The Great Gatsby – novel into movie

A Comparison of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby and Baz Luhrmann’s Movie Adaptation

Den Store Gatsby – roman till film
En Jämförelse av F. Scott Fitzgeralds Den Store Gatsby och Baz Luhrmanns Filmatisering

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Abstract

In this essay I will discuss alterations that have been made to the storyline of the novel *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, when the novel is made into the movie with the same name. The focus of the essay is on the different types of devices used, such as lighting and color, and extra diegetic devices, that were used in the movie to make it fit into the modern-day society and to make it aesthetically pleasing to the eye. By comparing the novel and the movie the essay reaches the conclusion that the director Baz Luhrmann has stayed true to the original storyline but has made alterations that helps the movie connect to the modern day society.
In the novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald we get to read a story about Jay Gatsby through the eyes of war veteran Nick Carraway. The novel is set just after the First World War, as the roaring 20s begin. Baz Luhrmann adapted the novel into a movie in 2013. Luhrmann is known for his over the top movies and as Thomas Doherty writes in his movie review Luhrmann “remain[s] faithful to the spine and spirit of the novel while giving himself plenty of room to move” (45). In this essay, I will suggest some ways in which he does this by comparing the novel and the movie. I will focus on changes to characterization but also on the different extra diegetic devices the movie uses, such as color, and music to show how the original story is compressed into the movie format. The essay suggests that although Baz Luhrmann sticks to the original storyline of *The Great Gatsby*, his alterations make the movie suitable for modern-day society as well as aesthetically pleasing to the eye.

The novel is written from Nick Carraway’s point of view, and the movie keeps this narrative perspective, including its bias. However, Nick is not the main character of the novel; the center of the novel is Jay Gatsby, “a figure marked by failure and shadowed by death” (Will 127). He is a young war veteran who returns to New York seeking an old love named Daisy Buchanan, as she “embodies the idea of perfection for Gatsby, an almost unapproachable ideal of social success and self-realization” (Hays 320). Even though he is the narrator, Nick is “placed at the edge of the story” (Miller Jr 22) and on one occasion in the novel Nick thinks: “I was within and without” (Fitzgerald 40). According to James E. Miller Jr, Nick is “reconstructing by some means whatever he himself has been unable to witness” (21), telling the story as someone looking into someone else’s life. Nick becomes the one keeping everybody’s secrets and the one who is then able to retell them. He also mentions in the movie that “for the second time that summer . . . I was guarding other people’s secrets”. Both in
the novel and in the movie Nick is able to angle his descriptions of the characters as he sees fit, which we can see in that there is a clear difference between how he talks about other characters and how he talks about Jay Gatsby. The way Nick romanticizes and characterizes Gatsby makes the reader see Gatsby in a different light than the other characters of the story. At first glance, the reader gets a biased characterization of Gatsby because of the way Nick tells the story. Gatsby’s character is made up to be a guy longing for the love of his life, and who will do anything to get to her. However, the readers’ “own beliefs and desires” (Tyson 191) start to play into how they perceive not only Gatsby but the other characters as well. After reading and seeing *The Great Gatsby* the audience notice, as Paul Giles writes “the power of the human mind to frame the world differently” (Giles 14), and that everything is not just black and white. In the movie, the viewer gets a possible warning about Nick’s bias early on, as he in the opening scene of the movie says “only one man was exempt from my discussed” talking about Gatsby, through the opening scene at Perkins Sanitarium, where he has been admitted for a long list of different reasons including insomnia, fits of anger and anxiety,

Everything that Nick talks about and describes seems very extraordinary and very luxurious, which adds to the feeling of luxury in the novel. He tells the story with sensitivity and is able to engage the reader, and because of that he gains sympathy from the reader by ”sharing with the reader his personal feelings: his desires, dislikes, fears, doubts and affection” (Tyson 122). Nick himself is characterized as being sympathetic. Nick is “the moral center of the novel” (Tyson 122) which puts him in a vulnerable position. As the narrator of the novel and the movie Nick is able to portray the characters however it suits him best. As already stated, he portrays Gatsby in a different light than the way he portrays the characters
that are from West Egg. He portrays Gatsby as a more charming human being, perhaps because Gatsby is part of the new money and thus more of a representation of the American Dream where people were able to build their fortunes through hard work. As we discover, though, in Gatsby’s case his money was gained through criminal activities such as bootlegging. This makes Gatsby lose, as Tyson writes “the image of the honest, hardworking man that the dream is supposed to foster” (73). As previously mentioned, though, with the help of Nick’s narration Gatsby is at first glance that charming person who represents the American Dream.

When making a novel into a movie some of the storyline disappears in translation out of necessity when adapting the story to a shorter format. Characters are given different emphasis and scenes are changed, added, or cut to fit into the director’s vision for the movie. Luhrmann’s *The Great Gatsby* is no exception. Some of the lines are altered and some of the characters are minimized. For example, Jordan Baker and Nick are a couple throughout the novel. When it comes to the movie, however, Jordan’s role has been minimized and it seems like the only real function of her character is to deliver the question about Nick inviting Daisy to tea, as well as being by Daisy’s side during the Plaza scene. Although the main focus of the novel is, just like in the movie, on the Gatsby and Daisy relationship we get some small glimpses into Jordan and Nick’s relationship but the audience have to know about it from the novel to notice it in the movie. Jordan reveals in the novel that she “hates careless people” (Fitzgerald 64) and that is why she likes Nick, because he is not careless like everyone else she has met. This helps the reader get to know a different side of Nick as well. The reader gets a glimpse into what kind of person Nick actually is, and in some ways his personality is seen in the things we get through visual effects throughout the movie such as facial expressions and body language.
All the characters have become more impersonal due to the fact that Luhrmann puts more effort into the visuals of the movie and that can be seen as a loss to the movie. Luhrmann puts more effort into the visual effects and the aesthetics of the movie than into the characters. Nick, who throughout the novel is open to sharing parts of his life with the reader, loses his personal relationship with the audience. The movie ”flattens Nick into a cardboard cutout” (Klawans 36) and other than the “sheer amazement” (Klawans 36) that sometimes crosses his face, he fails at delivering emotions that in some places of the movie are necessary for the story. One example is when Nick walks into the living room of the Buchanan’s where Daisy and Jordan are laying on the sofa, Nick is describing Daisy and says “Daisy Buchanan, the golden girl. A breathless, warmth flowed from her. A promise that there was no one else in the world she so wanted to see” (Luhrmann). If someone makes you feel that way, the expression on one’s face would be much more happy and much more excited.

Something similar happens to Daisy. Daisy in the novel is not only described as a lovely and smart girl with a “thrilling voice” (Fitzgerald 15). She is described as “her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth” and she had “an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget” (Fitzgerald 15). This does not come across in the movie. She is portrayed as a stupid blonde girl who does not understand the world around her. At the same time, Daisy has a saintly aura around her throughout the movie and there is a difference between the beauty she has in the novel and the beauty she has in the movie, which stands out due to the way she is portrayed. In the novel Daisy is portrayed as the ultimate golden girl, someone that everyone wants to be. She is the second cousin once removed to Nick and she is married to Tom Buchanan. He is heir to one of the wealthiest families in America. However the movie minimizes the fact
that she is the ultimate golden girl. She is still very beautiful, but the impression of golden girl is gone because of the lack of the character’s personality. She is no longer a person everyone wants to be. A line that she has both in the movie and the novel occurs when she is talking about when she found out her first born was a girl: “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” (Fitzgerald 23). This line, although it is short, makes the reader and the viewer get a little glimpse into what a miserable life she lives. Although she has wealth to comfort herself with, all she wants is for her daughter to be a fool so she does not need to think about the people around her. Daisy lives for the moment and revels in all the luxury she has around her. She is reckless and beautiful, and the movie does a fantastic job showing off her reckless and careless side. By the end of the novel Nick describes Tom and Daisy:

They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made… (Fitzgerald 181)

Nick also says this during the final parts of the movie, but Tom and Daisy’s actions throughout the movie show their reckless and careless sides better than in the novel. Luhrmann has managed to downsize all the characters and their personalities and the characters become somewhat uninteresting due to the heavy focus on visuals. Some things that are said in the novel about the characters are shown in the movie with different effects like lights or colors, for instance when the movie shows Daisy, they focus on the lighting around her instead of Nick describing her as he would in the
novel. Luhrmann has mostly put his effort into how the movie looks aesthetically and somewhere along all the special effects and the glitter the characters have lost the personalities they had in the novel, since the viewer will focus on the visuals instead of someone describing the characters.

Gatsby is kept as a secret for a while both throughout the novel and the movie. To keep Gatsby as secret as possible for as long as possible, the reader is told lies from different people throughout the first part of the novel. All the lies are brought up during the party scene in the movie while the camera moves through the crowd of people at the party. The rumors about Gatsby in the novel and the movie are more or less the same, “they say he’s a nephew or a cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm’s”, “somebody told me they thought he killed a man once”, “he was a German spy during the war”, “he was in the American army during the war” (Fitzgerald 37,49) and the list of rumors goes on. Using these rumors, the novel and the movie are able to achieve “a desirable amount of bewilderment, confusion, mystery, and suspense” (Miller Jr 27). One would think that Nick, hearing all these rumors, would have some preconceived idea about Gatsby and who he is, but as the reader learns at the beginning of the novel Nick’s dad has taught him “Whenever you feel like criticising anyone…just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had” (Fitzgerald 7). Nick says something similar, but simpler, at the beginning of the movie. However, Gatsby continues to somewhat be wrapped in mystery throughout the novel. In the movie the viewer gets to know Gatsby’s background earlier than in the novel, however only because Nick is talking about the different times he got to know different things about Gatsby. If the movie had kept Gatsby’s background story a secret until the end it would possibly have made the movie slightly hard to follow, which might explain the editorial choice.
When the audience finally thinks that there might be a chance of Daisy and Gatsby getting together, something happens. The scene where the characters are at the Plaza, because “it is too hot [outside] to do anything” (Luhrmann), The Buchanan’s, Jordan, Nick and Gatsby go into town to cool down. In the movie adaptation Baz Luhrmann catches the awkwardness that Fitzgerald aimed at in the novel. He is able to make the scene believable, he makes it so tense the audience feels a little bit awkward watching it, which is exactly how Fitzgerald manages to make the reader feel about the scene in the novel. However what Luhrmann does differently from the novel is the fact that Daisy goes back to Tom because she becomes afraid of Gatsby when he grips Tom by his collar. In the novel, however, Daisy returns to Tom because she is more comfortable with Tom and does not want to leave her security and comfort. In the novel, she is used to domestic violence in her relationship with Tom as she often refers to her husband as a “brute of a man, a great, big, hulking specimen” (Fitzgerald 18) and she mentions her fingers that are “black and blue” (Fitzgerald 18). In the novel after Daisy accusing Tom of hurting her fingers, she also defends Tom, in front of Jordan and Nick when they are having dinner by saying “I know you didn’t mean to, but you did do it” (Fitzgerald 18). It is not likely to think she would become afraid of Gatsby because of him losing his temper. There is also the fact that Tom rather easily “broke [Myrtle Wilson’s] nose with his open hand” (Fitzgerald 42) during the party at Tom and Myrtle’s apartment, which would indicate that he has anger management problems. Since this scene is shown in the movie, the concept of Daisy going back to Tom because she becomes afraid of Gatsby does not work in context. Peter L. Hays writes about the novel in “Oxymoron in The Great Gatsby” that “Daisy finally realizes the safety of staying “with her own kind”, those of her social class, however repellent her husband is” (323). To realize this, the
viewers have to have read the novel and then draw their own conclusions.

Luhrmann is known for using colorful color schemes for the movies he directs. He uses colors to enhance and describe different feelings and emotions. In the movie *The Great Gatsby* there are four kinds of color schemes, and with the help of the different color schemes Luhrmann is able to achieve a movie that is dreamlike where it needs to be and over the top where it needs to be. There is the dark brown and dark red color for when the camera shows Nick in the sanitarium, the bright colors with gold accents for the time when Nick is talking about the parties and the lush life, there is the grey color scheme for when the camera shows the Valley of Ashes, and the sepia-toned memories of Gatsby’s and Daisy’s past. This, combined with the special effects, makes the color scheme stand out amongst the other six\(^1\) movies that are based on the same novel, which have opted for a more realistic mode. With the different strong colors the roaring 20s becomes a color party, where reds are vibrant, yellows shines brighter than the sun, whites are more white than fallen snow and the gold glimmers more than when the sun catches gold in real life. All of this stands out against the scenes played out in the Valley of Ashes.

The Valley of Ashes is overlooked by the gigantic blue eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg and Fitzgerald describes the Valley of Ashes as

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<th>Year</th>
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\(^1\) 1926, The Great Gatsby, Dir. Herbert Brenon (Silent movie)
1949, The Great Gatsby, Dir. Elliott Nugent
1974, The Great Gatsby, Dir. Jack Clayton
2000, The Great Gatsby, Dir. Robert Markowitz
2002, G, Dir. Christopher Scott Cherot
2014, Affluenza, Dir. Kevin Asch
rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. (28)

Luhrmann captures the feeling of the grotesqueness that Fitzgerald describes in his novel with the help of the colors that are used for the Valley of Ashes. Luhrmann uses colors such as a dirtied down white for the clothes of the people who work there. The dirt on the faces of the men who work among the ashes also enhances the feeling of greyness of the lives of the people of the Valley of Ashes and the feeling of a place that has become a dumping ground for industries. This feeling is also increased through the narration from Nick as he steps off the train and into the Valley of Ashes. As he does so, Nick says the quoted lines of Fitzgerald’s narration. Although the scenes of the Valley of Ashes are filmed in front of a green screen and sometimes this becomes very visible, the contrasts between the Valley of Ashes and the glamorous life are shown and that is the important part.

From time to time memories of Gatsby’s and Daisy’s past come up: Jordan talks about Daisy’s wedding day and Nick tells the viewers about how Daisy and Gatsby fell in love. These scenes are played out in sepia-toned colors, a mix between green and grey tones with Nick’s handwriting across the screen as he tells the love story of Gatsby and Daisy, which makes the scenes stand out as memories rather than part of the contemporary events. The same thing happens when Jordan is telling Nick about the time when Daisy first introduced Jordan and Gatsby to each other; the scene is in the same sepia-tones, as is the scene when Jordan is telling Nick about Daisy and Tom’s wedding day. As Jordan tells how Daisy got a letter from Gatsby, and how Daisy cried “tell them Daisy changed her mind” (Luhrmann) about the wedding, the scenes of Daisy sitting in a bathtub and the letter almost turns to ashes in her hands as
the words “Darling Daisy the truth is” (Luhrmann) flow through Daisy’s hand is played. Just like in the novel, the viewer never gets to know what Gatsby said in the letters he sent to Daisy on her wedding day. In the novel Daisy gets the letter the day before her wedding. She then takes it with her into the bath and sits there until she sees the letter falling apart, and the next day she marries Tom. All scenes that are sepia-colored are memories of the past, and they become almost dream-like, as if they had all just happened in Daisy’s dreams. They also add to the feeling of longing between Gatsby and Daisy and, of course, make the movie more aesthetically stylized.

Luhrmann uses light in a very special way that differs from how other directors use light for their movies. He is able to enhance feelings through light and make some scenes seem more realistic and in some scenes the light becomes a symbol for something else. Throughout most of the movie he uses cold white light instead of warm yellow light and by doing so he is able to achieve a sense of luxury and elegance since white lights give of a more flattering light, both for the actors and for the props, such as diamonds. When he then uses the different color schemes and mixes it with the way he uses light he is able to catch the viewer’s attention. One of the scenes early on in the movie when Nick drives over to Tom and Daisy’s house for dinner and a full evening at their house serves as an example. He walks through the doors into a sitting room where Jordan and Daisy are lying on the couch. The white curtains are flowing between Daisy and Jordan’s hands. The light setting of this scene makes the whole room glow, almost as if the room is filled with cold white lamps all around. The light that is supposed to represent the light from the sun catches the diamond rings and bracelets Jordan and Daisy are wearing as we only see their hands amongst the white curtains. In the novel Fitzgerald describes the curtains fluttering in the wind and “twisting them up towards the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling, and then rippled
over the wine-coloured rug” (Fitzgerald, 14). Luhrmann captures the “frosted wedding-cake” feeling because of the way he uses cold white light in this scene. In the same scene Jordan mentions Gatsby and Daisy turns around and says “Gatsby? What Gatsby?” (Luhrmann), and once again the light and the focus of the frame is set on Daisy, as if she were the only person in the room, even though the butler is in the same frame as Daisy when Daisy speaks the words. By using the cold white light Luhrmann achieves the level of luxury and richness that we find in the novel.

To get the best effect of the Gatsby mansion and all of its lights, many of the scenes are shot with the camera flowing over the top of Gatsby’s mansion. The viewer is able to see a very well lit New York skyline in the background. At the first party Nick attends at Gatsby’s mansion the viewer seemingly attends a party that takes place at the middle of the day, because of all the lights. It seems like people who are attending the party and entering through the doors should have been blinded by all the lights reflecting back onto them. Even outside the house there is so much light that it makes it hard to believe it is nighttime. But, as Nick mentions to Gatsby later in both in the movie and the novel, “Your place looks like the World’s Fair” (Fitzgerald 85), and in the movie he adds “or Coney Island” (Luhrmann). Nick makes this comparison between Gatsby’s mansion and the World’s Fair, a huge event at the time, and Coney Island, which is a neighborhood in Brooklyn with a well-known theme park. The comparison rings true because of the lights and all the wild and irrational things going on in Gatsby’s mansion. Luhrmann stays true to the novel by adding on the comment about Coney Island as this connects back to the part of the novel when Gatsby invites Nick to take his plane for a ride to Coney Island. However as this movie is made in the modern day Coney Island is a place that most people know of, therefore it becomes suitable to put that in as a comment in this part of the movie.
During the first party Nick attends, fireworks start going off while Nick and Jordan are standing on the top of the staircase. They and the viewer get to know who Gatsby is during this scene. When Gatsby turns towards Nick and Jordan the fireworks are in the background, which should make Gatsby backlit and dark. However, Luhrmann has made Gatsby’s face well lit in front of the fireworks, which might be realistic because of how much light Gatsby’s mansion has. Nevertheless the many lights are there for a reason. They show Gatsby’s mansion as luxurious and expensive and they make all the gold confetti and champagne-towers sparkle as much possible. All of the lights that are used for the party scenes make the movie feel more rich and lush.

Since the whole movie is based in how much Gatsby and Daisy love each other it can sometimes seem like the weather is changing because of what kind of drama they are in, which is referred to as pathetic fallacy, which means “attributing human feelings and actions to natural objects” (Peck, Coyle 166). In all scenes except for two or three the sun is shining. The movie is set during the summertime. However the way the weather changes throughout the movie sometimes makes it hard to believe since the weather tends to change from scene to scene and very drastically. In the two or three scenes when the sun is not shining it seems to be almost stormy outside. One of the scenes is when Nick has invited Daisy over for tea on Gatsby’s behalf. It is pouring down rain and in some way this could be connected to the fact that Gatsby is nervous to meet Daisy, but somehow inside of Nick’s house it seems like the sun is shining or he has really bright lights in his house. The house is filled with flowers that Gatsby has gotten for Daisy, and it seems like they are brightening up Daisy’s face when she goes near them. During the same scene when Nick comes back after leaving Gatsby and Daisy alone for a while he comes back to find Gatsby
and Daisy gazing into each other’s eyes and the lighting makes the scene almost angelic, with the soft music in the background and the brightness of the lights. When Gatsby and Daisy are gazing into each other’s eyes the rain stops and the sun comes out. The light glows from above them as if there were a spotlight shining down on them. The angelic setting of the movie makes the audience believe in the special love that Gatsby and Daisy have for each other.

This saintly experience continues as Gatsby and Daisy go out onto Nick’s porch to look across the bay and try to see the green light that usually shines from Tom and Daisy’s dock, but the mist that lies across the bay makes it hard to see it. Gatsby tells Daisy that he can see the green light from his place as well, and he invites Daisy and Nick to his mansion. As they walk through the gate Daisy twirls in front of the fountains in Gatsby’s yard and suddenly there is no mist. She glows almost as if the sun is shining down on her. This does not agree with what happens next since after a while of being inside of Gatsby’s mansion Nick, Daisy and Gatsby are in Gatsby’s bedroom. Suddenly the phone rings and at the exact same time the wind blows opens the doors of the balcony and the greyness and darkness from outside transfer into the bedroom. This suggests that the call that Gatsby gets is somehow ominous, perhaps having to do with his illegal activities. As Gatsby and Daisy later on dance together in Gatsby’s mansion, there is supposed to be just candlelight but again the light is so bright that it seems like the lights in the ceiling are on. However there is still something sad and dark about the lights in Gatsby’s mansion, which could be because of the flooring of the mansion being all black with gold accents. Maybe Luhrmann wants Gatsby’s not so uplifting past to come through in his mansion as well, mixing light with dark flooring to get a haunted effect.
The party scene in the movie where Nick and Tom party together with Myrtle and her sister becomes disorganized as Nick is both talking in present time about the party in the past and at the same time we see the party going on. There is much to take in for the viewer but in a sense it seems like the feeling that is conveyed in the novel is that Nick has a messy mind and Luhrmann achieves the same effect in a different way. As Nick says while talking about the party, while looking out of the apartment window seeing himself on the street, “I was within and without” (Luhrmann). He is looking through the other windows into the other apartments on the street, thinking about what other people think about when they look through the window of the apartment they are in, while a trumpeter plays in the background. The scene is supposed to be set at nighttime, but the light from outside the window rather gives it an early morning glow. However, this scene might have an explanation for the way the apartment is lit up even though it is nighttime. The apartment they are in is in New York, and as the viewer sees throughout the movie, New York is filled with neon signs that light up the town. So Luhrmann has also given these scenes some realistic perspective because of the way the insides of the apartments light up from the neon signs on the streets.

The way the light is set up in some scenes can sometime together with the vibrant colors become cartoon-like. There is one scene in particular where Gatsby is taking Nick with him to New York to visit a speakeasy, a place where they illegally sell alcohol. They drive over the Queensboro Bridge and the camera zooms out and the viewer is able to see a bird’s eye view of the Queensboro Bridge with the New York skyline behind it. It is almost as if the scene is painted or animated, which it probably also is. The point is, however, that it is not made to look realistic so much as it is made to look pretty.
Luhrmann is able to use strong colors and connect his own color scheme with how Fitzgerald describes things with colors in the novel. For example, what is more of an internal scene in the novel, the party scene in the apartment, is played out in full in the movie. This makes the point of what the movie is trying to show more realistic, while the different color schemes mixed with the light settings still make the movie dreamlike and the luxurious life becomes unattainable for the viewer. The end result becomes a movie that stays true to the novel and is aesthetically pleasing to the eye.

For the soundtrack of the movie Luhrmann has gotten some help from some of today’s most famous musicians such as Beyoncé and Jay-Z and has also used material by Amy Winehouse. One song from the soundtrack of the movie is “Young and Beautiful”, sung by Lana del Rey and co-written by Lana del Rey and Rick Nowles. The song was already written but not released by the time the movie went into production, and in the commentary for the movie Baz Luhrmann tells Lana del Rey how the production crew “are very lucky the movie found the song and most importantly that you are singing it” (Interscope Records). Together Lana del Rey and Baz Luhrmann changed some of the vocals to make it fit the movie a little bit better. In an interview with Triple j, Luhrmann says “Fitzgerald put African American street music, called jazz, front and center in that book, so I go ‘We got to do that’” (Triple j) and credits the inspiration for the music to Fitzgerald, saying it is a “weave between traditional jazz and hip hop” (Triple j). Music always plays a big role in Luhrmann’s movies and by changing the soundtrack from their original hip hop and up tempo sound to jazz with more trumpets, the modern music blends with the roaring 20s that is portrayed in the movie. Lana del Rey is able to “encapsulate the novel” very easily with just one song but with different tempos. Because of the different tempos of the song the movie is able to portray different feelings for different times during the
movie. It does not matter whether the song is played during a party scene or during a memory scene, it can always lead to different feelings in the audience. One of the versions of the song is played by the DH orchestra, who are able to enhances the song “Young and Beautiful” with violins and dulcimer, which makes a great alternative beginning to the song to boost the feeling of this epic love story a bit more.

Luhrmann keeps the song “Young and Beautiful” the centerpiece throughout the whole movie. The only change that is made to the song is the tempo, so that it coordinates with the different scenes, and by the time Daisy and Gatsby meet in the garden of Gatsby’s house during the party there have been six different versions of this song, everything from up-tempo versions to the regular tempo and an instrumental version. The audiences get the point, young and beautiful. Daisy and Gatsby were young when they fell in love. Daisy was and is very beautiful. Gatsby dies at a young age, which makes him stay young and beautiful forever. The song is written from Daisy’s perspective as though she should be singing it. Everyone that has read the novel knows that Daisy and Gatsby’s story is very sad and the song emphasizes that sadness in their love story, which may make the audience feel that sadness a bit more.

This song with its sadness makes a difference to some of the movie’s major scenes, such as when Gatsby takes Daisy and Nick back to his place after they have had tea at Nick’s. Daisy is spinning around in front of the fountains of Gatsby’s mansion admiring the beauty of his place like there is no tomorrow, her clothes flowing around her and the sun shining on her. The song plays in the background and underlines how Daisy becomes an innocent girl without any care about the world around her when she is with Gatsby. The song is able to communicate the feeling that Daisy has when she is with Gatsby: the feeling of innocence and how she feels like she is back to how it was when they were in love while they were young, and the song is
also able to suggest the feeling Daisy might have towards the lost years between her and Gatsby.

The song starts very subtly with a bit of humming and violins while Lana del Rey starts singing the first verse:

I’ve seen the world
Done it all, had my cake now
Diamond, brilliant, and Bel-Air now (del Rey)

This part of the lyrics is first played at Gatsby’s party where Daisy and Tom attends, as Gatsby asks Tom if Tom minds Gatsby and Daisy dancing together. We see that this verse reflects the passage in the novel and lines from the movie where Nick first attends a dinner at Tom and Daisy’s house. Later that same night Daisy and Nick go outside to talk about life and how Daisy’s life is, being married to Tom:

“You see I think everything’s terrible anyhow”, she went on in a convinced way. “Everybody thinks so – the most advanced people. And I know. I’ve been everywhere and seen everything and done everything.” (23)

She somehow implies that she has “done it all” but there is still something missing in her life. One might say that she is hinting that the thing missing in her life is Gatsby. She also tells Gatsby later on in the movie that “I wish I had done everything on earth with you” (Luhrmann) which is also hinting back to “done it all”. The audience and the reader get the feeling that she is not happy in her marriage with Tom and that she is wishing that things were different in her life and that she had seen the world with Gatsby instead of Tom. However when she gets the chance to change her life and start
a life with Gatsby she does not take it, she stays in her comfort zone and keeps with her own kind, and stays with Tom. This song accentuates the subtext for those that are listening to what is actually happening in the background of the movie. The combination of gathering the specific pieces from the novel and putting them into the song lyrics, stitches the novel and the movie together. The music also complements the visual and is able to complement the movie where the words and visuals do not succeed.

In several ways, this song is perfect for this love story. In his commentary to the song, Luhrmann describes the song as “innocent but slightly dark” which corresponds to the way Daisy is characterized in both the novel and the film. The song has a bridge where Lana del Rey sings:

Dear lord when I get to Heaven
Please let me bring my man
When he comes tell me that you’ll let him in
Father tell me if you can
Oh that grace, oh that body
Oh that face, makes me wanna party
He’s my sun, he makes me shine like diamonds

In the movie, Daisy is depicted as shining, not with words that describe her, but the way she is portrayed and by the way the light always shines on her. In addition, there is a passage in the novel where Nick describes the way Gatsby dances with Daisy: “Daisy and Gatsby danced. I remember being surprised by his graceful, conservative foxtrot – I had never seen him dance before” (Fitzgerald, 109). Lana del Rey and Rick
Nowles have clearly intended to tie the song lyrics and specific words from the novel together, such as “oh that grace” and how Nick describes Gatsby as graceful when he is dancing with Daisy. The four first lines of the bridge could refer the fact that Daisy still sees Gatsby as a good man in the end, a man that takes the blame for what she has done and she feels guilty for him taking the blame. In some ways Daisy might feel like Gatsby’s illegal past should be erased since he is willing to take the blame. And therefore instead of going to hell for killing someone, he should be able to go to heaven because he took the blame so Daisy would not get into trouble. This could also mean that Daisy knows that Gatsby is a good man in his heart when he does not have to hide behind all of the different secrets that he keeps.

The pre-chorus ties in with how Gatsby is characterized throughout the novel and the movie. When Lana del Rey sings there is an aching in her voice for the hot summer nights with the person or the people that she loves and is longing for to meet again. So in a sense the audience, watching the movie and listening to the song playing in the background, become part of that feeling of longing and aching for someone:

Hot summer nights, mid-July
When you and I were forever wild
The crazy days, the city lights
The way you played with me like a child

Throughout the novel the reader gets a sense of Gatsby always thinking he is immortal. Thinking that you are immortal is the mentality of a young person and thinking that “you and I were forever young” one might get the feeling that Daisy always felt young when she was with Gatsby. A young person wants to be
spontaneous and when you grow up you realize that there are responsibilities in life, which makes us less spontaneous, but Gatsby is holding on to his spontaneity. Although he has all those responsibilities, he manages to be spontaneous with the other characters, like when Gatsby in the movie tells Nick “Let’s go to Coney Island, old sport. In my car” (Fitzgerald 85), but as Nick is a responsible man who needs to go to work the next day he says “I’ve got to go to bed” (Fitzgerald 85). However, most of the other characters have come to the conclusion that life is about responsibilities. So if this song is meant to reflect Daisy’s point of view it might indicate that she is longing to be more spontaneous and not have so much pressure from other people for her to be a certain way to fit into the crowd with the old money. And as it says in this part of the song, “the way you played with me like a child”, she might be remembering how it was before Gatsby went into war. What she might not be realizing is that Gatsby is a different person now, he has become someone that wants to have control over everyone in his life.

In conclusion, before a director decides to make a movie out of a novel that has just turned 90 years and that sells 500,000 copies a year the director should be careful not to destroy the audiences’ expectations of an adaptation. But just like Fitzgerald manages to make “sentences [...] memorable by a single word” (Bruccoli 219) Luhrmann manages to achieve the same effect when he “whips up an indulgent visual confection as his camera chassés across opulent ballrooms, swoops around cascading champagne fountains, and cranes over lush mansions” (Daisley 77). Luhrmann has been able to put his own touch on it with the way he uses lights and effects and the way he tries to make is aesthetically pleasing to the viewer’s eyes. Luhrmann keeps the storyline of the movie true to the novel but he makes it suitable for the modern day. The narrative of the movie stays the same even though some of the lines are
altered to become more suitable for modern day society, and Gatsby’s mansion looks more like a castle from a fairytale, Luhrmann has given this novel some new life by mixing the roaring 20s with today’s modern society, by using today’s most famous musicians and just altering the different tempos of their music. With Luhrmann’s flashy vision and the special effects that are put in, the viewer gets a different view into what the roaring 20s might have looked like than what the reader gets. Luhrmann’s usage of light and the different color schemes add on to the way the movie is more suitable for modern day. By having some of Nick’s famous lines from the story appear in the form of writing across the screen the viewer is able to get a small piece of both the novel and the movie. To some people the magic of the story lies in being able to read about the roaring 20s and live vicariously through Nick, and to some people the magic lies in seeing the party scenes with gold confetti and modern music, while others enjoy the classic epic love story combined with the lights and the sparkles. Either the storyline is appealing to people, the characters or just the aesthetics of the movie, or some other aspect of it, but either way it seems to have stuck with people. If that is a good thing or a bad thing is up to each of us to decide.

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