Dream has become central to the interpretation of Fitzgerald's text and the novel's near-mythical status in American culture (see ch. 3). Gatsby himself personifies America's 'counterfeit identity as the land of opportunity' (Griggs 2016, p. 198). Gatsby's quest could also, in a sense, be read as a Badiouian struggle against the foreclosing structure of class determination, to be able to be faithful and become a human subject. Although the failure of the dream is unambiguous in the novel, it has elements that make it more profound and paradoxical, saving it from pure didacticism. These are the 'complex and ironic quality of Gatsby's attempt to beat against the current' (Burnam 1963, p. 105) and Gatsby's poetic commitment to the dream within its tangible failure.

Thus, the theme of the American Dream must somehow be tackled by those wishing to invoke the cultural and commercial value associated with this text, but tension is caused by the need to represent the 'failure' of the Dream in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) when this is articulated by Hollywood's own 'dream factory'. How the films speak to Fitzgerald's theme of class mobility gives a sense of their intentions: whether to continue to portray the American mythology of progress and opportunity or foreground Fitzgerald's political critique. This theme of class exclusion and the limits of social mobility is most effectively portrayed in *The Great Gatsby* (1949), where prevailing manners, still formal at the time, aligned with the portrayal. In 1974 it took a boldly different but largely ineffective form; in 2013, it seemed to fall away almost entirely.

In the 1949 film*,* Tom is assured of his privilege. In a similar key to the novel, he makes several scornful comments about Gatsby's origins, claiming, 'Oxford? He probably went to reform school', and saying to Gatsby, 'I don't know how you got within a mile of her, unless you brought the groceries to the back door' (min. 1:05:38). He asks Daisy if she wants to marry 'a crook who'd have to steal the ring to put on your finger' (a 'common swindler' in the novel's text [Fitzgerald 1950, p. 127]). Tom's class condescension is likely to resonate negatively with the audience, who are more likely to identify with the self-made, and in this film, definitively war hero, Gatsby. Gatsby's approach is shown as naïve: 'It's my pleasure to have high-class people at my parties', he tells Nick, something a genuinely high-class person would never need to think of, let alone say (min. 24:15). Daisy is also a believable characterisation – her initial moral resistance to allowing Gatsby to take the blame for the accident is quickly diverted into, 'I couldn't go to prison, I'd die, I'd die, I'd die', when she realises the possible consequences (min. 1:15:06). This fits well with her depiction as an overprotected debutante.

In *The Great Gatsby* (1974), Daisy and Tom are depicted as occupying a somewhat eccentric space where they are quite beyond conventional mores. Again, however, Tom sneers at Gatsby's origins – even more egregiously if we consider his own rude and bullying behaviour toward those around him, including his wife and peers. Clayton's film puts forward an idiosyncratic but effective portrayal of Tom as a man who has so much money that he does not need to follow the strictures of good manners and breeding anymore.

The serving staff, how they are depicted and how the characters treat them, give another means of expressing an attitude towards class. In the 1949 film this is handled straightforwardly, with staff waiting on the partygoers but with little focus on them. In *The Great Gatsby* (1974), the ever-present waiting staff at both Gatsby and Tom's are presented as anonymous, mostly filmed from the back or above, often in uniform, their individuality carefully hidden and kept unobtrusive by the filmmaker. It is made clear that Tom treats his staff with disdain, not even glancing at the staff member to whom he throws his hat, scarf and cane. There is not much emphasis on how Gatsby treats his staff, although, in the one close-shot, they seem in good spirits as the party dissolves into rain. However, his indifference toward the working-class Myrtle at the end of the film does not allow us to see him necessarily in a better light.

In Myrtle's flat, in the 1974 film, both Myrtle and her sister speak in affected tones that speak of their desire to seem 'classy'. Myrtle comments about having to keep an eye on the servants all the time – aiming to keep a distance between herself and an even less empowered serving class. The scene at the flat ends with a cut to a lawn cocktail party at the Buchanans, with Clayton using contrasting shots to make his point. By making the comparisons so overt, Clayton does not allow us to feel the more subtle exclusions that serve to keep Gatsby out of the elite, and the theme is hence less effectively handled than in 1949. However, as Daisy's currently poor yet well-bred relative, Nick is better handled in this film. Even he looks askance at Gatsby's parties – describing 'the rules of behaviour as at an amusement park' (min. 13:16) – but he is drawn to them as an antidote to his stuffy and limited life nonetheless. He observes with enthusiasm but still, in some way, keeps his distance, again emphasising his breeding.

In 2013 *The Great Gatsby* film, the excision of the words, 'not everyone has had the advantages you've had' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 7), from Nick's introductory voice-over, illustrates right from the start how little interest Luhrmann has in the class side of this tale. Instead, Nick merely states, 'in my younger and more vulnerable years, my father gave me some advice. Always try to see the best in people he would say' (min. 1:15). There is no particular emphasis on Nick's class in this film. However, there is an enhanced emphasis on his supposed poverty – his being too poor to marry

is mentioned a couple of times, even though this is not, in fact, made as much of as in the novel. For Luhrmann, the possession of wealth is the important factor, and class is less significant. As in the 1974 film, Tom is without social graces, but in this case, he seems merely brutish and less to the manner born than Tom in 1974.

A focus on wealth rather than class might work if it didn't level Tom's behaviour with Gatsby's own poor behaviour toward those of the labouring classes. Gatsby's posturing car drive where he races Tom shows Tom, Nick, and Jordan veering around a scattered fruit truck, failing to stop or help. It appears that Gatsby and Daisy may have caused the damage. If so, they clearly also failed to stop at the scene. In these scenes, Gatsby appears to epitomise an elite who are relatively indifferent to the struggles of others, although he does at least acknowledge the grubby workers who earlier cheer his car, whom someone like Tom might simply have ignored. If the intention in this segment is to show Gatsby as a hero of the working class 'made good' in a way that Tom is not, the parallel with the earlier careless destructiveness makes this unclear. Gatsby also treats his servants in a relatively offhand manner, failing to make eye contact and leaving them standing silently in the heat (see Figure 7.1) or cleaning up his mess (including the thousand candles lit for him and Daisy when she visits his mansion). Only at the end of the second party does Gatsby dismiss his servants, saying, 'That will be all for now, gentlemen. Thank you' (min. 1:16:41). He does not acknowledge anyone in particular, and we do not see any of the servants in the frame.[45]

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FIGURE 7.1: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (2013) portraying the silent servants waiting with towels.

45. Gatsby's servants also form part of Luhrmann's depiction of race in *The Great Gatsby*. See my article, 'Revising race and social mobility in adapting Gatsby' (Vooght 2023), which looks at *The Great Gatsby* (2013) and Cherot's 'unannounced' adaptation *G* (2002).

Instead of the more complex traits of class, Tom's sense of superiority in this film is put down to his belief, earlier expressed in gross racist sentiments, in eugenics. In the later argument between Tom and Gatsby at the New York Plaza Hotel, Gatsby states: 'The only respectable thing about you, old sport, is your money … Your money. That's it. I have just as much as you, that means we're equal'. Tom responds, 'We're different. I am. They are. She is. We're all different from you. You see we were born different. It's in our blood' (min. 1:36:14–1:37:34). This effectively removes a subtler consideration of class exclusion. Unfortunately, the fact that there is apparently not much difference in Gatsby's and Tom's behaviour toward their staff takes away from our sense of Gatsby as admirable.

Although it remains relevant, this theme only feels clearly and impactfully realised in *The Great Gatsby* (1949). Although 'many directors have used canonical literature for politically or culturally resistant purposes' (Naremore 2000, p. 12), the desire to celebrate the Dream and the commercial requirements of big-budget film production fostered a less incisive portrayal of Fitzgerald's critique of American society.

■ The Roaring Twenties

Adapting the decade of the 1920s for consumption is another aspect of the later adaptations. Although Fitzgerald continued to publish important works until the end of the 1930s, he is routinely cited as a key author and representative of the decade, with Carlisle (2009, p. 1) summing up the popular view: 'No American is as associated with a specific decade as F Scott Fitzgerald is with the 1920s'. As with the American Dream, the term Roaring Twenties was not in common use at the time of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) – the first reference to the Roaring Twenties was in 1930.[46] Fitzgerald instead used the term 'the Jazz Age' for the decade in his collection of short stories, *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922) (Fitzgerald 1960) and later writings. The American 1920s were a period of prosperity, urbanisation and increasing personal freedoms – except in the case of prohibition, which was brought into law in January 2020. The unpopularity of prohibition led to many ordinary people feeling less compunction about being law-abiding and played a role in the rise of gangsterism. Another aspect of the decade's underside was increasing urban unemployment and crime. Social changes extended to gender and race as well: more women were entering the workplace and, with increasing access to contraception, enjoyed greater sexual freedom. Racial norms changed as clubs such as the Cotton Club in New York brought together all races to pursue jazz and entertainment. Clothing reflected these changes, with higher hemlines, brighter clothes

46. See www.etymonlinea.com.

and the ‘bob’ haircut. All these increased freedom of movement and reduced time spent on dress and preparation for young women of the 1920s. Technological innovations and mass production also bought freedoms, and along with them came increasing consumerism. The decade rather neatly closed with the notorious St Valentine’s Day massacre and the Wall Street stock market crash in October 1929 (see Marcovitz 2013; Streissguth 2009).

Recreating a historical period in film is never the same as experiencing it; indeed, this is not a film’s intention. The fact of its staging, which may call attention to itself as staged, inevitably changes the emphasis. The very definite costume and *mise-en-scène* possibilities of this unique period add to the attraction of filming a text set in the 1920s, as audiences come in part to admire the show of costume and style. A film or book that tells a story also comes with its own set of narrative requirements that differ from the experience of everyday life. This is no bad thing – the conflation of past and present can allow for new and exciting arrangements of the elements of a set. Recreations are often pleasurable to watch, and the tension between the naturalistic and the re-enacted holds its own potential for fidelities. Griggs (2016, p. 195) asserts that *The Great Gatsby* (1925) ‘preserves a moment in time that is contemporaneous to its author’. However, to allow for a fidelity, *The Great Gatsby*’s (1925) adaptors must approach the text authentically and openly whilst also embracing their own contemporary moment. Badiou’s fidelity demands activity in the present and a connection to the traces of a previous truth rather than an embalming of it. What is problematic is when the past is referenced in a way that is either superficial or overly rigidified as embodying a stereotype of what the decade was, and thus does not allow for the experiencing of deeper meanings or challenging of belief systems.

In these films, the depiction of the 1920s is thus a re-enactment, an adaptation of the 1920s themselves. Each film takes the era of the 1920s as its frame. There are nonetheless subtle differences between their choices and approach to the period. Although published in 1925, the novel clearly states that the action takes place in 1922 (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 9) – early in the decade. The early 1920s were full of optimism and the liberation of the younger post-War generation from 19th-century styles and standards of behaviour. However, some argue that the ultimate pessimism of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is prescient of the crash to come (see film critics Brody 2013; French 2013). Notably, most of the films choose to set the action *later* than 1922 as a definite choice – allowing for the souring that took place only in the second half of the 1920s. *The Great Gatsby* (1949) sets the film in 1928, and *The Great Gatsby* (1974) in 1925. Only Luhrmann takes the heady and optimistic 1922 as his starting point but counterbalances it by having the events commented on from the perspective of 1929 by the older and more jaded Nick.

Is Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* a story that emphatically needs to be read in the context of the Roaring Twenties to make sense? Apparently, the screenwriters of 1949 thought so, as there is a lengthy exposition near the start of the film intending to set the scene:

> 1928 – remember the Lindy Hop? Before that the Black Bottom, and before that the Charleston – wild, careless dances, beating out the crazy rhythms of the Jazz mad 1920s – jazz throbbing like the pulse of the country … prosperity, paper profits, fortunes made overnight […]. (min. 220–2:43)

These descriptions are accompanied by footage of dance halls, jazz musicians, dollar bills and similar images intended to evoke some of the memories or perceptions of the time. Initially, these appear to be archive or studio footage. These then move on to filmed scenes, such as the sequence that follows, showing young people in a car drinking and driving wildly:

> Yes, the Go signals were up, all the lights were green and young America went joy riding on homemade hooch … prohibition brought new ways to get one's hands on the big money, the speakeasies, the gunmen … the bootleggers … rum runners … hijackers […]. (min. 2:45–3:28)

The voice-over is accompanied by shots of these activities, including police chases by speedboats and men carrying large rifles commandeering a goods truck. Finally, they refer to 'the gang wars' (min. 3:34) and we see a person being shot from a moving car. Gatsby is shown as the person behind the wheel. He pulls out a gun and shoots the passenger in the car next to them, then the driver. Then he pulls over, gets out and walks toward the viewer, flanked by two of his henchmen whilst the voice-over states, 'Out of the twenties and all they were came Jay Gatsby' (min. 3:59). (It is easily missed, but the one henchman behind Gatsby in the introduction is the later intruder into the party whom Gatsby punches.) This whole introduction moves the storyline into a later period in the 1920s that is more open to the kind of action viewers were felt to expect.

Shortly after, the time is explicitly referred to again as 1928, with the introductory voice-over stating: 'In the spring of 1928 when he drove to Long Island with his henchmen …' The choice to set the film a bit later than Fitzgerald's novel draws it more closely into the era of Capone and similar. The clear time-framing also allows the viewer to watch it at a distance, as something that happened in the past. It allows for voyeuristic enjoyment, whilst emphasising to the viewer that they are better than that now. In 1949 the viewer's sense of superiority to those on show was left intact through the definitively distanced staging.

The absence of a real sense of the 1920s was felt to work against the film's effectiveness by scholars and film critics such as Atkins, Crowther and others (see ch. 5). Costumes reflecting the tastes of the 1940s simply served to work against the film's framing rather than add a fresh element

of their own. However, more problematic is the fetishisation of the decade that we see in the later filmic versions. This jars because it interferes with our connection with what we see, reducing it to nostalgia or an empty spectacle. According to Clayton, *The Great Gatsby* (1974) was again set a little later, in 1925, although this is not explicitly stated to the viewer (Atkins 1974, p. 221). Clayton's *The Great Gatsby* (1974) attempted to recreate a spectacular 1920s *mise-en-scène*. The focus was on a seamless recreation of the 1920s – inevitably, through a 1970s gaze. It is notable that 1974s recreation is not particularly youthful or optimistic and focuses on the look rather than the feel of the 1920s: as Maslin (1977, p. 264) put it, 'jazz age-elegance pre-supposes not just fashion-plate airs but also the inclination to raise hell without worrying about getting one's dress dirty' and Clayton's style of primly controlled staging did not evoke the era. Rosen (1974a, p. 47) writes that although *The Great Gatsby* (1974) was 'a faithful adaptation [...] [T]he book is so fluid and the film is so cluttered' because of the focus on an overtly 1920s *mise-en-scène* (Vooght 2018, p.29). The aim was not a naturalistic one, however. As Davis (2009, p. 18) writes, the static period look ignores 'the hand-me-down along with the new, the archaic with the fashionable, the inherited with the purchased' that characterises everyday life. There is no attempt at this, suggesting that spectacle and visual pleasure were the dominant concerns.

Less time is expended in 1974 on scene-setting through a description of the 1920s than in 1949 or 2013 – the approach is more immersive. What interrupts the potential subtleties of the immersion is, however, the fetishisation of the decade. To take the portrayal of objects as an example, interior furnishings reflect modish 1920s styles and how they are shot aims to emphasise this rather than use it as a matter-of-fact background. The silver objects on Gatsby's desk, the perfectly polished antique cars, the monogrammed backs of stylish hairbrushes in the introductory sequence and sparkling silver tea sets and trays occupy such centre stage that they become players in the drama, reminding us continually that we are looking through the far lens at times gone before. Placed at the forefront of the shot, as in Figure 7.2, they 'mirror only the surface structure of Fitzgerald's writing' (Tuhkunen 2008, p. 104). Whilst Fitzgerald's objects are strangely alive (see ch. 3), the coldly evaluative eye of the camera also fails to simulate what Maslin (1977, p. 263) rightly calls Fitzgerald's 'eroticism of wealth', emphasising only the admiration of Nick as proxy viewer.

In the 2013 *The Great Gatsby*, there are similar moments. Once again placed at the forefront of the shot, art deco tea sets and the like are shot in such a way as to emphasise them as fashionable objects of the 1920s (Figure 7.3). These shots apparently serve an even less narrative purpose than they did in 1974, where Gatsby's fetishistic collection of objects includes Daisy, and is made a part of the theme. However, they are also less

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FIGURE 7.2: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (1974) depicting a silver tea set for the meeting at Nick's.

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FIGURE 7.3: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (2013) showing a silver tea set for the meeting at Nick's.

overt in their demand to be desired. In keeping with his postmodern, intertextual approach, Luhrmann makes many references to Clayton's earlier version, and even the staircase in the 1926 *The Great Gatsby* film seems to find an echo in Luhrmann's film. Also in keeping with his postmodern approach, these are largely stripped of the meaning they had in previous versions and exist primarily for show.

In contrast to the other films, 2013 sets the action at the same time as the novel, clearly stating through Nick's voice-over, 'In the summer of 1922, the tempo of the city approached hysteria'. This is accompanied by grainy recoloured documentary footage and music contemporary to the film rather than the novel, asserting that Luhrmann will have an eclectic postmodern approach to the material. The footage notably includes scenes from the *The Great Gatsby* parties we will see later in the films, done over to look grainy and old. The film 'ostentatiously wants to exploit conceptions of the cinematic to the max', writes Polan (2013, p. 397), and this is evident in the many unusually angled CGI shots and montages of images that Luhrmann puts together to recreate the era – not necessarily in a naturalistic way. Film critic Seitz (2013, n.p.) describes these as 'CGI cityscapes that visualize 1920s New York through Warren Beatty's candy-colored "Dick Tracy"'. Past recreations are not used as naturalism but as intentional prisms to support the story.

Oddly, despite his clear attempts at pastiche, Luhrmann continued to make claims for authenticity: the evocation of New York City aims to replicate the 1920s, as Luhrmann stated, 'We did very accurate research on New York City in the 1920s, and all the imagery and expression of the city in the 1920s is accurate in the film' (Ohneswere 2013, n.p.). This nostalgic desire to replicate is intermingled with his claims of updating the text (*Tribute Movies* 2013):

> It's a new modern world [...] The dresses that they're wearing in the movie at that time are totally fashionable now. [...] We are still in the modern era. That's why that book still speaks to us now. I don't know, moral elasticity on Wall St anyone? Ring a bell? I mean, it is now, it is us and our job was to use the book. [...] Fitzgerald put the music of his time in his book – I put the music of our time in this film. (min. 6:10-7:07)

The time shifts extend to Nick, who is made far less genteel than in the novel and has character changes intended to place him firmly in line with the supposed zeitgeist of 1922. As with the 1949 *The Great Gatsby*, an introduction to the 1920s is deemed necessary. Digitally recreated aerial shots of the New York City skyline aim to bring back a lost age in a way that suits the maker's purposes. Nick himself narrates:

> Stocks reached record peaks – and Wall Street boomed its steady golden roar. The parties were bigger and the shows were broader. The buildings were higher, the models were looser and the ban on alcohol had backfired, making the liquor cheaper. Wall Street was luring the young and ambitious, and I was one of them. (min. 3:26–3:58)

The camera pans down an Art Deco-style skyscraper: 'To get started I bought a dozen volumes on credit banking and investments – all new to me' (min. 4:15). Nick turns the dial of a clearly antique radio of the time. We see shots of Nick looking excited whilst traders operate around him.

'At Yale, I'd dreamed of being a writer – but I gave all that up' (min. 4:28). We see him pick up a copy of James Joyce's 1922 novel *Ulysses* and then put it down. This is more than a little corny (as are most of the film's references to Nick having ambitions as a writer). Luhrmann is neither frightened of corn nor its effect of abruptly releasing the viewer from emotional immersion in the film. So a specific time is given to the action, and the optimism of this time is emphasised. However, the crash is also present through the cuts to the later Nick at the sanatorium, which take place, according to the psychiatrist's logbook, in 1929.

On the one hand, Luhrmann asserts a specific time and place, and on the other, Luhrmann reserves the right to meddle with historical veracity and 'adapt' the 1920s for a contemporary audience. These two aims do not always work well together, and the result is often neither one thing nor the other. In Badiou's terms, Luhrmann should likely have gone further than he does, as he modifies some aspects of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) more than others. The inconsistent approach suggests a superficiality, an 'ornamental' style approach, which is at odds with an authentic connection.

An amusing and indicative aspect of the recreation of the period is the differing stance that 1974 and 2013 take on the peripheral theme of Nick's work. In the 1974 *The Great Gatsby*, the stuffiness and boredom of the broker's offices is emphasised, whereas, in 2013, Nick appears to be working excitedly at full tilt, with numerous men excitedly talking into their phones. He opens a book at a page conspicuously entitled, 'Market speculation'. He then relates how he planned to spend the summer studying but was distracted by the lively events next door – another nod to Luhrmann's intended youthful audience. The approach of 1974 makes more psychological sense – that Nick is wistfully yearning for something a little more exciting in his life, which helps to draw him to Gatsby. Luhrmann attempts to portray Nick as in key with an overtly capitalist zeitgeist, rather than remaining slightly aside, with the ability to see what Gatsby himself does not see.

The recreations of the 1920s again demonstrate the filmmakers' attitude to their adaptations of *The Great Gatsby* – to create a spectacle that the viewer watches from afar rather than connects with. This detracts from the realisation of authentic connection.

Gangsterism – the underside of the Roaring Twenties

One of the most elusive parts of Fitzgerald's text is what exactly Gatsby has done to amass his fortune. Clearly, it is something less than kosher, but how bad is it? Fitzgerald does not want his readers to damn Gatsby before introducing them to his more redeeming qualities. There are hints at his

being a bootlegger early on – the 'young ladies' at his cocktail party say so (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 60). They also claim he is 'second cousin to the devil' (p. 60). The bootlegging only becomes a definite premise late in the book when Tom and Gatsby fight in the New York Plaza Hotel (Fitzgerald 1950):

> I found out what your 'drug stores' were [...] He and this Wolfshiem bought up a lot of side-street drug stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter. (p. 127)

However, Tom also alludes to something bigger than the 'small change' of the drugstore business that his friend Walter is 'afraid to tell me about' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 128). This turns out to be the business, far more egregious to today's audiences than bootlegging, of selling fake bonds. This is hinted at when Gatsby offers Nick 'a little business on the side' (p. 80). The nature of this business becomes unarguable after Gatsby's death when Nick picks up the phone, to be told by a stranger, 'Young Parke's in trouble. [...] They picked him up when he handed the bonds over the counter' (p. 158). This is no whitewashing of Gatsby's crimes by Fitzgerald, and yet at this point, with Gatsby dead, it tends to add to our sadness and sense of waste rather than our judgement. Overall, Gatsby's criminal behaviour, for the bulk of the novel, is obscured in a fog of vagueness. That it ultimately turns out to be financially fraudulent speaks to the dark underside of the 1920s economic boom.

The clearly criminal Wolfshiem is, of course, the clue to Gatsby's darker side; however, even here, Fitzgerald (1950) wheels back from this image of Gatsby at his worst, suggesting how Wolfshiem took advantage of Gatsby:

> I raised him up out of nothing, right out of the gutter. Right away, I saw he was a fine-looking, gentlemanly young man, and when he told me he was at Oggsford, I knew I could use him good. (p. 162)

Wolfshiem uses Gatsby's gentlemanly persona to put a good face on business that he himself is too obviously criminal to conduct. Gatsby's culpability is lessened as the reader perceives him as being exploited.

The films each face the challenge of how to approach Gatsby's criminality. Wanting to keep our sympathy with Gatsby but also to use Gatsby's gangster credentials to create tension and fuel the films' action required certain acrobatics. In 1949, the approach was to make Gatsby an out-and-out mobster. This is brought home in the film's opening sequence, where Gatsby personally shoots several people from his moving car – in this version, Gatsby *is* a killer. He is also violent when a man gate-crashes his party, taking the insistent man aside as if to speak with him – and then suddenly and violently punching him to the floor. If one watches the film closely, it becomes clear the man is one of his henchmen from the introductory scenes. This scene's placement early in the film also allows us to largely forget this moment when we are shown Gatsby's more honourable

tendencies later on. The film relies on Ladd's 'purity' of countenance (Henry 1974, p. 13), the gentlemanly way he takes care of Daisy after the accident and his vocalised expressions of regret at the life he has led to redeem Gatsby in the viewer's eyes. Through his 'clean-cut good looks' (Atkins 1974, p. 220), gracefulness and controlled movements, Ladd manages to lend Gatsby a sense of not being tainted by his gangsterism. But some of the complexity of Fitzgerald's ever-hopeful Gatsby has been lost in reducing him to a pure mobster. In the 1949 *The Great Gatsby*, the harsh hypocrisy of Tom's judgements is also emphasised, with him frequently swigging the alcohol he shames Gatsby for dealing in. The focus is kept on Gatsby's more acceptable bootlegging business. Gatsby admits: 'That's my merchandise you serve on your table. I've always seen to it you got good stuff' (min. 1:09:32). Nick says, 'What does it make us when we buy it?' (min. 1:09:36). He is told to shut up by Tom. In 2013, moral qualms seemed in short supply, perhaps in keeping with the 21st century.

The 1974 *The Great Gatsby* film is less successful at redeeming Gatsby. He is presented as gentlemanly and polite, kept almost a prisoner by his armed minders. Everything, including his romantic relationship with Daisy, is approached with almost exaggerated delicacy. However, bodyguards lurk in corners throughout his mansion, and the repeated phone calls that feature in this film (and in the 2013 *The Great Gatsby*) become a major player in their own right. These emphasise that Gatsby's business is a criminal one. In 1974, as Nick is meeting him for the first time, Gatsby takes a call, swears and hangs up on the caller – forming part of what sours this earlier scene. This pushes forward a phone call Gatsby takes much later in the novel when Daisy visits his house: 'Well, he's no use to us if Detroit is his idea of a small town ...' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 91) (in the 1974 film Detroit becomes Philadelphia; min. 35:28). Following this terse interaction, Gatsby clearly has to make another urgent call and says goodbye to Nick with the phone receiver in his hand, hovering toward his ear.

Gatsby is shown as being somewhat at the mercy of these phone calls. In this film, he also receives a call when Daisy is visiting for the first time. In this film, he asks the caller to 'Check with Wolfshiem. Just DO it; I can't talk now' (min. 55:04). This makes Nick uneasy, as it demonstrates a clear connection between Wolfshiem and Gatsby. At the later party Daisy and Tom attend, he is called to the phone – this time, it is Detroit on the line. There is also an included conversation in which Nick questions him about the origins of his money – he first claims he lost his inherited fortune 'in the big panic *(stumbles)* ... in the panic of the war' (min. 52:44). When Nick presses on his business, he snaps, 'that's my affair', apologises and then says he was in drug stores and oil and is not in either one now (min. 52:52). His thin-skinnedness on this issue feels less than admirable.

Phone calls are again used in 2013 to suggest Gatsby's criminal side. They are frequent, unrelenting and somewhat repetitious, as is so much of Luhrmann's filmmaking. Once again, the cautious revelation of Fitzgerald's depiction is lost. Gatsby is told of a call at the first party from Chicago, although his reaction is unruffled, as in the novel. Later, his servant approaches him again, saying there is a call from Philadelphia. He says goodbyes and makes moves to answer this call. As Nick leaves this party, he looks up at a tense Gatsby in his eyrie, answering another phone call, and Gatsby is back on the phone soon after he formally waves goodbye to Nick. Clearly, the issue is a serious and unhappy one.

In this film, there is also less subtlety about the Wolfshiem relationship. Going to meet him, Gatsby describes him as 'one of New York's most distinguished businessmen' (min. 36:30). As they arrive, Wolfshiem says, 'he keeps his mouth shut, or he doesn't get a penny', and Gatsby, clearly involved, says, 'We'll talk about that later' (min. 39:25). There is more of an obvious levelling between them than there seems to be in the novel. Gatsby then takes another call, and we again cut to him later on this call, looking very tense.

The phone rings again just after the shirt-throwing scene with Daisy, and this time Gatsby is terse. Initially, he says casually, 'I can't talk now, old sport' but then whispers crossly into the phone, 'small town ... I said a small town ...' He becomes angrier, 'He's no use to us if Detroit is his idea of a small town!' Seeing Nick's eyes on him, he straightens up and changes his tone, 'Chat later, old sport' (min. 1:02:50–1:03:26). The repeated (and repetitious) phone calls ram home the point that Gatsby's business is dubious, with little subtlety.

The implied violence of the bodyguards that conspicuously lurk in all corners of the mansion adds to this feeling of gangsterism. Similarly to 1974, there is no privacy in 2013's mansion, with men stationed at every corner. Again, there is an intertextual connection to the prior film. However, these men feel a bit less sinister than in 1974 – as we also see them tidying up and snuffing the myriad candles. Later in the film, they become more sinister – Nick says to Gatsby, 'I hear you fired all your servants' (min. 1:23:19) and Gatsby admits he has replaced them with people supplied by Wolfshiem. This conversation, conducted on the phone, is yet another occasion when we see a tense Gatsby talking on the phone. According to music supervisor Monsted, the riff 'to express what Baz calls "gangsta love"' is 'peppered throughout the fabric of the underscore' whenever we see a mysterious side of Gatsby (Trakin 2013, n.p.) – this shows Luhrmann's conceptualisation of Gatsby as a likeable gangster, but a gangster nonetheless. The repetitiveness of Gatsby looking strained and worried and on repeated additional phone calls hammers home the point a little

too much but does retain our sympathy for him far better than for the aloof Gatsby in 1974.

As in previous versions, Luhrmann adds an overt element of violence to Gatsby's parties that only detracts from the sense that Gatsby is in any way admirable. During the party Tom attends, in an invented incident, partygoers come to blows whilst Gatsby and Daisy fraternise in the garden, prompting Tom to comment, 'What a circus'. At the end of this party, a guest is dragged out by several serving staff, serving further to add a nasty edge to the entire party spectacle. Some white-jacketed staff hold the man whilst another repeatedly punches him, making this incident feel even more intense and unpleasant than the punching incidents in previous films. The camera then pans up from this scene to the JG logo on Gatsby's gate, overtly associating Gatsby himself with this violence. Combined with the disagreement between Daisy and Gatsby, the moment this creates a sense that all is turning to the bad. With almost an hour of the movie still to go, as in 1974, this seems to bring in the unpleasant discordant elements very early, dimming the viewer's enjoyment. The issue is the unpleasant tone that is created, working against the lyricism of Fitzgerald's prose which the later films also attempt to access via the Voice-over.

These are the kind of contradictions that do not work so well, as they stem from a desire to commercialise the film product. Rather than allowing an unincorporated evental site the opportunity to speak, they are generalisations and simplifications that reduce the ambiguity of Gatsby's business proceedings. To sum up, the 'subtleties of Fitzgerald's sketchiness have been lost' (Atkins 1974, p. 222), no less in 2013 than they were in 1974 and 1949. The damage caused to the film is linked to how this concretisation affects our image of and sympathy for the Gatsby character.

Symbolism – the eyes of Doctor TJ Eckleberg and the green light

Overall, Fitzgerald's writing creates a sensually heightened object-world. With the exception of the billboard of the eyes of Doctor TJ Eckleberg, which forms a very solid (although notably ambiguous) symbol, and the perhaps less ambiguous 'green light' of American aspiration, the symbolic elements of his prose seem to reside more diffusely in his descriptive geography, such as the valley of ashes, and elements of his action – the man selling puppies of dubious origin, for example.

In the films, the temptingly concrete and depictable symbol of the faded billboard advertising the services of oculist Doctor TJ Eckleberg has been

adapted in ways that reduce its undecidability. The eyes belong to the transit through the valley of ashes, the urban wasteland referred to whenever the characters pass through the valley. They are introduced early in the novel, near the start of Chapter 2 (Fitzgerald 1950):

> But above the grey land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor TJ Eckleberg. The eyes of Doctor TJ Eckleburg are blue and gigantic – their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose. Evidently, some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness or forgot them and moved away. But his eyes, dimmed a little by many paintless days under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground. (p. 26)

The eyes are watchful, frowning, intense, super-size and hardly human – and, ultimately, made of by the characters as what they will. Nick narrates (Fitzgerald 1950):

> I followed him over a low white-washed railroad fence and we walked back a hundred yards along the road under Doctor Eckleburg's persistent stare. The only building in sight was a small block of yellow brick sitting on the edge of the waste land, a sort of compact Main Street ministering to it and contiguous to absolutely nothing. [...] 'Terrible place, isn't it', said Tom, exchanging a frown with Doctor Eckleburg. (pp. 27, 29)

The eyes seem to disapprove of the bleakness in some way, although they also serve to inhabit its nothingness. The billboard is referenced each time the characters spend time in the valley (Fitzgerald 1950):

> Over the ashheaps the giant eyes of Doctor TJ Eckleburg kept their vigil but I perceived, after a moment, that other eyes were regarding us with peculiar intensity from less than twenty feet away. In one of the windows over the garage the curtains had been moved aside a little and Myrtle Wilson was peering. (p. 118)

The eyes create an echo with events – both eyes and the characters are fading; both are looking, as are the valley's inhabitants. The billboard hence comes to be associated with the intersection between the Wilsons and Tom Buchanan and the crucial clash between them, which the Buchanans must inevitably win. They also seem to provide an element of warning (Fitzgerald 1950):

> We were all irritable now with the fading ale and, aware of it, we drove for a while in silence. Then, as Doctor TJ Eckleburg's faded eyes came into sight down the road, I remembered Gatsby's caution about gasoline. (p. 117)

The eyes are awash with associations that speak to Fitzgerald's fidelity to modernism. The billboard is highly ambiguous and undecidable, representing both the vast overreach of commerce and its eventual destruction as the oculist is long gone, and the billboard is tatty, presiding

only over bleak emptiness. The size of the billboard is suggestive of the vastness of America, although also its colonisation by gigantic eyes that look down from above, as though representing a deity – but they represent a vanished God, and the replacement of religion by the advertising billboards of consumer culture. They both illustrate a modernist spiritual vacuum and the lingering desire for certainty and authority that some characters project onto them. They also represent looking and perception, including that of the viewer themselves, the tattered values of the Enlightenment and the increasing dominance of visual culture in the 20th century.

Placed on the roadway, the eyes connect the mansions, the commercial centre of New York City and the underbelly of urban space that is represented by the valley of ashes, whilst the cars that are driven between them represent the new automobility of the time and the freedoms of modernity. These automobiles illustrate Gatsby's identity and simultaneously lay the seeds of its destruction. If the 'motorcar is a metaphor through which national identity [...] has been negotiated and constructed' (Gibson 2004, p. 43), these are automobiles intrinsically related to the aspects of the American self, including its dark underside. Gatsby's car illustrates Gatsby's interest in new technologies (Pearce 2016, p. 59),[47] again referencing aspects of modernity. These technologies connote both freedom and new means of destruction. As Clarke (2020, p. 209) writes, following the accident, the car is 'no longer the emblem of wealth and celebrity, it is now just a car driven by a reckless driver, a machine both insentient and destructive'. Gatsby's car crash, fittingly caused by one of the Buchanans, thus additionally symbolises the systemic rejection of Gatsby's attempt to traverse the different spheres of American social geography.

The billboard of eyes, an apparently easily reproduced symbol, features in all the films. Harder to capture is the actual effect of the eyes within the text, and their film interpretation tended to simplify the many contradictory aspects of the eyes into a simpler, more moralistic stance in which the eyes lose their implacable amorality. In the novel, Wilson appears inspired by the billboard, telling Michaelis (Fitzgerald 1950):

> 'God knows what you've been doing, everything you've been doing. You may fool me but you can't fool God!'
>
> Standing behind him Michaelis saw with a shock that he was looking at the eyes of Doctor TJ Eckleburg which had just emerged, pale and enormous, from the dissolving night.
>
> 'God sees everything,' repeated Wilson.
>
> 'That's an advertisement,' Michaelis assured him. (p. 152)

47. Gatsby's car is also a symbol with many layers. See Clarke (2020) and Pearce (2016).

The billboard may indeed see everything, but it is a far more ambiguous type of judgement than a casual reading might suggest, unmoved, implacable and inhuman. Whilst interpreted by Wilson as the eyes of God, Wilson is shown to be misguided and misled in his attempts to impose moral justice.

Many of the films fall into the too-obvious temptation to give the billboard clear religious or moralising qualities, the overtly moralistic attitude that Badiou decried in films. Fitzgerald, a lapsed Catholic atheist, was adept at using religiously-orientated language to evoke feeling but would not have put forward any solidly religious schema. In 1949, there were no such qualms, and the eyes appear to have a straightforward moral role to play. The scale of the eyes is reduced, allowing them to appear easily within the shot and freshly painted (see Figure 7.4). As previously described, whilst his comrade says they remind him of God, it is Gatsby who dismisses them as 'painted that way' (see Fitzgerald 1950, p. 187) – this dismissal of the higher forces of Fate will, of course, fulfil a film stereotype in leading to his destruction.

They are seen again just over half an hour in when Tom speaks to Wilson and sneakily picks up Myrtle, who is waiting for him not far away on the dark road. They appear again, looming over the car with Tom, Nick and Jordan as they stop where Myrtle has been knocked down – once again associated with fate and judgement. Tellingly, the eyes form the 1949 film's final shot – as Nick and Jordan walk away, the scene at the graveside dissolves into an image of the eyes. The eyes then dominate the screen as they fade to black, after which the words 'The End' appear. This becomes the defining symbol of the film and is a fitting tribute to its moralism, but apart from that, the symbol has little depth in how it is handled. More than anything else, it seems a useful image that reminds us that we watch events as the billboard does and that our actions are themselves watched and judged. This operates at a fairly superficial level, lacking in deeper impact.

In the 1974 *The Great Gatsby*, the eyes of Doctor TJ Eckleberg are larger in size, and having them on a billboard high above the action means they are seldom in shot together with any of the characters (this same issue occurs in Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby*). Hence, there is much cutting back and forth between Wilson and the billboard to connect the two, which sometimes feels awkward. Although their size draws our attention to them, it also makes plain their constructed nature. There are a couple of other nearby billboards, which helps to make them look a little less unlikely, but the eyes are still larger, more colourful and more vibrant than the other signs. Thus, they do not appear to fit into the landscape as they did in the 1949 film.

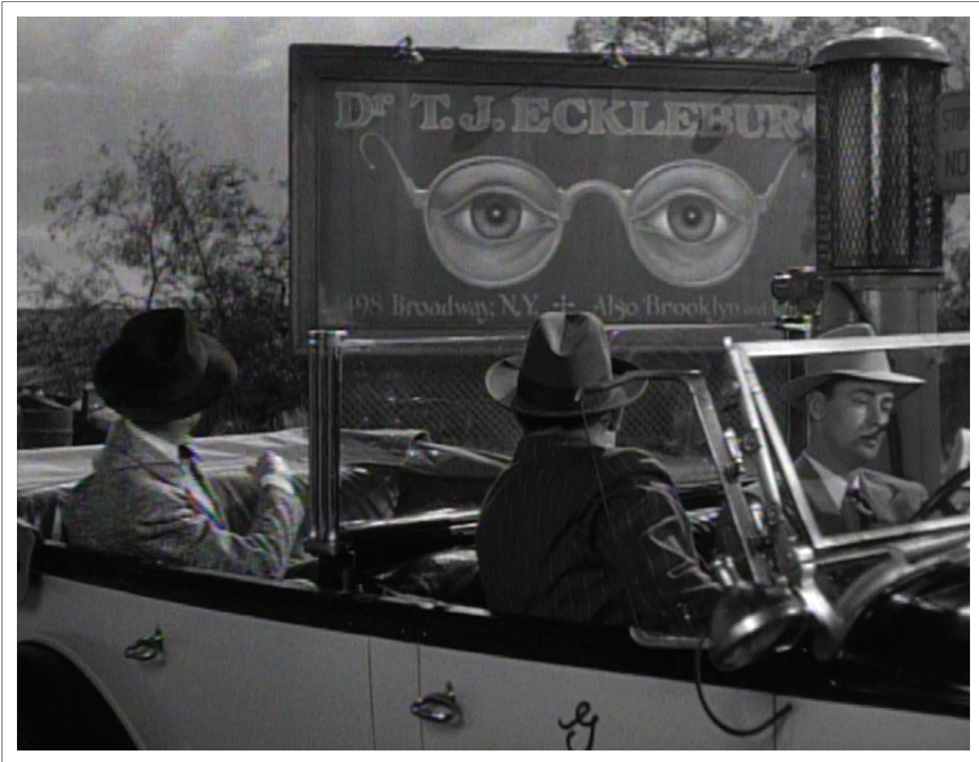

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FIGURE 7.4: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (1949) illustrating Gatsby ignoring the billboard.

The eyes are introduced in the 1974 *The Great Gatsby* through an overlay with the shadowy party figures next door – as Nick comments on the rules of behaviour at Gatsby's parties being like 'an amusement park' (min. 13:16). These comments once again connect the association of judgement with the eyes, although this time, Nick is also shown as wistfully tapping his foot in time to the music, itching to be a part of it. The eyes appear frequently in the film; when Jordan's bad driving nearly causes an accident; when stopping for gas at Wilson' garage; and after Gatsby and Tom fight, as an introductory shot to a scene where Myrtle and George Wilson are physically fighting. During this fight Tom tearfully says, 'Maybe you think you can fool me Myrtle … maybe you can … but you can't fool God …'. There is a direct cut to the eyes – 'God sees everything', says George. It then cuts back to George and Myrtle, and Myrtle says, 'That's an advertisement. You're so dumb you don't know you're alive' (min. 1:41:50–1:43:00). Again, as in 1949, we see the billboard behind Tom's car as he pulls up to the scene of the accident. As Tom leaves the scene, we do not, however, see the billboard again but rather an overlay with

reflected green light on water, panning up into the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. This creates a competition between or perhaps an attempted conflation of the two symbols and lends an air of malignancy to the green light, which gives it a new meaning.

This is not the last of the eyes, however. As Gatsby tells Nick he will wait for Daisy all night if he has to, his eyes are large and stare upwards – not long after, we see the billboard again and an association is made between the two eyes. Thus, the eyes have been set up to seem fateful, and all seem possessed in some way by their fates – in a way that might seem a little heavy-handed, in contrast to the novel's subtlety. Even the 1974 film plays to commonly held beliefs about the sanctity of marriage and the necessity of punishment for transgressing these norms. With an even heavier hand, the billboard eyes are then overlaid with an image of Gatsby's bloodied car headlights.

The last time the billboard is shown is when a maddened Wilson stares towards it, indistinctly mumbling, before stumbling off towards East Egg (Figure 7.5). The impression is given that he is being directed from above or finding direction through looking into them – giving the eyes an almost malevolent quality. This is the last time we see the sign, with the Coppola script favouring ending with the symbolic green light, as in the novel.

In 2013, the voice-over made the association very clear: the 'fantastic farm' of the valley of ashes is watched over by 'Dr TJ Eckleberg, a forgotten oculist, whose eyes brooded over it all, *like the eyes of God*' (min. 14:30; [*author's added emphasis*]). Instead of this thought coming from the crazed mouth of Wilson, the 2013 script establishes this squarely as the official interpretation by putting it into the mouth of Nick. The entire valley of ashes, created through CGI with little respect for believability, comes in a literal sense from the pen of Nick. The sanatorium doctor advises him to write anything, 'a thought, a memory, a place' and the valley of ashes appears initially superimposed with Nick's writing pen. Figure 7.6 illustrates how the pen and book dominate the image, with the toiling figures appearing as though they are but an illustration of the book. Whilst there is something of the fable about Fitzgerald's description, this depiction on screen ascribes a fictional quality to the suffering of these figures.[48] Luhrmann's intention is not to be realistic, but this effect is not well-controlled. It also reminds us that we are connecting to a written novel. As Polan (2013, p. 399) notes, 'Just as the film treats the words of the novel literally as quotations that float across the surface of the screen, the visuals

48. Luhrmann draws on other aspects of fable, at times invoking the sense of a fairytale in his depiction of Gatsby's mysterious castle; this doesn't quite work as the tale does not correspond to fairytale tropes.

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FIGURE 7.5: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (1974) depicting George as he departs in search of Myrtle's killer.

also have a quotational quality', showing us 'a set of notations that refer us back to the novel and stand as rote citations of it'. These represent attempts to harness the novel's cultural value.

There is a certain deadening of emotion and involvement as we look at the prettified or striking images before us, and the flying words merely emphasise the flatness of the cinema screen. The actual sign looms even larger and more striking than in 1974.

Once again, cutting is required to associate the billboard with particular characters. As George and Myrtle fight, the characters ride back from New York City 'towards death' as the voice-over announces (min. 1:40:14). The billboard makes its fateful appearance again, moving out toward the viewer (remember the 3D) as the camera then swerves down toward the yellow car flashing around the corner. In presenting the billboard as erected on an intersection between the roads, Luhrmann makes more of the billboard as connecting with the motorcar and the idea of travelling between different spaces and fates. As Myrtle runs out into the road and is hit by Gatsby's car, her body flies up in the air in front of the billboard. There are some fairly awkward shots where there is an attempt to get both her body and the eyes in the shot, and the figure appears superimposed in. In this film, Myrtle's death is treated in operatic style. Her figure stands before the car, clothes billowing, before being flung upward and passing by the stars, then

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FIGURE 7.6: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (2013) of Nick writing the valley of ashes.

hanging in the air in front of the billboard. The soundtrack is Jack White's 'Love is Blindness' – seemingly emphasising that Myrtle is dying for her love rather than focusing on her abuse. The slow-motion shots and music tap into other responses than mere shock or disgust, and the incident begins to feel grandly cathartic, rather than disturbing.

After the accident we see the eyes again as Tom, Nick and Jordan approach the scene. There is a momentary dissolve from the eyes into their headlights as in 1974. Filming in an age when intertextuality has been embraced, Luhrmann echoes the previous *The Great Gatsby* films as well as the novel, for example, the central staircase that we see in the 1926 trailer, the brutish bodyguards and retainers of 1974 as well as Gatsby's ring and indeed, some of the dialogue from the 1974 *The Great Gatsby*. In this way, he expresses his own zeitgeist. The eyes appear again as Gatsby recounts what really happened in the accident to Nick much later (the same images of Myrtle's body as previously, with the difference being that this time we are shown Daisy at the wheel). If the images did have some shock value the first time, the second time around, this is surely reduced still further. This repetitious doubling distances, again moving events further into the past.

And finally, as Wilson picks up his gun, there is a cut to the billboard as we hear his voice say (for the second time), 'God sees everything' (min. 1:53:27). Wilson is far less sympathetically portrayed than he was in 1974. In this film, he is only a violent possessive thug. Little is made of his ultimately confused attempts at morality, and Fitzgerald's most striking symbolic image loses its ambiguous power in the transposition.

Using the eyes as a symbol in 2013 is thus perfunctory and lacks even the depth of the previous two films. However, this may well be because Luhrmann, unlike the other directors, has chosen to foreground Fitzgerald's other notable symbol in the book, the green light. Somewhat hastily expanded upon by Fitzgerald in his final draft, its positioning was extended from a simple appearance as Gatsby shows Daisy his mansion and his view of the light from his dock to the light's inclusion at the end of Chapter 1 and the very end of the novel (Eble 1964, p. 317). This placing gives it central defining importance.

Perhaps because of the last-minute inclusion, these symbols do not work together, creating difficulties for a film version. The green light is not as well-integrated into the text as the billboard, and the two symbols tend to compete with each other thematically. The shifting focus proves more problematic in film, where these symbols become more solid than in the novel.

The green light is taken up solidly and stolidly by the colour films of 1974 and 2013 (it is not a notable feature in the black-and-white 1949 version). In the novel, the tiny light becomes something much larger, connecting not only to Gatsby's desire but the larger theme of the American dream, discovery, exploration and aspiration, as the ending of *The Great Gatsby* makes clear (Fitzgerald 1950):

> And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams [...] And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. 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 [...]. (pp. 171–172)

We note Fitzgerald's own sense of nostalgia here, but it is a nostalgia that seeks to integrate, rather than replicate, the energy of the past. It collides with both the past and present, once again collapsing space and time in complex ways. Thus, although the meaning of the green light might be fairly straightforward, what it stands for is so huge and its presentation in the text complex that it acquires a further dimension. What can be reproduced in film is, of course, the green light itself. The 'single green light, minute and far away' that Fitzgerald (1950, p. 25) writes of needs adapting for a film medium.

In 1974 there is the conceit that the light is connected with a green ring which Gatsby, in a later scene, gives to Daisy as a love token. The connection between the two is made quite explicit, with Gatsby saying, 'I bought this house just to be across the bay from you' (min. 1:19:45) and noting that the

ring is the 'colour of the light of your dock' (min. 1:20:14). She quickly gives it back to him to keep, a sign that she never intends for their liaison to be more than an affair that must be kept secret. He tries to put it on, but it does not fit his wedding finger. Later, as Gatsby's body is removed from the house, the green ring is very present on Gatsby's hand as his arm lolls out from his shrouded body. The dream of the green light becomes conflated with a doomed romance.

We first see the green light on Tom's dock. If we fail to see it, it blinks on and off at us as Nick says his goodbyes following the first tea party. As Nick returns to his residence, we see it from the other side of the water, just before we see Gatsby mysteriously step out of the shadows. In this shot, it does indeed embody the novel's 'minute and far away' description (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 25). There is a very brief shot again of Gatsby, this time gesturing as if to try to grasp the tiny green light, after the party at Myrtle's apartment and a brief shot of Tom and Daisy hosting a garden party. This seems to serve mainly to try to keep the green light in the audience's mind, but it is also an attempt to literally transpose a moment from the book in this sense of a 'traditional', reifying fidelity. In the novel, this moment comes when Nick first sees his mysterious neighbour, Gatsby. Wondering whether to greet him, he halts as Gatsby (Fitzgerald 1950):

> [...] gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone – he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and far as I was from him I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward –and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness. (p. 25)

Critics complained that this reaching out looked 'silly' (Ebert 1974, n.p.).[49] Part of the reason for this is perhaps not only the visuals but because the *The Great Gatsby* theme that pounds us whenever he appears (as discussed in the previous chapter) sits oddly with the general style of the film.

The green light appears again very much later in the film after Myrtle is run down and killed. Here it also serves to move us back in space to Tom's mansion, showing how film elements can have multiple values. It then appears just after Gatsby reveals to Nick that Daisy was driving and before we see Tom and Daisy reconcile after the accident. Each of the latter times it appears, it is accompanied by the sort of music one might hear in a horror movie, beating in time to the flashing of its light as though the blinking is in itself ominous. The more numerous appearances of the green light in 1974 suggest a desire to more fully integrate this symbol into the

49. Luhrmann clearly didn't agree, including a very similar scene and gesture in the 2013 *The Great Gatsby*.

film, in this case converted into a symbol of unattainable desire and its negative consequences. Clayton chooses to (almost) end with the green light, and with Nick's voice-over as he steps through the empty mansion:

> I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this lawn and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. (min. 2:14:50–2:15:02)

As Nick looks across at the tiny light across the sound, his voice-over continues: 'He did not know that it was already behind him' (min. 2:15:07). The subtle changes to Fitzgerald's words and exclusion of the more complex theme of past exploration and discovery again reduce Gatsby's aspirations to a romantic one only, leaving out the other aspects of the American dream – perhaps also because, in Clayton's words, this 'was too complicated for the screen' (Houston 1974a, p. 78).

In *The Great Gatsby* (2013), the green ring is an innovation from the 9174 film that Luhrmann judges as useful and hangs onto in his version – although in this film, it is purely Gatsby's ring and its metallic colour changes, sometimes appearing more black and at other moments more greenish-silver. However, the radiant symbol on it forms a powerful visual connection to the green light and to the beams radiating out from the art deco-ish 'JG' logo that is repeated throughout the film. At the film's start, we see the JG rosette logo fly backwards and transmute into the green light radiating out from the darkness over the water – the connection is made explicit.

Luhrmann's film shows the ring before we see Gatsby's face. When Nick first mentions the goings on at Gatsby's, Gatsby's hand bearing the ring is shown pulling aside the curtain as he stands, slightly too far away to see clearly, at the window of his turret eyrie. The ring once again morphs into an image of the JG logo as the scene returns to the sanatorium. The connection by now is very explicitly established, with the ring operating as a stand-in for Gatsby and all the green light represents. In this case, however, it is not an unwanted love token and purely connected with Daisy, but a constant connection to Gatsby's driving dream. This accounts for the ring's greater effectiveness as a symbol within the film. It effectively becomes one of his 'enchanted objects' that stand for his dream – as described when Gatsby at last meets with Daisy (Fitzgerald 1950):

> The colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one. (p. 90)

Thus, including the ring as a means of creating an ongoing emphasis on the broader meaning of the green light is an effective and allusive device

in this film. Luhrmann claims (amongst his many claims) that the green light is the pivotal symbol of his film, saying (Welch 2013):

> Those people who feared that the film was just going to be about the shimmering mirage of Gatsby's parties can now take a collective sigh – like, 'Oh good, it's about the green light'. (n.p.)

The light itself reappears just after Nick's first meeting with Daisy at the Buchanans. As Daisy and he look out in a melancholic mood over the sound, Daisy says, 'all the bright precious things fade, and they don't come back' – there is a cut to the pier's green light, as the camera then swoops over the water and we see a patch of luminous green next to Gatsby's mansion which fades as the camera draws closer in towards the mansion's face. Luhrmann's non-naturalistic style allows for the additions of CGI-enhanced colour, which help the green stand out against the natural greens in the environment. In this case, the increased flexibility benefits the production.

A slight luminous green tint is added to many of the scenes in the foliage outside Gatsby's mansion. (The round pool at the centre of the party scenes also has been given an aquamarine tint.) Nick sees Gatsby reach toward the light across the water as we hear Nick's voice-over explanation, 'he seemed to be reaching toward something in the dark' (min. 12:46). Again, the dialogue spells out what we see in the most prosaic way. The light then expands into a cloud of greenish mist, which fades into Nick at the sanatorium as he mutters, 'the green light' (min. 13:02). He then says, 'I don't want to talk about this, Doctor …' (min. 13:09) That this scene showing Gatsby reaching toward the light works better than it did in 1974 is largely because of the acting skill of DiCaprio – how he pulls his hand out of his pocket demonstrates Gatsby's complexities. We see resistance, compulsion, shyness… all with only his back to read. At the same time, the scripting lacks this complexity and spells out what we already see. This clunkiness undermines some of the subtler effects.

The green light recurs again after his meeting with Daisy and the slight collapse in mood that results. The irony of Nick's voice-over comment that 'now it was once again just a green light on a dock' (min. 1:01:44), no longer holding its 'colossal significance' (min. 1:01:36) is that the film continues to present it as anything but. It appears again when Gatsby tells Nick his full story near the film's end, observing, 'It was all for her' (min. 1:52:16). Most notably, it is emphasised at the end of the film. Gatsby's swimming pool is again round, greenish and has the JG logo on the base. As he dives in, we see his ring prominently. The luminous hue given to the pool becomes even stronger when Gatsby's body is shown from below floating in the water as light shines down into the water from above. Once again, the various symbols are connected. It finally appears, with an almost aggressive lack of

subtlety, at the film's end. Luhrmann goes beyond his previous efforts to concretise the words of the voice-over, with the green light appearing in tandem with Nick's reading of 'Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us' (min. 2:03:02). As Nick speaks, 'Tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther', the screen again shows Gatsby literally reaching toward the green light (min. 2:03:12). As Nick writes 'The Great' onto his typescript of 'Gatsby', there is a cut to the green light, which again sweeps through the screen, blinking on and off, then receding into the darkness as a pinprick, which then expands again to a small globe which grows and blossoms into the JG logo, recalling the start of the film. How Luhrmann draws together the symbols of the green light, the JG logo and the ring is effective in creating a symbol that represents Gatsby and all he stands for rather than merely symbolising a misguided love affair as it did in the 1974 *The Great Gatsby*.

The question is not whether or not a filmmaker should stray away from the text but the effectiveness of the changes in emphasis and the fit of the symbols' suggestiveness to the overall theme. Other added symbols, such as Clayton's inclusion of birds at key moments and focus on characters' hands, remained peripheral to the central theme and did not add a great deal of their own. As well as additions, equally symbolic incidents such as the salesman 'selling a pup' to Myrtle, effectively portrayed in 1974, do not appear in 1949 or 2013. Deletions may also have an impact. The choices convey the filmmaker's attitude – workman-like and prosaic, or imaginative and allusive.

Film requires various media elements to work together to enhance meaning. At times, repetition and simplification are required in order for an audience to grasp meaning quickly in the linear time that watching a film necessitates. However, the impact of this approach as it continues throughout the movie is perhaps more profound than we might initially realise. At times the films were heavy-handed and didactic, whereas a subtler and less moralistic approach could have allowed for a greater circulation of meaning.

■ Fixing meanings

Adaptors of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* were faced with several dilemmas. There were the audience's culturally determined expectations. There was an expectation from studios, nervous about their investment, that the more commercially saleable themes, such as gangsterism, would be heightened at the expense of Fitzgerald's subtler and more profound themes of class mobility and inclusion or exclusion. The directors desired to access some of Fitzgerald's 'value' in the adaptations. Over time and with *The Great Gatsby*'s continuing presence as a book studied in the American academy (see ch. 3), the themes of social mobility and the

context of the 1920s in *The Great Gatsby* were solidified by the later tropes of the American Dream and the Roaring Twenties.

The Hollywood adaptations of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) all, in various ways, seek to connect with Fitzgerald's text. As perceptions of Fitzgerald's cultural value and film budgets grew, this connection became an intrinsic part of the desire to create value in the adaptations. How this need was interpreted is revealed in the formal choices, inclusions and exclusions displayed in *The Great Gatsby* adaptations. The adaptations' emphasis on Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as a source of fixed meanings suppressed his text's more politically contentious aspects.

There was also increased emphasis on the 'darker' side of the 1920s, the gangsterism that grew into the 1930s. This aimed to increase the filmable action at the expense of Fitzgerald's tone. The increase in invented violent elements, whilst aiming to ramp up the tension, seemed also to misalign the viewer's sympathies. The 'realist mode of cinema' (Griggs 2016, p. 199) and an omniscient camera with its exposing eye tended to work against Fitzgerald's modernist vagueness and undecidability, even in an overtly intertextual film such as 2013's *The Great Gatsby*.

There were many losses through imposing the mythology and fixed ideas surrounding the meaning of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) onto the films, and thus approaching the set in a foreclosed manner. The need to overtly indicate judgement of those involved in adulterous affairs spoke more to a societal view of morality than the ambiguity of Fitzgerald's use of the billboard of the eyes. Applied in a less stolid manner, these aspects could have become part of a Badiouian faithfulness to the evental site of the novel.

Chapter 8

Anatomy of a party

> Where the exhibitor may look askance at the overlength of 80 minutes' running time, and be tempted to apply the shears to the swimming pool orgies, etc., it is cautioned against this because for the average layman this footage will be the most attractive. – Review of the 1926 *The Great Gatsby* ("Abel", 1926)

Combining elements

Elements in a film do not exist in isolation but interact with each other. This chapter will consider how the themes and elements discussed in the last two chapters combine to make meaning and how this can be read in terms of a Badiouian fidelity. Whilst there is worth in considering each element individually, isolating elements that are intended to be part of a whole may, of course, also be problematic. The combination of elements and the film's overall organisation is important. As Badiou (2013, p. 17) writes, cinema has the ability to 'show in one and the same shot' a range of possibilities and references to larger themes outside of itself. The film's 'artistic organisation' is where the fidelity that creates the subject can lie (p. 11). How elements work together in a particular sequence, that of the first party Nick attends, is the focus of this chapter.

The first of Gatsby's parties that Nick attends, where he is introduced to the mysterious Gatsby, appears in all of the films. The lengthy sequence allows us to examine the similarities and differences of each director's approach and how the elements of Fitzgerald's text and the film medium combine with their own creative intentions. The discussions in the previous

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chapters regarding the intentions of the creators, commercial pressures of Hollywood film production and approaches to textual elements are illustrated in these scenes. Again, we see foreclosures of the set operating (e.g. Coppola's interest in Mafia-style characters, which seemed to be something of a hobby horse) and consider how these serve to affect the possibility of fidelity.

The famous Gatsby parties become very problematic in the films. Firstly, they offer an opportunity for directors to showcase their ability to marshal crowds and effects with the possible end result of hubris. Secondly, what is glowing and intimate in Fitzgerald's prose can become an empty spectacle on screen, distancing an audience emotionally. Thirdly, they involve audience expectations of fun and escapist entertainment – how can these expectations be managed given the ultimately sour message of *The Great Gatsby* (1925)? The contradictory aspects of Fitzgerald's prose which I explored in Chapter 3, so compelling in the novel, may be reduced in favour of straightforward entertainment in the films.

This chapter will take one party and analyse key aspects of its interpretation in the films, seeing what conclusions can be drawn about the approach to the novel, that is, whether the films allow Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* to operate as an evental site. I will quote from Fitzgerald's text not to assert that the films should copy it but to explore the meaning of changes from the text, which are not accidental. As motivation is key in a Badiouian approach to fidelity, it can be seen through the choices what were the likely drivers behind the changes. The entire sequence will be discussed, considering how choices that move away from the text were motivated and giving a sense of the overall trajectory and weighting of incidents within the larger film. Key aspects that will be given attention are the creation of the party spectacle, including references to the 1920s, the introduction of the Gatsby character, point of view and how the sequence is closed out.

Fitzgerald's party

Nick's experience of the first party, in many ways, sets in place what to expect from Gatsby's parties throughout the rest of the novel. It is important to remember that what we are told in Fitzgerald's text is filtered through Nick's eyes. Nick's naivety of approach and old-fashioned manners are emphasised by his being the only one to come bearing an invitation. Fitzgerald describes the party's set-up with precise (and admiring) orchestration. His prose is full of syncopation in the form of references to numbers and time: 'weekends'; Mondays when 'eight servants, including an extra gardener' arrive; 'every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons

arrived [...] every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless halves' – these are for the orange machine that can 'extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler's thumb'; 'at least once a fortnight' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 41); 'at seven o'clock' (p. 42). Listing each number and day of the week highlights the precise organisation behind the spectacle, creating both a feeling of mastery and suggesting the need to control an underlying chaos.

In Fitzgerald's novel, the preparation for the party is as much a piece of theatre as the party itself – and, notably, this huge organisational feat is set in motion and ultimately controlled by Gatsby, who, like a conductor, will be seen separated from the herd at the end. Only *The Great Gatsby* (1974) attempts to depict any of the organisation that goes into the preparation for the parties, placing this in separate scenes not related to the first party Nick attends. We see food and flowers arriving and an army of staff putting up marquees. Others roast suckling pigs and create elaborate party fare in the large kitchens. The scenes are interesting but convey more of a sense of labour and the grittiness and anonymity of 'downstairs' operations than of gathering excitement, the drawing together of elements to build scale that Fitzgerald creates. The differing rhythms suggest different meanings and purposes.

Fitzgerald's text then pulls back to Nick and his invitation. His initial attempts to find Gatsby frustrated, he then meets up with Jordan and sits at a table listening to much gossip and speculation about Gatsby. Nick has various anxieties – he notices an undergraduate that expects to sleep with Jordan, that her party of 'staid nobility' does not mix (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 46). Looking for Gatsby, Jordan and Nick encounter Owl Eyes (discussed in detail in ch. 6). As notable as Fitzgerald's intermingling of the humorous and sinister is his use of ambiguity. Owl Eyes's ambiguous expression of admiration for the realism of Gatsby's fakeness resonates, full of contradictory impulses, as does Jordan's later statement that large parties are intimate because 'at small parties there isn't any privacy' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 50). These both play with the subversion of expectations. Nick does not immediately recognise Gatsby, who is initially deflated by this. Then, Gatsby makes Nick feel comforted and accepted with his smile. Gatsby leaves to take a phone call, later reappearing, clean-cut and sober, set apart from the drunken crowd.

Thus, initially, there is much noise, chatter and laughter. With frank enjoyment, Fitzgerald's glowing descriptions celebrate the sensory pleasures of the party's food, music and dress: 'On buffet tables, garnished with glistening hors-d'oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold'

(Fitzgerald 1950, p. 41). Girls 'glide on through the sea-change of faces and voices and colour under the constantly changing light' whilst a 'gypsy' in 'trembling opal' begins the dancing (p. 42). But the episodic vignettes increasingly show gossip, confusion, abuse and infantile behaviour: – there are references to a 'baby act', glasses larger than finger bowls, 'rowdy little girl' drunkenness (p. 48), women fighting 'with men said to be their husbands' (p. 52) and wives are 'lifted, kicking into the night' (p. 53). From the finely syncopated start, the party becomes gradually chaotic and possibly destructive, although the precise keeping of time and number continues (2 a.m. 50 feet, etc).

This culminates in Nick coming across a car crash not far from the front door – the turned-over car has an 'amputated' wheel (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 55). Fitzgerald's sense of humour, in this case, is shot through with the macabre. To everyone's horror, a man comes out who says that he was 'not even trying' to drive. It turns out this man is Owl Eyes, and he eventually reveals he was merely a passenger. Another figure gets out, a 'pale, dangling individual' (p. 56), far more sinister than Owl Eyes. He wants to try still to drive, although the wheel has come off; as he says, there is 'no harm in trying' (p. 56). The emergence of the death-like figure from the broken car is nearly the note the party ends on – except then there is Gatsby. Gatsby presides over it, outside of it, untouched by it. Fitzgerald (1950, p. 56) wishes to show Gatsby's control and ability to stand out from the crowd of the ordinary; and, at the same time, his 'complete isolation'.

Thus, one of Fitzgerald's party's most striking and effective aspects is its trajectory. Events follow a narrative arc that leads the reader from the excitement and sensual stimulation at the start of the party to increasingly chaotic scenes as the sky darkens, the couples begin drunken arguments and a figure of death appears from a smashed car. This may be seen to presage the car crash later in the novel, which precipitates Gatsby's destruction, but there is little of humour in that later car crash. This early party, however, is shot through throughout with Fitzgerald's wit and sense of absurdity, and the glimpses of darkness, confusion and isolation remain just that. The arc provides a build to a climax, after which there is a partial collapse – a structure that provides a sense of completion and catharsis. There is also a smaller preceding build and climax linked to the party preparation, ending with the words: 'The party has begun' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 42).

■ 1926's party

It is hard to comment on specifics from the 1926 film, where only the trailer survives, but we do have some significant clues in the trailer (*HypedFor* 2012) and from reviews of the time. The parties were very much a feature of the

film and considered to be part of its chief appeal, with exhibitors exhorted not to cut this lengthy material ('Abel' 1926):

> Where the exhibitor may look askance at the overlength of 80 minutes' running time, and be tempted to apply the shears to the swimming pool orgies, etc., it is cautioned against this because for the average layman this footage will be the most attractive. (p. 15)

This review referred to 'the usual Long Island parties and the rest of those high hat trimmings' ('Abel' 1926, p. 4). Although Mastandrea's (2022, p. 203) reconstruction of the storyline suggests that only one actual Gatsby party was included, there was an attempt to depict excess within the general *mise-en-scène*. The film's trailer shows the guests racing up the stairs from the beach to get changed for the party as per Fitzgerald's (1950, p. 42) description, 'The last swimmers have come in from the beach now and are dressing upstairs' (see Figure 6.6) and a synchronised dive into the pool by several bathing belles (Figure 8.1), recalling some of the set showpieces of early film. A contemporary film critic referred to Gatsby as flinging 'gold pieces into the pool as the women scramble to retrieve them' (Robinson 2014, n.p.) – a definite addition to Fitzgerald's narrative. What the party consisted of, pre-censorship, can only be guessed at.

It would be fascinating to see a film version of the parties that was contemporaneous, which would have no need to invoke nostalgia or desire to showcase reconstructions of the 1920s. However, what is notable is that the surviving trailer does not try to sell the film on the party scenes alone –

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FIGURE 8.1: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (1926) of the swimmers diving into Gatsby's swimming pool.

there are just as many references to the overall drama of Myrtle, the abused wife and various aspects of confrontation around the love triangle. Melodrama appears as important as spectacle, which was not always the case in years to come.

■ 1949's party

Whilst the 1926 adaptation had little to limit it except the basic production mores and budgets at the time, the 1949 version was, as has already been discussed, afflicted by the 1934 Hayes code of censorship as well as post-war austerity and a general feeling of distaste for the excesses of the 1920s. Nonetheless, an attempt is made to indicate *joie de vivre* and excess within a fairly limited scope: a woman rides through the house on a horse, and a man drinks out of a supersized bottle. The party spectacle apparently did little to relieve film critics of the general feeling that the film was tepid (see ch. 5). Nonetheless, attempts are made to create a sense of energy, although these are punctured by Nick's continually disapproving attitude.

The scene before the party is of Gatsby staring across the water at the green light on Daisy's dock. Following a fade to black, we hear the first chord of the party music before we see the image. We then see the party, a lively song playing and the singer stepping forward into the frame, flanked behind by a row of white saxophonists. The camera pans slowly to the right, and we see the crowd of dancers from a high angle, men mostly in tails (although some are in blazers and flannels). Women are dressed in a surprising range of outfits, from diaphanous and glittery dresses that are conventional party wear and do not speak much to the 1920s, to sailor suits and hats. Perhaps intended to show the crowd's diversity at Gatsby's party, it looks more like a costume cupboard at the studio was plundered. No particular person stands out. Indians wearing turbans and saris move through the crowd (they are not shown dancing but standing and observing). White serving staff press through the crowd with trays. The dancers are filmed from a high-angle shot, showing them from the waist upwards only, thus showcasing the Gatsby mansion more than the people. There are large chandeliers, flower arrangements, columns and wallpaper (Figure 8.2).

This then cuts to a lower-angled shot showing a buffet in the foreground, with a deep focus so that we see the revellers at the back of the room, and a horse coming into the right of the shot. These shots are intended primarily to show the scale of the party and its unconventional elements. In later shots, we begin to see the swimming pool that will feature strongly in the plot at the end of the film – this helps the viewer tie these scenes together and is a useful cinematic addition to the text.

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FIGURE 8.2: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (1949) depicting the dancing partygoers.

An older man drunkenly clutches a comically huge magnum of champagne and swigs out of an equally large glass (we recall Fitzgerald's [1950, p. 48] 'glasses bigger than finger-bowls') – the emphasis is again on excess, and that age is no indicator of discretion at a Gatsby party. Later in the party scene, the camera focuses on a woman dancing the hula-hula, who wiggles her hips centre stage. This focus is further highlighted by the fact that the men in her company are all seated as she stands and displays her figure. The audience is invited to participate in the male gaze of the men who sit around her and who ask her to dance some more (there is an admiring woman, as well). This part of the party spectacle gives a sense of voyeurism with attendant distancing effects. The vignettes of the horse and the man with the bottle are in the spirit of Fitzgerald's incidental party moments, but nothing about the way in which the party is shot encourages the viewer to enter the scene – we view it all from a distance. The feeling of intimacy encouraged by the sensual flavour of Fitzgerald's prose is thus lacking.

How the film introduces Gatsby is also indicative. Nick is far more self-assured than he is in the following versions. He crosses his arms in front of him and asks one of the servants to 'tell Mr Gatsby that Mr Carraway,

Mr Nicholas Carraway is here' (min. 10:53). The framing of this introduction shows Nick as someone with a sense of his own importance, very different from Nick in Fitzgerald's (1950, pp. 43–44) text, who 'slunk off' feeling 'sheer embarrassment' at his inability to locate his host. The response, 'I will, Sir, if I can find him', makes far less of the mystery of who Gatsby is than the later adaptations (min. 10:57). The man clutching the comically large bottle of wine asks simply why Nick would be interested in meeting Gatsby. The indifference of people to Gatsby is here more apparent than the mystery and glamour that surrounds him, which is played up in the later adaptations.

Clearly, Gatsby has no interest in the party he has set in motion and is filmed standing out on his dock. Although we do not see what he is looking at this time, it can be assumed that he is again looking at the light on Daisy's dock. Separated from the crowd, he only comes in when he hears Nick has arrived. Gatsby approaches Nick slightly tentatively: 'Enjoying yourself, old sport?' (min. 12:41). Dressed in a black tuxedo, he stands very straight and keeps his hands behind him – overly proper compared to Nick, who is wearing the 'white flannels' of Fitzgerald's (1950, p. 43) novel with a necktie and spats (Figure 8.3).

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FIGURE 8.3: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (1949) portraying Gatsby's formal attire and body language.

Nick makes some disapproving comments. When Gatsby reveals himself, Nick is genuinely embarrassed, covering his mouth with his hand. There is no reassuring smile from Gatsby. Instead, he appears to give Nick a slightly steely stare. The special 'quality of eternal reassurance' in Gatsby's smile that Fitzgerald (1950, p. 49) describes is absent, and the Nick of 1949 would have no need of Gatsby's understanding. The effect of leaving out this key moment in their introduction is to make less of the empathy and sensitivity that make Gatsby appealing to others. Notably, it is a passage that is difficult to convey in film (see ch. 6), and this chapter will go on to look at how the other films tackle it. At this point, in an invented incident, the character Reba, who is from Gatsby's past, pushes in. Gatsby punches him, encouraging the audience to see the hard man that sits alongside the tentative airs and graces.

Throughout this introduction to Gatsby, we note Nick's social ease, even condescension in the party situation. Nick does not have Gatsby's social anxieties and is secure in his class. He wears any personal feeling of poverty extremely lightly. This is compared to Gatsby's somewhat over-elaborate gestures and language, well conveyed by Alan Ladd. Despite the relative lack of fanfare of our introduction to Gatsby, the characterisation of Gatsby fits relatively well with Fitzgerald's conception. However, Nick is more self-assured and less naively open to experience than the character in the novel. Nick's attitude is overtly priggish compared to the novel, where Nick appears to reserve his judgement. It is persistently indicated that Nick's moralistic attitude is correct; during their discussion about Gatsby's origins, Gatsby says to him, 'If I had a man like you for a friend, I figure I'd come a long way' (min. 16:12). This change appears to have been dictated by the time and the need to express moral opprobrium toward the 1920s. On the positive side, it highlights Gatsby's insecure status as a *parvenu*.

There follows a lengthy (nearly eight minutes) flashback to Gatsby's time with Cody, emphasising how one will be badly treated until one gets money in the bank. The very length of this section, coming in the middle of the party, is somewhat disruptive, even if the information it gives is helpful. Returning to the party, Gatsby and Nick converse in Gatsby's boat, where the clumsiness of Gatsby's attempt to bribe Nick for access to Daisy makes it seem less egregious. Gatsby leaves the boat, and the scene moves to the meeting of Nick and Daisy at Tom's mansion.

What is left out may be as important as what is added. There is no Jordan at this party, the mysterious Owl Eyes is not there (his appearance has been moved to a later party) and nor is the death-evoking car crash at the end of the party. At the same time, the film manages to telescope several important events into the party, allowing for a concise use of the limited time available. The confrontation with Reba sets the scene for the extended flashback revealing Gatsby's past. This revelation of his past,

which happens only near the end of the novel, is brought forward – giving the audience an earlier opportunity to sympathise with Gatsby. Thus, the element of surprise is sacrificed in favour of concision and efficient storytelling; however, also at the expense of the overall trajectory.

The overall effect of the party scene is prosaic and also somewhat clumsy. The party's filming bears out the context of the film and the Ladd star persona. It also gestures towards the cultural value of Fitzgerald by quoting directly from his text, as Nick tells the man bearing the bottle: 'A chauffeur in robin's-egg blue crossed my lawn bearing a gilt-edged invitation in majestic hand' (min. 12:17). It differs from the other adaptations in not attempting to use the party as an opportunity to revel in hedonistic escapism and elaborate spectacle. This party is very much a means to the end of the story's plot.

1974's party

In the 1974 *The Great Gatsby*, the first party scene lasts for approximately 11 minutes (26 minutes in until 37 minutes in), a fair chunk of time, echoing the substantial coverage it has in the novel. It begins as Nick responds to his formal invitation, delivered, as in the novel, by a 'chauffeur in robin's egg blue' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 43) – this time, not spelt out in words but recreated in the visuals (see Figure 8.4). This moment demonstrates Clayton's commitment to a 'traditional' conception of fidelity to the letter of the text and to concretise Fitzgerald's words.

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FIGURE 8.4: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (1974) of the chauffeur in robin's-egg blue (eggshell blue) attire.

Nick arrives in the evening to a lively atmosphere with garden tables and marquees as guests dance next to a large fountain. In contrast to 1949, Nick is not disapproving but alert and interested. Seeing Jordan talking to a heavily moustachioed man, he intervenes, and we get a clear steer he is romantically interested in her. There is more dancing in the Charleston style. This is followed by a conversation amongst guests, some notably drunken, seated outdoors around a table about who Gatsby is and his mysterious and possibly suspicious past – has he actually 'killed a man'? (min. 29:29). This is followed by more scenes of excess, such as champagne being lavishly poured out over many glasses. Some of these are disconcerting, such as a dog eating from the table buffet. A man stands up, claiming to be 'your entertainer for the evening' (min. 30:42) and begins to tell jokes. A boorish-looking man in white tie pours a glass of wine over his head. Jordan is excited to see the fight. What we later know to be Gatsby's chief minder/bodyguard removes his own watch. He then violently punches the boorish man, whose inert body is then dragged away by other minders of Gatsby. Jordan loses interest, although Nick remains alert. There are more shots of choreographed dancing. The minder comes and tells Nick to follow him. Going up in the elevator, Nick notices a gun in his jacket. He is delivered to Gatsby, who is secreted in his office behind various closed doors. They have a friendly but vague conversation. Gatsby then takes a tense 'business' call. Nick is delivered back to the party by the minder, somewhat shaken. He takes a glass of wine and enjoys the party again as an opera singer holds forth. It begins to rain, and there is much hilarity as the guests run for cover. The dancing continues indoors, and the shot is overlaid with one of the sun rising and daytime as the dancers gradually fade out. As mentioned earlier, neither Owl Eyes nor the car crash appears, although Klipspringer clowns around.

In creating the 1974 party 'spectacle', most noticeable is the role of the camera, which determines our feelings as to what we view and our involvement. The party can be divided into three units – the opening sequence, the sequence where Nick is taken aside to meet Gatsby and the concluding sequence when he returns to the party. A different style of filming governs each sequence. During the first part of the party, the camera is remarkably mobile: what Atkins (1974, p. 222) describes as 'Clayton's graceful camera movement' through the 'glittering, shimmering spectacles'. It slides around, initially following Nick's arrival but then divorced from him; moving around the speakers at the table as they describe their experiences with the mysterious Gatsby; panning left and right and up and down through the dance sequences and the close-ups of the dancing. Graceful it may be, but the camera movement is problematic for several reasons. We do not get the sense that the camera is following Nick's point of view – the viewer also cannot focus and empathise with

Nick as the camera moves completely away from him. If it is intended to function as if we ourselves are a guest at the party, mingling and moving around, this is undermined by the camera's frankly voyeuristic viewpoint. For example, in the initial scene where the dancers perform an increasingly frenetic Charleston, the camera angle comes in repeatedly from below, offering us a view up their skirts. This is an impossible viewpoint unless someone is lying on the floor – hence it feels frankly voyeuristic and presents us with a spectacle for our consumption rather than a feast in which we participate. Not only that, but it is a male gaze which emphasises the female form. Firstly, the female dancers stand out because of their white stockings and silver shoes, whilst the men in their black tuxedos are barely noticeable; secondly, the viewpoint of the camera, which is often at waist-level or below, highlights the wiggling derrieres and shapely legs of the female dancers. Female audience members may well feel alienated by these shots.

Another distancing aspect of the party spectacle is the emphasis on the display of the costumes and other faux 1920s elements, such as dance styles and music. These are put out for the frank enjoyment of the viewer; as Atkins (1974, p. 222) puts it, 'There are those of us who revel in the relatively simple pleasures of observing Fitzgerald's beautiful people at play'. But the emphasis on the past, presented not in the authentic hues of the time but through a nostalgic 1970s-coloured lens, is also emotionally distancing. The first dance sequence ends on a close-up of the legs of a female dancer, centre screen, clearly showing the rolled-up tops of her stockings, the wrinkling of the stockings around her ankles and the seam line at the back of the stockings – all anachronistic features that stand out to a more contemporary eye (Figure 8.5).

There is a tightly controlled colour palette, obvious from the moment of Nick's arrival, where guests are dancing at the side of a large fountain. Immediately noticeable are their colour-coordinated outfits, which suggest that what we are about to see will be driven by what is considered pleasing and attractive to the eye rather than following a quest for authenticity. The colour code of the partygoers throughout is silver, gold, peach and soft pink, with the men in formal evening dress, mostly tuxedos. As Maslin (1977, p. 264) notes, 'It's too pretty, stultifying so, and seventies-pretty at that'. Nick's striped necktie, a 1920s innovation, is a well-researched element of meaning-making through costume, emphasising that Nick is part of a new generation[50] and indicating a schoolboy preppiness. In terms of the women's dress, there is some reference to the dropped waists and bias cuts of the 1920s, but the party dresses seem a little more figure fitted than they might have been in 1925, the pastel colours are not typical, and dresses

50. See https://hiring.workopolis.com/article/brief-history-tie/.

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FIGURE 8.5: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (1974) of partygoers rolled-up stockings from a low point of view (shot).

are less idiosyncratic in design: as Marcus (2020, p. 122) writes, 'no female character dresses as herself'. Hairstyles are mostly bobbed with elaborate headpieces, again suggesting the aim was for a 1920s look and feel – an aim that would be in keeping with the nostalgic approach favoured. At the same time, there was a desire to please a 1970s audience. The result is, overall, a superficial interpretation, a nostalgic view of the past that becomes merely ornamental.

This nostalgia may have met some of the audience's expectations for spectacle, but 'whatever social commentary Clayton may have set out to make is lost in a flurry of voile and tulle' (Maslin, 1977, p. 264). However, this chapter argues that more than that is lost – the ability to experience an authentic connection in the present and, with it, the satisfaction of making (or remaking) a truth. Instead, nostalgia of this sort intends to replicate within the known.

The nostalgic concerns continued in the accurate depiction of dances of the time. Dances of yesteryear seem to be so complex that only trained dancers can master them – or so is suggested by this film. The first dance sequence shows us the Charleston (if we failed to notice the dance, the musical refrain of 'Charleston! Charleston!' makes this clear). Following on from the spoken scene at the table and the violent interlude, the camera again moves to the dancing guests, who are this time, dancing the tango. Unfortunately, this highly formal dance makes the obvious professional

training of the dancers who dominate the front of the shot even clearer, which came in for some criticism. Maslin (1974, p. 264) writes, 'the same two-dozen trained dancers are in the foreground of virtually every mass-revelry shot', and even the popular *Mad Magazine* (1975, n.p.) took aim in their *The Great Gasbag* satire: 'Those parties he threw [...] they were unbelievable! Gasbag thought of everything! He even had the dancing choreographed!'. The choreographed dancing again takes away from any sense of authenticity – the party is not a party at all, but an elaborate staging of elements of nostalgia designed to present an audience with an entertaining spectacle rather than make them feel. In Badiou's terms, this shows an attempt to approach the set with a foreclosing attitude or, to put it another way, to present a simulacrum of a party and the 1920s.

The most striking difference from the source text is the violent interlude with the party guest and minders, which leads into the second sequence, where the audience is introduced to Gatsby. Prior to this, we have only seen Gatsby at a distance, looking out over the sound – we have not yet seen him face to face. In this version, Nick's first meeting with Gatsby forms a lengthy mini-sequence of its own (four of the party sequence's 11 minutes) within the larger party sequence. An entirely different atmosphere from the party outside is effectively created. Spaces are enclosed, whether it be the lift with its cage-like portcullis, the oppressive panelling in a dark wood that reaches to the top of the shot, the floor-length curtaining, or Gatsby's office, which is reached only through multiple closed doors. Gatsby, first found standing at a window, immediately closes it, thus reducing the distant party noise to absolute silence and creating an absolutely enclosed space. The sound stage is also entirely different: the background diegetic sound of the party is reduced to nothingness, and even the conversation between Nick and Gatsby is peppered with lengthy, awkward pauses and silences. As with the following final party sequence, the scene is put together through cuts rather than a moving camera. This successfully gives a greater sense of involvement, as we often see what the character is seeing, for example, in the shot and reverse-shot conversation between Nick and Gatsby.

The segment departs from Fitzgerald's description in notable ways that are important to consider, as they further reveal the filmmakers' intentions and attitude toward the material. The gangsterism of Gatsby is hyped up. The minder, whom we saw violently punching and removing a troublesome guest earlier in a disturbing scene, has slicked-back hair and Italian features. In looks and behaviour, he is more than a little Mafioso. With few words, this minder removes Nick from the party and takes him into the lift, where he will ascend to meet Gatsby. Various elements underscore Nick's separation from the others and potential vulnerability; as he pushes through blurred party members to the lift, he is the only one in focus; we see him from

behind in some shots, giving us a sense of his undefended back and neck; in the lift Nick sees, in a close point of view shot, the firearm under the minder's jacket. Guns never feature in Fitzgerald's text; perhaps the closest to them is Wolfsheim's cufflinks, those 'finest specimens of human molars' (1950, p. 70).

The sense of Nick being possibly in danger from Gatsby and his staff is emphasised, even to the point of using standard and 'clichéd devices to provide dramatic tension' (Dixon 2003, p. 293) – for example, the slammed doors out of shot that cause Nick to jump or swivel, the mirror in which Nick suddenly sees a reflection of himself, or the fact that during these sequences we see an anxious Nick looking without ourselves being shown what is in his eye-line. This allows for an effective reduction of tension when Nick meets Gatsby himself. This does give a little of the 'quality of eternal reassurance' that Fitzgerald claimed for Gatsby (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 49).

It is worth looking closely at how Gatsby is first presented. Our first sight of Gatsby's face, as he turns toward Nick, shows an indefinable expression (Figure 8.6). We next see him mid-length with the illuminated window behind him, one hand at his hip in a formal posture as he turns toward Nick. The presentation of Gatsby is formal both in his posture, and dress (he wears a tux with embroidered waistcoat and gold watch chain) and in its staging – he is centre shot, framed by the net curtains with darker panelling or curtaining on each side.

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FIGURE 8.6: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (1974) showing the first shot of Gatsby.

The curation of the image speaks to Gatsby's curation of himself. Behind him is conspicuously displayed in a silver frame what we will later learn is a photo of himself at Oxford University. He turns smoothly toward Nick, saying, 'How do you do, old sport, I'm Gatsby' (min. 33:55). He then smiles broadly and holds the smile a little too long, making it feel slightly uncomfortable (Figure 8.7). Nick then descends the stairs quickly, looking relieved. He is now on the same level as Gatsby. They shake hands fully at arm's length, again, suggesting formality.

Most important in this brief introduction is the interpretation of the Gatsby smile. In the novel there is something genuinely understanding and reassuring about it (Fitzgerald 1950):

> It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. (p. 49)

Whilst Gatsby's friendly manner in the scene (coming after the tension of the elevator journey) does indeed reassure Nick and the viewer, the director emphasises the acted nature of his smile (and indeed his environment). This again undermines what is ultimately intended to be truly admirable in Gatsby. He becomes a man who is simply playing a role rather than someone who truly has a freshness and an 'extraordinary gift for hope' at his core (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 8).

The scene is littered with 'tells' that create unease and suggest all is not well. Gatsby's face is, at times, in shadow and, for part of the meeting, he

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FIGURE 8.7: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (1974) illustrating Gatsby's smile.

stands behind his Chesterfield armchair as though needing the protection of the chair in front of him. When the phone rings, Gatsby answers, 'I don't give a damn what Philadelphia thinks, I said a small town. If that's his idea of a small town, he's no use to us' (min. 35:28). This conversation is held in pleasant tones, although there is an element of tension instantly created by Gatsby's swearing and his body language. His laugh afterwards, 'I'm sorry old sport, it was business', is clearly unconvincing (min. 35:41).

This phone call is taken later in the novel, just after Gatsby has shown Daisy his mansion. It has a differing function, suggesting what Gatsby had to do to present himself this way. Gatsby gets a phone call during this first party but leaves to answer it. The decision to bring in the more detailed phone call earlier merely emphasises the illegality and unpleasant nature of Gatsby's business, something Fitzgerald leaves extremely vague until later in the novel. Nick's innocence and good nature are emphasised through his body language, dress and positioning within the scenes quite effectively. However, the final results of this scene are, as Dixon (2003, p. 293) put it, 'More *Godfather* (1971) than *Gatsby*'. Coppola's script heavily colours the scene and reflects the personal interests of the man who shortly after made his name with the Mafia *Godfather* series. As Atkins (1974, p. 222) puts it, whereas Fitzgerald 'teased and tantalized', Nick's meeting with Gatsby in 1974 'creates almost the same effect as the gangland prologue of the Alan Ladd film' – portraying Gatsby as an out-and-out mobster.

Considering why the choices departed so substantially from the book is interesting. Gatsby's gangster persona is considerably emphasised – here, he is surrounded by unpleasant, taciturn and violent minders who are armed. This ultimately reflects poorly on his character and suggests a more extreme illegality to his business. At the same time, he is portrayed as extremely isolated and, quite literally, behind closed doors and 'above' it all. Whilst this may invoke a sense of pity, it is also quite unlike the sense we get in the novel of Gatsby's humility, where he is isolated within the crowd. Dixon (2003, p. 293) writes, 'more importantly the new scene has nothing to do with the spirit of the original' – suggesting the continuing desire for correspondence of some kind. In the novel, Gatsby circulates amongst the crowd at the party, unrecognised but also not pushing himself to the fore. More important than any departure from the novel, the reasoning behind these choices seems unclear. If the aim was to satisfy an audience's need for greater action and excitement, the additions nonetheless fail by not seeming to add anything to the plot or exposition. Instead, they serve to give the unfortunate sense that Gatsby is, as Tom Buchanan describes him, no better than a 'common swindler' (Fitzgerald, 1950, p. 127).

In fairness, Clayton is not oblivious to the humour in Fitzgerald's text and strives for his own moments of humour within the party. This is created

in the first segment largely through the antics of Klipspringer, who grimaces at the gossipy revelations, is perturbed when the drunken woman lays her head against him, and hams up his dancing. The elderly lady who complains, 'You know I always want pheasant' (min. 30:37), is also a little ridiculous, and the partygoer who jumps over the body of the troublemaker who is being dragged away manages to convey both comedy and a sense of the selfish nature of those who are at the party purely for their own indulgence. Another instance occurs between Nick and the minder in the elevator going to see Gatsby. Nick asks the minder, 'Are you sure you've got the right person?' (min. 33:00). We see Nick gulp. There is a pause, then a very slight smile from the minder, which we see Nick mirror with a larger, ironic smile. The minder then nods, and Nick nods, saying, 'Yup' (min. 33:08). There is the definite intention of a moment of humour despite the otherwise ominous nature of the interactions. The humour is, however, limited or perhaps simply lost within the general tone.

When Nick returns to the party, Clayton strives to re-establish a more light-hearted party atmosphere. This forms the third discrete sequence of the longer party sequence. He now uses crowded shots at mid-height to show numerous partygoers within the frame. Laughter, song and glinting glassware add to a sense of *joie de vivre*, and there is less of a focus on displaying the elaborate garments or dances of the time. The diegetic party music resumes, interspersed with singing and laughter that effectively evokes a lively party with guests enjoying themselves. The wandering camera of the first party sequence, whose 'candour', according to Atkins (1974, p. 222), shows us on an equal footing 'the glassy-eyed gaze of suckling pig and drunken guest', is replaced by a series of cuts, mostly showing us the party through Nick's eyes and allowing for more involvement from the viewer. Clayton uses reaction shots, such as Nick showing surprise and laughing and the bartenders similarly showing surprise and laughing, to involve the audience further. The only place where the camera drops below a normal eye-view is a brief moment when it follows a dog who runs in from being out in the rain. The sudden rainstorm further breaks down social boundaries, with the musicians and the bartenders breaking from their duties to enjoy a drink and partygoers racing for cover inside. Whilst we see a shot of the crowded palatial hall at a distance, giving the viewer some grandeur, the lack of a concentrated focus on any particular costume or body part more effectively allows us to enter the scene.

The emphasis on spectacle is reduced, and the latter part of the party far more effectively gives a sense that the partygoers are actually enjoying themselves – a very different trajectory from Fitzgerald's. Fitzgerald's party follows what might be called a drunken trajectory, where Nick's trepidation becomes excitement, 'I had taken two finger-bowls of champagne, and the scene had changed before my eyes into something significant, elemental,

and profound' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 48), and then dissolution and collapse. In Clayton's version, they party until dawn with an increase in liveliness and enjoyment – there is a slow, superimposed dissolve from the crowded hall, full of partygoers, into the sunrise. We see that once the need to display a nostalgic view of elaborate faux 1920s dresses and an increased emphasis on the gangsterism of Gatsby has passed, there is an increased sense of authentic emotion, which is ultimately more satisfying and less open to criticism. There is some difficulty, however, in adjusting to the lighter tone in view of the previous less pleasant scenes.

■ 2013's party

In the 2013 *The Great Gatsby*, the first party again lasts more than ten minutes and occupies a similar placing in the film (22–33 minutes into the running time). This party starts with panoramic views of the guests arriving, which could not be more different to the claustrophobic sets of 1949. Joining the huge crowd entering the mansion, Nick is dazzled by what he sees. He tries and fails to find Gatsby, and there are various playful hints of Gatsby's presence through the green ring. Four minutes into the film, viewers are introduced to Gatsby's ring with its radiating symbol as he stands up in his castle's windowed eyrie, which will be used repeatedly to show us Gatsby tucked away in thoughtful privacy (but also exposed). So the audience certainly reads the ring as Gatsby by the time of the first party, knowing ahead of Nick that Gatsby is near him. This adds the element of a 'knowing viewer' who can enjoy the big reveal.

Unable to find Gatsby, Nick meets Jordan, and they fall into the room with Owl Eyes.[51] As they go back to the party, they hear comments from partygoers about Gatsby's mysterious past. These comments are presented in a deliberately stylised, theatrical way. The film does not aim for naturalism but rather aims to create theatre. The discussion about whether Gatsby killed a man is elaborated, again in keeping with the gangster persona that is enhanced in this film. There is a comment made about Gatsby 'killing for fun' that has no parallel in the book (min. 25:36). The obnoxious rich boy who has persistently tried to get between Nick and Jordan makes several comments about Nick's lack of money, including the comment, 'Rich girls don't marry poor boys' (min. 28:09) (that appears in the 1974 film, but not in the novel).[52]

There are numerous shots of Gatsby's ring as Nick searches for him, including Gatsby's hand holding a tray of drinks, a hint again of his

51. See Chapter 6 for an analysis of the Owl Eyes scene.

52. This remark is attributed to F Scott Fitzgerald's first love, Ginevra King (Prigozy 2013, p. 93).

lower status. Luhrmann keeps our focus on Nick and the emotions he is going through, so the staging feels less obvious and uncomfortable than it might. We then see Gatsby's back as he takes a drink of his own from another tray held up by a waiter. He says, 'I'm afraid I haven't been a very good host, old sport' (min. 28:36). We see Nick turn and stare, surprised. 'You see –' (there is the drawn-out sound of a brass instrument, then silence), 'I'm Gatsby' (min. 28:42). Gatsby looks at Nick, amused and understanding. We hear the music build and see, via a cut, the fireworks going off, then there is a cut back to Gatsby in close-up, smiling and lifting his glass to Nick. Nick initially stares, then relaxes and then smiles. Numerous reaction shots help us to feel the kindly essence of Gatsby's smile. As previously discussed in Chapter 6, Luhrmann's interpretation of Fitzgerald's words is knowing and somewhat tongue-in-cheek, fireworks and all. It very much exaggerates the mystery around Gatsby and is generally repetitious in making its points. It is also playful, and this playfulness contrasts sharply with the sombre introduction to Gatsby in the 1974 film.

As Gatsby is told of a phone call, his manner remains positive and friendly. Later, Jordan is called to speak with him, and we see more fireworks, hear more cymbal clashes and participate in more crowd reaction shots. Fireworks are reflected in Gatsby's window panes as he looks out, a little more sombrely over the crowd. There is a rather brief attempt to establish a more serious and drunken mood, with slower, moodier music, guests lying or sitting around languidly or drunkenly and Nick lying on the ground. There are scenes of the servants beginning to tidy up as a notably smaller number of die-hard guests attempt to carry on with the party. The party ends with Jordan's mysterious comments about her private meeting with Gatsby and her lively leave-taking dominating over the Owl Eyes car wreck.

This party appears to follow the various party incidents of Fitzgerald's text more closely than previous adaptations – particularly in its introduction of Gatsby. Again, however, a subtly differing trajectory is created. In this party sequence, there are at least three climaxes where music and lights build to a head. There is no clear sense of which climax is the important one. The attempt to bring in a more sombre, thoughtful mood toward the end of the party is well-created but almost immediately abandoned. Instead, the sequence ends more cheerfully than the original, with Nick enthusiastically waving goodbye to Jordan. Although, again, it is not quite clear if this is where the party ends – there is an additional sequence where Nick looks up from his quiet garden at Gatsby in his tower.

It is worth looking more closely at how Luhrmann creates the party spectacle, and what this reveals about the adaptation's approach and choices. The impression created of guests queueing to enter and Nick arguing over his invite with a doorman suggests a clubbing scene rather than a house (or even mansion) party (Figure 8.8). The camera looks down

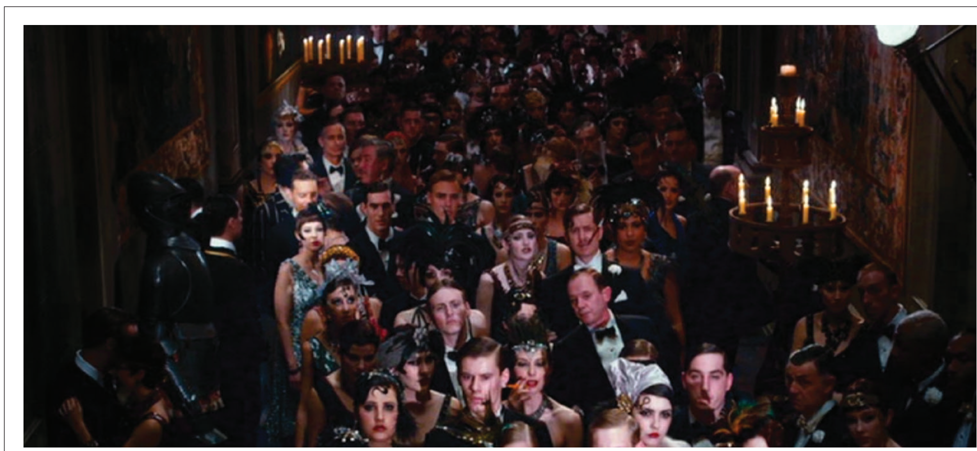

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FIGURE 8.8: Film still from *The Great Gatsby* (2013) showing the party guests queueing to enter.

on a large herd of people who are struggling to get through the double doors and then up from their eye-view at the spectacle that comes into view through the doors.

The excitement builds with plenty of reaction shots and reveals, whilst the strikingly contemporary music gathers to a climax as they enter. The music fades out again as Nick reels off a diverse list of guests as he observes and reacts:

> Billionaire playboy publishers and their blonde nurses, heiresses comparing inheritances on Gatsby's beach, my boss, Walter Chase, losing money at the roulette tables, gossip columnists alongside gangsters and governors exchanging telephone numbers, film stars, broadway directors, morality protectors, high school defectors, and Ewing Klipspringer, dubious descendant of Beethoven. (min. 23:57–24:19)

We see a mixed bag of costumes that reference the 1920s but are not slavish reproductions of an era. This reflects the feel of the whole scene – it does not try to recreate the 1920s, but, with its bright colours, contemporary music and a hint of the style of early film choreographer Busby Berkeley in the geometrically arranged shots and women dressed as birds pouring from huge fake bottles, creates a mélange of styles and experiences that suggest the 1920s but allow for a new experience. The scene is created largely through numerous quick cuts, showing reactions, point of view and different shows of the party – all encouraging viewer involvement at the same time as parading spectacle. The first song ends with a bang and the camera zooms out to show us the mansion from a distance, and a moment of quiet. Then we see Nick looking out and his comment, 'Wow' (min. 25:06). This is intended for us as the audience to echo, without the novel's sense of Nick's formality.

Thus, the editing does its best to encourage viewer participation in the face of an incongruously large and spectacular party that bears little reference to Fitzgerald's large but nonetheless human-scaled description of Gatsby's parties. The visual references to the partygoers (both those we know and anonymous attendees) via reaction shots show their continual engagement with and enjoyment of events. They also suggest the viewer's enjoyment of the film spectacle.

The cinematography is focused on spectacle and copious amounts of CGI; for example, at one point, we see fireworks going off from across the bay and then a reverse shot of Gatsby's mansion with the fireworks like snow merging into a laughing character spraying golden glitter from a large bottle. The floating or diaphanous textures appear to be an attempt to work against the potential for flatness of the 3D, forming 'ethereal textures that float across the screen and resist cardboarding',[53] as with the streamers that cut across the screen (Polan 2013, p. 398). However, they also emphasise the CGI-induced unreality of some of these effects.

In making these mega-choices, Luhrmann's party is almost the opposite of Jordan's well-known statement about large parties being 'so intimate' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 50). Even during their meeting in the room with Owl Eyes, Luhrmann is loath to lose any sense that there is a party going on outside and frequently cuts from the room where they are speaking to the party going on outside. Whilst there are some attempts to make these cuts point-of-view shots (there are shots of Owl Eyes, Jordan and Nick looking out of windows placed high up in the room, questioning what this is all about), other cuts just appear and do not follow any character's viewpoint. So, whilst the viewer is encouraged to watch and respond to the party, it is similar to watching a fireworks display, with emotions kept at this simple level.

The sequence is full of a multitude of minor incidental shots that liven things up and give the sense of a party in which many things are happening simultaneously. The continual cutting can, however, prove tiring in the context of a longer film where this editing style is used almost continuously rather than merely for the emotional highs of a party. Luhrmann's pacing is also problematic – as film critics have noted, Luhrmann is unsure where to put his attention, and there are continuous 'multi-orgasmic' climaxes that dull with repetition (Morris 2013, n.p.). Repeated builds and big bangs can eventually lead to detachment. There are fireworks when we first meet Gatsby, and, again, fireworks a little later on that are even larger and more spectacular, whilst feeling

53. Cardboarding refers to how 3D films create depth through 'a set of flat planes one after the other and extending into the distance of the space within the frame' (Polan 2013, p. 398).

less connected to any plot point. The second set of fireworks occur as Jordan goes in with some trepidation to meet Gatsby, and he looks out at the party. Gatsby also pops up at least five separate times – six, if you count Nick looking back at him from the house. Some of these appearances seem superfluous – does Gatsby need to appear again after having spoken with Jordan (shots which have no inspiration in the book), only to say to Nick that he apologises for not being able to tell him what they talked about, and then disappear again? In a film of this considerable length, it seems odd and indulgent when other, more telling scenes and characters have been excluded.

Although each adaptation tries to present Gatsby as likeable in some way, the mood of the 2013 first party of Gatsby is hence kept much lighter than in previous adaptations. Nick is embarrassed, and Gatsby reassures him. The stern-faced retainer that advises Gatsby that he has a call from Chicago gets no major reaction from Gatsby that is unsettling. However, a shot of Gatsby looking furtive as Jordan voices her suspicions about his back story and his stern-faced appearance in the eyrie before he notes Nick looking at him changes the mood. There are intimations of what is to follow. However, Luhrmann has, unlike previous versions, managed to keep the mood of the party light and enjoyable for the viewer throughout, as much by what he has left out (the added violent interactions of the other two films) as by what he has included. This works better, although the mood is generally one of a superficial excitement.

The implausibility of the whole scene, with its industrial scale fireworks, transforming the neighbourhood into something like a 'war zone' (*CinemaSins* 2019, n.p.) is, however, problematic. The party is far more like an urban nightclub than a house party, however lavish. Whilst many stylistic features reference the 1920s in playful ways, others (such as the music) do not seem to, and the viewer is never really sure why. The music we hear is not produced by the instruments we see (n.p.), and this also serves to create a sense of detachment. The more obvious CGI effects draw attention to the constructed nature of the visuals, again creating a sense of detachment. The repeated fireworks on a colossal scale make it entirely implausible that his Buchanan neighbours across the water would not have heard of him (and also implausible that these parties happen on a weekly basis). The possibilities for maintaining a trace of the vanished event through the slightly more flexible yet still connected approach that Luhrmann takes are somewhat dampened by not being extended similarly to all elements. Nonetheless, at this relatively early point in the film, the highs have not yet become excessively repetitive, the cutting still lends itself more to excitement than to dullness, and the party scene, whilst unrealistic in many ways, continues the film in its own momentum.

■ Balancing acts

As well as being led by their own preferences, directors often face audience expectations that may be misguided or wayward. The famously excessive Gatsby parties, and the perception of the 1920s as an era of excess, create certain expectations that the party scenes will provide the audience with enjoyable spectacle. This was seen as a drawcard for film viewers from as far back as the 1926 version. Griggs (2016, p. 212) argues that an emphasis on spectacle is 'well suited to certain aspects of Fitzgerald's novel'. However, there is a gulf between how it reads on screen and Fitzgerald's description's sensuality and intimacy.

A close reading of the novel reveals that the seeds of destruction in Fitzgerald's ultimately pessimistic account of Gatsby are already sown in the first party. The later party which Daisy attends is even less enjoyable, containing the beginnings of open conflict between Tom and Gatsby. Thus, the detail of the novel stands in contrast to audience expectations, and directors who wish to follow the plotting of the novel are left with a dilemma. The opportunity to satisfy some of the audience's expectations lies most obviously with the first party, where the downward trajectory of Gatsby's tale has not yet begun to fully take hold.

The ways in which the adaptations handled this party scene are indicative. Already, in 1926, there seems to have been some exaggeration of the party spectacle in comparison to the novel, with girls diving after gold coins and, as seen in the trailer, a synchronised dive that speaks to a choice to provide visual spectacle rather than something more naturalistic. *The Great Gatsby* (1949) stands out amongst the adaptations as having a different focus regarding the depiction of the parties. In this film, the party spectacle was secondary to the need to view the 1920s through a particular kind of moralistic lens. The visual emphasis is purely on the oddity of the combination of guests and the scale of Gatsby's mansion and does not convey the emotional excitement of Fitzgerald's description. The intrusion of overt violence into the scene, when Gatsby punches Reba, also sounds differing notes, as does the lengthy conversation between Gatsby and Nick in his boat, followed by the lengthy flashback to his days with Cody. These decisions point to the general lack of importance of the parties in this film, even though they are central to the plot and experience of the characters in the book.

Yet this party is still more enjoyable than the 1974 party, which sounds the oddest collection of notes in providing a cold, voyeuristic spectacle alongside violence and an oppressive introduction to Gatsby, and then aiming to reintroduce a lighter atmosphere to a (by this time) shaken audience. The scene's claims of period authenticity are never believable, as

the focus is far too obviously on what is coordinated to be attractive to the eye. The aim to create visual splendour to please an audience hungry for nostalgic spectacle appears to be in conflict with the overall goals of the director – with the result that the return to a more light-hearted atmosphere at the end of the party is by then experienced as unconvincing.

The Great Gatsby (2013) is the most successful in providing a party atmosphere that a viewer can enjoy, and there is an attempt to draw viewers in with repeated reaction shots. This party best manages the audience's expectations of spectacle and escapism. Unlike in 1949 and 1974, violent notes do not yet intrude into the enjoyment, although there is an increasing sense of Gatsby's tension. The loose approach to period authenticity also helps the film with a *mise-en-scène* that clearly 'adapts' the 1920s. Yet even this party is overwhelmed by the director's hubris in presenting the party, with techniques that are so repetitious and so overwhelming in scale that any emotional subtlety is lost. The budget appears to be blown for the mere sake of it, and the 'cardboarding' feel of the 3D contributes to the overall sense of the inauthentic and superficial.

What is, however, most problematic about the parties as these films present them is their role in undermining or obscuring what is meant to be admirable in Gatsby. Fitzgerald emphasises Gatsby's organisational prowess in contrast with the humility of his presence within the massively scaled party, and also his loneliness. Most of the films portray Gatsby's isolation but interpret it as coldness. At worst, Gatsby is shown to be a thug no better than others in the film, a characterisation which seriously damages the intended message.

In their pacing, none of the scenes recall Fitzgerald's 'drunkenly' cathartic trajectory and, as such, seem to lose the opportunity to take the viewer on an intense emotional roller coaster. Choices that differ from the novel are not inherently wrong in Badiou's concept of fidelity. What is important is whether choices made close off possibilities or fail by not adding anything or, as in the case of the added gangster violence, by dogmatically asserting certain meanings.

Chapter 9

Conquering the canon

> A film's subject is not its story, its plot, but rather what the film takes a stand on. (Badiou 2013, p. 11)

Increasing possibilities

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) remains a text of the American canon, complicating attempts to adapt it.[54] This book considered how the Hollywood film adaptations of *The Great Gatsby* worked to create or suppress a fidelity to the evental site of Fitzgerald's novel. Whilst playfully interpretive and intertextual versions are far more commonplace and accepted by audiences than they were, allowing for freer approaches to *The Great Gatsby*, producers of the big-budget productions still attempted to meet the needs of several markets, including the education market, by reproducing recognisable elements of Fitzgerald's text.

Whilst views on fidelity to literary texts have changed alongside changes in society, Fitzgerald's presence in the American canon was nonetheless a major factor. 'Unannounced' adaptations, such as the 2002 film *G* (Cherot [dir.]), reflect some of the benefits of not carrying the Fitzgerald name, as the dilemma of social mobility was freshly reimagined

54. It should not be forgotten that canons also change, and elements of Fitzgerald's text such as his 'reflexive racism' (Nowlin & Rampersad 2022) may work against his future canonicity.

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within a contemporary setting.[55] The Fitzgerald estate has been notoriously proprietorial towards *The Great Gatsby* (1925), with the costs involved in using Fitzgerald's material placing a real limitation on both scholarship and the adaptation of his work (Dimock 2017, p. 12). This meant the large studios controlled the film rights, the expense of production necessitating the use of big-budget stars and approaches. In January 2021, *The Great Gatsby* (1925) finally came out of copyright in the USA after 95 years. The world can expect to see greater freedom in adapting and interpreting this highly visible text. Book publications of the text have already seen shoddy versions released with words changed and even pages missing (West 2021) – it remains to be seen what will happen with *The Great Gatsby* adaptations, although these certainly allow for a greater degree of creativity.

There is no instance of a 'perfect' adaptation, and no fixed formula for how an adaptation should be made. As in human situations, which are infinitely multiple, the elements of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* can be combined in numerous, almost limitless ways. And, as Badiou (2005a, p. 234) writes, there are 'many manners of being faithful to an event'. But when choices are determined through stereotypical concepts, projections of cultural morality, or commercial imperatives, we may see that what Badiou calls 'the state of the situation' has operated to foreclose the part of the set which is present but not representable. This suppression of what is contradictory or not easily expressed in favour of what is apparently culturally acceptable or previously known results in a failure of fidelity, in Badiou's terms.

In this book, I have aimed to give a sense of the possibilities inherent in bringing Badiou's concept of fidelity into the field of adaptation studies and to establish whether his theory would be useful in reframing issues that have dogged the conventional concept of fidelity as applied to film adaptation. Many of the issues examined speak in particular to adaptations of so-called canonical texts. At the time of writing, Badiou's theory had not yet been considered as part of the fidelity discussion, except in my own article (Vooght 2018). Whether applied to film or other types of adaptations, a revised concept of fidelity continues to be of interest to scholars, as the relationship between source and adaptation lies at the heart of what an adaptation is.

Inconsistent effects

The four Hollywood adaptations of F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), directed by Herbert Brenon (1926), Elliot Nugent (1949),

55. For a fuller discussion of *G*, see my article 'Revising Race and Social Mobility in adapting F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*' (Vooght 2023).

Jack Clayton (1974) and Baz Luhrmann (2013), have been used to explore the ramifications of moving from a 'traditional' conception of fidelity to Badiou's fidelity. The choice of film adaptation reflects the dominance of interest in film in the field, and the choice of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* allowed for comparison of a series of 'versions'. In some way, each of these adaptations made claims of fidelity to Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

Whilst lost, it appears that Brenon's *The Great Gatsby* (1926) was intended as a crowd pleaser, with a dramatic love triangle and plenty of partying. These simplified themes gave little clue as to what resonated so deeply in Fitzgerald's novel. Contemporary reviews suggest exaggerated events and acting, and Brenon's own words suggest a liking for hystericised emotion. Comments on badly worded intertitles suggest that there was little desire to make a connection with Fitzgerald's prose style.

Nugent, in 1949, was a director with a sincere appreciation of Fitzgerald's work, even when Fitzgerald was at his least popular. However, Nugent was hampered both by his own attitude of excessive reverence to the text, which was inhibiting, and by the highly controlled studio environment of the time. He lacked the directorial gravitas or Hollywood 'clout' to make it his own. His subtleties are lost within the clunky script and studio setting, the jarring 1940s costuming and inappropriate music, none of which serve to create new meanings but merely intrude. Nonetheless, he was lucky with his cast and drew out sensitive performances, which the study of reviews suggests were largely misunderstood at the time (audiences also need to come with an open, rather than foreclosed, attitude). Nugent's depiction of Gatsby's subtle exclusion from the moneyed upper classes is both convincing and painful. For this, the director deserves more credit.

Clayton was the wrong choice of director for the material, with a clinical and exposing style utterly unsuited to the warm sensuality of Fitzgerald's prose. His depiction of excess is cold and narcissistic, with hard light glinting off glass and angular silver, rather than sensual and evocative. His interest is in discordant tones and creating an atmosphere of unease – ideal for a psychological thriller like his 1961 adaptation, *The Innocents*, but far too arthouse and distancing an effect for *The Great Gatsby* (1974). His idea of sexual relations seems old-fashioned, even for the 1970s, with the ferociously physical mistress set against the physically immaterial Daisy. His depiction of class is also so eccentric that we never really feel the pain of Gatsby's exclusion. The overtly binary contrasts Clayton evokes through his sharp cutting between rich and poor, physical or non-physical romance, upstairs and downstairs, are not the same as Fitzgerald's contradictory and paradoxical qualities. Indeed, as Ward (2016, p. 137) writes, this version of *The Great Gatsby* shows a little attempt to speak to Fitzgerald's modernism

but rather views the story 'through the generic conventions of a Hollywood feature film'. However, his suggestion of larger themes, such as the tension between modernity and the fading values of an older America, is where Clayton creates more resonance. The 1974 *The Great Gatsby* perhaps suffered the most of the films from an attempt to recreate, blow-by-blow, the original text in the spirit of a 'traditional' fidelity to the letter. There seems to have been the idea that if random small moments in the text, like the chauffeur in 'robin's egg blue' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 43), were reproduced, the 'spirit' of the book would somehow be captured – even if these moments exist alongside major thematic changes, such as presenting Gatsby as surrounded by gun-carrying mobsters and reducing his quest for acceptance to the pursuit of a worthless romantic goal.

Luhrmann's auteur approach was more original but failed in that it took a fundamentally superficial approach to the source text. By his own admission, Luhrmann had barely engaged with the text before he saw its attention-grabbing screen potential. His conception is hence often a shallow and reifying one. The addition of the framing 'Chinese box' device of the sanatorium and the cheesy references to recognisable items of the 1920s, such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), not to mention the product placement, are all banal additions that contrive to create a lack of emotional depth that reduces the film's potential impact. Luhrmann goes the furthest to create a connection with the ambiguous and 'open' aspects of Fitzgerald's prose in a cinematic way. However, beneath the quirkiness, there is the dogged quest to reproduce detail from the novel that, in fact, echoes that of 1974 – the difference being merely in whether these details were rendered with realism, as in the earlier film, or in hyperbolic, CGI'd mode. This meant that Luhrmann's conception was not as radical as he put forward and continued to be driven by a desire to create value through reproducing detail. The voice-over, which frequently spells out unnecessarily what we see on the screen, further illustrates this. Luhrmann's approach, when authentically open, can be successful – when it returns doggedly to ideas of Fitzgerald's canonical and commercial value, it becomes foreclosed.

Thus, Luhrmann sometimes integrates some of the open-endedness necessary for a connection to the traces of the event, but is resolutely closed in other ways.[56] Badiou's (2013, p. 124) comment, 'a film can be fleetingly excellent, and then be trivial', is worth remembering here. Overall, the films' struggled to escape the various aspects that served to foreclose the set, either because of a desire to replicate in detail aspects of Fitzgerald's text or because of culturally determined ideas acquired about the novel. The commercial aspects of Hollywood filmmaking, such as studio pressures,

56. One may argue for Luhrmann's faithfulness to postmodernity, however, this would be another discussion.

big budgets, intensive marketing and the avoidance of politically subversive themes, also served to create limiting lenses. Whilst Badiou's fidelity through openness to ambiguity and contradiction can be sustained in places in the films (see Owl Eyes in 1949, Mr Gatz in 1974 or the ironic yet mysterious celebration of Gatsby's entrance in 2013), the effects are momentary rather than pervasive.

Remembering Badiou's (2013, p. 11) comment that 'a film's subject is not its story, its plot, but rather what the film takes a stand on' and how it does this through 'its artistic organization', we may ask what these films take a stand on: The right not to be a blockbuster (1974)? The fears of a director (1949)? Or the Luhrmann signature, the showmanship of 2013? Whatever the case might be, I suggest they did not take a stand on maintaining an openness to an evental site. Despite concluding that these films were, at best, only partially successful in allowing for a Badiouian fidelity, the films are nonetheless worthy of discussion. They each show moments of openness to the evental site of Fitzgerald's novel, with Luhrmann perhaps coming closest to the spirit of contradiction and paradox that connects to the modernist elements in Fitzgerald's text. They are not, as Badiou (2013, p. 10) calls them, the 'horrible or trivial films' about which there would be nothing to say. Marcus (2020, p. 5), writing on *The Great Gatsby* adaptations, agrees: 'Bad movies don't send critics to the ramparts; they file them by genre and move on'. The adaptations of *The Great Gatsby* represent thoughtful attempts to connect with Fitzgerald's novel, within the realm of commercial filmmaking.

■ How to adapt Fitzgerald – a proposal

With Luhrmann's adaptation, Fitzgerald has been seen to have the 'capacity to remain relevant in the similarly consumer-driven twenty-first century' (Griggs 2016, p. 199). It has continued to generate value within the Hollywood system and the larger cultural system, a necessity for Hollywood film production. The question remains as to whether it is possible to create a wholly successful adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* (1925). In Badiouian terms, there is no reason why it should not be possible.

For the adaptation to be successful *as an adaptation* (rather than simply a film in its own right) would require an individually authentic approach that maintains openness to the evental site of the novel within the adaptation. Thus, for an adaptation to succeed in Badiou's terms, the makers must begin with the right intentions. If the negative signs are a lack of sincerity in response, commercially influenced thinking, literalism in details, spectacle and distraction rather than emotional depth, and erasing of complex and contradictory elements, these can be upended. The attitude

to the source text must be one of connection, an authentic engagement that goes beyond a mere superficial interest or choosing the book to adapt because it offers the opportunity for the visibility the adaptation of a novel of high-status engenders. Then, the makers must endeavour to be 'faithful to this fidelity', remembering that fidelity requires their own individual response, rather than bowing to the pressures of the fixed expectations and interpretations inherent in canonisation. To do so, they must remember that literalising through the reproduction of details in the text works against the unknowable meanings of the text and that predetermined categories, whether political suppressions, stereotypes, or norms of the cultural moment, should be avoided. There must be room for contradiction, for inconclusiveness, and for emotional trajectories that go beyond the stated facts on the screen. As multiple as the individuals who are formed by the truths they make and discover, adaptations must tap into their own contemporary zeitgeist, as well as those traces that reactivate past truth-events, continually rearticulating and producing their truths.

Benefits and limits of a Badiouian approach

Whilst there are many influences on adaptations, and more than one possible way of cinema creating truths, Badiou's system allows for a consideration of the original text within adaptation. I have attempted to show the worth of this when considering Fitzgerald's novel as an example of faithfulness to modernism and when considering film adaptations as faithful (or not) to the evental site of the novel. In doing so, my aim was to also demonstrate that a concept of Badiouian fidelity can be useful within the scholarship of adaptation.

Whilst attitudes toward a requirement for fidelity in adaptation may become problematised, this compelling desire to view the adapting text as connected to the source text need not be wholly done away with. Concepts of homage and transposition are rightly outmoded, but a refocusing of the concept of fidelity via Badiou allows for an open-ended and dynamic engagement between original text and adaptation. Badiou's fidelity thus moves the concept of fidelity firmly away from that of so-called 'fidelity criticism' with its stress on particularity and imitative approaches and an excessive concern with preserving Fitzgerald's status in the American canon. Instead, the foreclosing effects of canonisation are noted.

The key benefit of Badiou's system is that it is holistic – an explanatory, integrated and holistic view of fidelity which allows for a consideration of the source text as an evental site. It binds together and explains concepts of fidelity that have proved problematic, for example, why a close

correspondence to the text will fail, as will the attempt to mine out an essence, why emotional and judgemental reactions to 'failed' adaptations are comprehensible as expressions of the stakes of fidelity, and how the value of the source text can be balanced against the adaptation's own value.

Film's ability to have moments of truth allows for Badiou's considerations to be used without imposing the impossibly high standard of requiring each film to be a truth-event in its entirety. Analysis can focus on how films maintain their openness and hence ability to serve as part of naming the effects of a truth-event. Badiou's conception enables different types of films to be considered, including popular films. His approach is politically informed, but eschews any form of didacticism. This again allows for an individual and experiential response to the film text.

The concept of a Badiouian fidelity allows scholars to make evaluations and explain judgements and audience reactions without the sense that an adaptation can be only an inferior copy of a cherished original. It allows for a discussion of failure, which may be considered bold, but is for Badiou an ethical requirement. This could also be seen as liberating within scholarship. Badiou's concept of fidelity also allows for the aspect of adaptation that invokes deep feelings, such as those of betrayal, to be further explored through an ethics which lies deeper than everyday morality and beliefs.

As a system of analysis which focuses on the intention of the maker, it brings together consideration of the role of form and context, thus avoiding the privileging of one or the other. Instead of disavowing comparison, it makes a virtue of approaches which compare iterations for what they can tell us about a Badiouian approach. It recognises the importance of creativity in the practice of adaptation and sees directors as creatives that are of equal ability and importance to the makers of other important artworks.

All these aspects are bound together in one coherent philosophical explanatory system, which allows adaptations to be considered 'as adaptations' – a unique and persistently desirable form. The adaptation may create its own truths through the evental site of the source text rather than being foreclosed by it. This gives a place for a discussion of the adaptation in relation to the evental site of its originating text, thereby recognising the doubling properties of adaptation (in relation to source texts) and dual and redoubling mirrors through which we perceive adaptations. In doing so, it allays many of the anxieties circulating around the concept of fidelity prevalent in adaptation studies.

Badiou's conception could be criticised as itself being a product of a modernist view that asserts personal freedoms, abrupt rather than incremental changes, and is suspicious of the commodification of

cultural goods. Badiou also appears to seek self-validation in terms of his theory's political and religious stance, with his views conforming with Marxism-derived ideologies, which, it could be argued, are already part of a scholarly establishment. Badiou seems to lack in-depth knowledge of the cultural approaches which he rejects. Although the application of Badiou's theory need not necessarily be aligned with Badiou's personal beliefs, these beliefs could be said to have played a role in shaping the theory itself. It should, however, also be noted that Badiou's writings have many unconventional elements within his broad ideological home, such as his ideas of the value of art and of high culture (in addition to that of mass culture).

A possible limitation is that Badiou draws upon a European philosophical tradition and may, therefore not take into account other traditions that may test his views. However, his theory may equally bring new elements into a field previously dominated specifically by Anglo-American scholarship (Leitch 2017, p. 6; Lewis & Arnold-De Simine 2020, p. 4). Badiou's theory, as a modernist system, may not be the best theory to comment on a postmodern work such as Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsb*y (2013), as the film may (as with the adaptation in the original conception of fidelity) always remain at a disadvantage. The analysis of Luhrmann's film shows, however, that there are aspects of Luhrmann's approach that show an open approach to the set – in other words, the use of Badiou does not make for the automatic damning of a postmodern approach. The difficulty, perhaps, is the film's relationship to the evental site of a modernist novel.

Elements of Badiou's theory remain in tension with each other. His exclusion of history as part of the metastructure of the state makes it difficult to talk about the context of films, although this is mitigated by the equally important idea of authentic faithfulness to the contemporary moment. Badiou's ideas in relation to history may be paradoxical, but they are logically explicable. Another area of productive tension for Badiou (2003a, n.p.) is his desire to celebrate film's universal appeal to the 'mass', based on his ideological links to Maoism, with his simultaneous interest in art that is as high and 'elevated as a star'. The idea of truths as being momentarily present even in weak films helps to resolve this difficulty, and the concept of film as a 'mass' viewing experience may be beginning to change. However, the tension between Badiou's condemnation of culturally pluralising approaches and his celebration of the mass and popular should perhaps be further explored if Badiou is to be invoked within adaptation studies, a discipline heavily shaped by its cultural studies heritage.

Possibly the key barrier to the application of a Badiouian fidelity to adaptation in adaptation studies is that the theoretical framework changes, rather than the methodology, as Badiou's conception still lends itself to

forms of comparative textual analysis. Whilst it does provide a theoretical justification for the use of these sometimes maligned methods, the lack of a more obvious change may lead to its being sidelined or seen as unnecessary, as it does not affect the manner in which films are analysed, but rather provides a differing criterion with which to examine the work. The judgement as to whether an adaptation 'works' may or may not change by using Badiou's criteria – however, it provides an explanation for phenomena that might otherwise be characterised as opinion or personal preference. So, one limitation may be that it does not change enough about the analysis to be considered useful enough to deploy. However, in this sense, it is also unlikely to be perceived as forgettably idiosyncratic.

In terms of the case studies, a methodology based on Badiou could be seen as being negatively focused – in other words, analysis is more easily conducted by finding what is wrong with the adaptation, through the 'negative signs' Badiou (2003a, p. 28) refers to. Badiou notes this bias in interpretation, but asserts the value of the effort – identifying limitations allows one to infer what would better support a fidelity.

Using the Badiouian model requires an understanding of his concepts. In practical terms, the space required to fully ground Badiou's concept of fidelity within his overall framework may be more than can be easily covered in a published article. Many published articles on Badiou devote much of the article to set out his theory (Jansen 2019; Sotiris 2011). In discussing Badiou's concepts, which depend on concepts of the unrepresentable, language is sometimes stretched to its limits. Certain parts of his schema would need to be taken on trust, with reference to Badiou's larger writings, for this to be a widely used framework for analysis. However, the overall concept of not foreclosing the set that I have used in this book gives one a clear path to follow.

Whilst this book explored the many and varied aspects of film, both formal and cultural, that Badiou's conception of fidelity speaks to, this also limited the space for consideration of some particularly compelling elements. Inevitably some interesting elements were left out, whilst others were not given as much attention as they deserved, as the desire to test the concept of Badiouian fidelity holistically against a variety of textual and paratextual elements was prioritised. There would be value in examining deeply one aspect of the adaptations, such as the representation of national identity, in terms of Badiou's fidelity. There are also many interesting ideas briefly or tangentially put forward by Badiou in his 'haphazard' writings on film (Tweedie 2012, p. 99) that could be investigated further in future research, such as his thoughts on film operating through subtraction and how films create truths through 'movement and reconstitution' (Badiou 2013, p. 18). Badiou's rejection of genre as relatively unimportant could and should be further questioned.

Finally, whilst this book limited itself to a discussion of 'announced adaptations', Badiou's theory could be used to consider the supposed freedoms of 'unannounced' or independent adaptations of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, such as Cherot's *G* (2002). It could also be used to consider a wider variety of adaptations to explore whether it is a useful framing for other kinds of texts. Badiou's theory of fidelity in the service of truth offers the possibility of a more complete and integrated approach to the issue of fidelity in adaptation.

■ Open-end

In the spirit of Badiou, I wish to leave you with openness rather than closure. Take these considerations and consider Badiou's framework and how you might apply it. Whilst this book aimed to look holistically at the concept of fidelity to address the difficulties experienced in relation to fidelity in the field, this meant that the number of elements considered may have precluded a deeper analysis in some cases. A scholar might choose not to focus on so many elements – remembering that the parts of the set are almost limitless, you may wish to dive deeply into one or two, always remembering what is being excluded or, worse, actively suppressed. Whilst the choice of textual analysis spoke to prevailing methods in the field as well as the type of investigations to be conducted, a different method could be applied, for example, if doing a reception analysis.

Whilst this book is focused on *The Great Gatsby* as part of the expression of the truth-event of modernism, another valid approach would be to look at Gatsby's own foreclosures of the set – the areas of gender (particularly notable in relation to the sacrificial, working-class figure of a sexualised Myrtle) and race (e.g. the reflexive racism seen in Fitzgerald's [1950, p. 67] description of the 'Negros' on the bridge and the Jewish mobster Wolfshiem) come to mind, problematic both in the book and in the adaptations. In the 1949 *The Great Gatsby* film, for example, Jordan gives up on golfing trophies and would rather 'help' Nick – thankfully, an outcome that does not feature in the novel. Race, gender and even class are areas where Fitzgerald could be regarded as foreclosed, although each is more complex than it seems at first glance (Fitzgerald both critiques and replicates racism, and there are hints of fluidity in sexuality[57]). Another approach might be to focus on how viewers or reviewers can approach the film without foreclosing the set. Or to consider whether Badiou's ideas, themselves the product of modernity, apply to works outside of this framing. Fitzgerald's own nostalgia, and why

57. As when Nick finds himself standing beside the bed of Mr McKee, the 'pale, feminine man' (Fitzgerald 1950, p. 32) 'sitting up between the sheets, clad in his underwear, with a great portfolio in his hands' (p. 39). Only Luhrmann, from the vantage point of 2013, is able to hint at these references.

this does not seem to be as foreclosing as the films' nostalgia, could be further considered. A greater look at the role of the auteur would also be beneficial.

Adaptation studies has been described as lacking in theories (Elliott 2013, p. 21), although this may have improved (Leitch [2017, p. 703] argues for numerous petit theories as opposed to Grand Theory). This book theorises fidelity in order to change the frame through which it operates. Whilst this may not result in a radical departure in terms of the methods of analysis, it does allow for evaluations to be made within a loose framework rather than on intuition only, thus reviving the moribund fidelity of adaptation studies and offering useful insights into the film adaptations of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Badiou's approach differs from conceptions of fidelity discussed in adaptation studies by clearly including a focus on the *goal* of fidelity, which is to discover and create truth. This allows for greater confidence in discussing adaptations' relationship with source texts and evaluating adaptations' effectiveness, a practice that has been critiqued but tacitly continues.

The most important implication of Badiou's fidelity is that adaptation *matters* – that a film's faithfulness to a truth-event is meaningful and important. The stakes of a Badiouian fidelity are high, as an approach of fidelity allows for globally impactful truths to be made and discovered, creating the human subject in the process. This explains some of the extremity of responses when adaptations are felt to fail. The relationship of faithfulness matters whether it is fidelity to a political revolution or whether it is a fidelity realised through openness to the evental site of the source text within a film adaptation. Scholarship, in Badiou's view, is charged with taking care of (rather than producing) truths, and hence has a vital role to play in recognising and supporting fidelities.

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Ursula Vooght's work should be of great interest to scholarly readers. Vooght has written an excellent book, not merely through making accessible any theorised explanations of methodological decisions but by bringing into the whole a visual, cultural and critical sense of how different film producers and directors, actors and different film critics responded to and continue to respond to *The Great Gatsby*, in its times, adapting it into films that also speak to their times. She has worked with a variety of visual and textual products and responses (film, text, posters and critical work) and engaged with the values contested at the literary heart of this wonderful novel and often wonderful films. Using Badiou's theories and the specific concept of fidelity, Vooght has produced an authoritative and very readable book.

Prof. Dr Gina Wisker, International Centre for Higher Education Management, University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom

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Ursula Vooght has written a thoroughly engaging scholarly book on the art of adaptation based on Alain Badiou's adaptation theories regarding fidelity to the original sources, here specifically the adaptation of F Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby*. There is no doubt that academics and researching script-writers will find this book appealing, and it would make an excellent addition to any shelf that deals with 'writing for film' or 'adaptation'. I highly recommend it.

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