

The Representation of the American Dream in Film  
Adaptations of *The Great Gatsby*

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## Introduction

If it were at all possible to capture a concept as abstract as the American dream in a work of literature, according to many critics it is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* which manages to do it. Written and published during America's Roaring Twenties, a time when "gin was the national drink and sex the national obsession" ("Scott Fitzgerald"), *The Great Gatsby* paints the era's stereotypical picture of extravagant, alcohol-fuelled parties in splendid houses: a time when the sky was the limit and anyone, even the son of a couple of poor Midwestern farmers, could make their own fortune.

The novel does not, however, present the story of a successfully fulfilled American dream. Jay Gatsby's dream ultimately fails him: he has the beautiful house, wealth and manners of the exemplary accomplished American gentleman, but he is unable to obtain the one thing that would truly complete his dream: Daisy. In a letter to his friend Ludlow Fowler, Fitzgerald himself fittingly stated that *The Great Gatsby* is about "the loss of those illusions that give such color to the world that you don't care whether things are true or false as they partake in the imagined glory" (R. Moore 6).

As is inevitable for almost every popular novel, *The Great Gatsby* too has been adapted for the screen. In total, six film adaptations of the novel have been made, the first of which came out only a year after the novel's publication. This adaptation, a silent movie of a stage production, is unfortunately a lost film, i.e. no known copies exist in any archives, nor any private or public collections (Dixon). This first adaptation was succeeded by four films which are all entitled *The Great Gatsby* and were released in 1949 (dir. Elliot Nugent), 1974 (dir. Jack Clayton), 2000 (dir. Robert Markowitz), and 2013 (dir. Baz Luhrmann) respectively. A very loose adaptation called *G*, which is set in The Hamptons and prominently features hip-hop, came out in 2002, directed by Christopher Scott Cherot.

Curiously, nearly all of the aforementioned films have been criticized by multiple film

critics for being unable to adequately express what is generally viewed as the most significant theme of Fitzgerald's novel, that of the failed American dream. In an article entitled "*The Great Gatsby* Never Makes A Good Movie," critic John Patterson states that in his opinion, *The Great Gatsby* is the Great American Novel, but "the Great American Novel never makes for the Great American Movie" – moreover, he feels that there is no use in attempting to film the novel, since "the great themes of *Gatsby* are so quintessentially American that they recur endlessly throughout the nation's art." Critic Charles Moore denounces the 2013 adaptation by Luhrmann as "a would-be faithful film, and a terribly, terribly bad one," claiming that its attention to detail does the film no favours and that it "aspires to make a great American film of a great American novel, but does not locate itself observantly in the culture that fascinated and appalled Fitzgerald. In the end, this is just a film about rich people behaving unpleasantly." In a similar vein, Roger Ebert criticizes Clayton's 1974 film for being unable to convey "the feel, the mood, and spirit of [the novel]," stating that even though most of the events and locations are faithful to the original, "we don't feel. We've been distanced by the movie's overproduction". However, although Moore and Ebert generally denounce the faithfulness to the original because they feel that that is what ruins the "mood" of the film, critic Alan Yuhas on the contrary states that "A movie about Jay Gatz needs to feature more than just the man at West Egg and Daisy and Tom Buchanan. Without Eckleburg's billboard eyes and the valley of ash, it's just another love triangle between rich people, fit for daytime TV."

Thus, since there does not appear to be any consensus as of yet as to why film adaptations of *The Great Gatsby* are evidently unable to do the book justice, this paper will attempt to find out the reason. It will take into account the three most recent film adaptations (the 1974, the 2000, and the 2013 adaptation), mostly for reasons of availability, since the 1926 adaptation has been lost and the 1949 film is not readily available due to copyright

issues. The 2000 hip-hop adaptation will also not be taken into consideration since in this case the original has been so loosely adapted that it might not be a fair comparison. The analysis will focus on the representation of the theme of the failure of the American dream in all three films. This representation will be compared to the means by which this theme is expressed in the novel. Discussion of the differences between the novel and the films is expected to establish what crucial elements the film adaptations are lacking in their representation of Fitzgerald's American dream.

This paper is structured as follows:

- the first chapter discusses the concept of the American dream as it is represented in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*;
- the second chapter explores how this theme has been adapted in the 2013, the 1974 and the 2000 adaptation, respectively;
- and the conclusion aims to answer the research question: How is the theme of the American dream represented in film adaptations of *The Great Gatsby*?

## 1

## The American Dream in *The Great Gatsby*

That the American dream is the most important underlying theme of *The Great Gatsby* is generally accepted as one of the truths of literary criticism (Long 173). In a certain way, Fitzgerald was a pioneer in dealing with this theme; *The Great Gatsby* is actually a story about the American dream *avant la lettre*, since the term “American dream” had not been used (at least not as the catchphrase we nowadays know it to be) until the publication of historian James Truslow Adams’s book *The Epic of America* in 1931 (R. Moore 77). Adams defined this newly-coined term as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (Adams 404), which arguably sounds a lot like Jay Gatsby’s dream and vision of America. In 1970, Roger L. Pearson gives an even more accurate definition of the term, stating that “it is the belief that every man, whatever his origins, may pursue and attain his chosen goals, be they political, monetary, or social. It is the literary expression of the concept of America: the land of opportunity” (638). Implicit in both of these definitions is, however, the condition that the American dream is still just that – a dream, not a promise that is necessarily fulfilled. In trying to realize such a dream lies not only the possibility of success, but an equally large chance of failure. Jay Gatsby’s failure to realize this risk plays a large part in the ultimate failure of his dream, making the underlying theme of *The Great Gatsby* as a whole not just the American dream, but specifically the failure of it. As Pearson states: “Fitzgerald’s unique expression of the American dream lacks the optimism, the sense of fulfilment, so evident in the expressions of his predecessors [e.g. Walt Whitman, Ralph

Waldo Emerson]” (638). Considering *The Great Gatsby* was written and published during the lavish “Roaring Twenties”, Fitzgerald might have foreseen the nearing end to these years of prosperity and excess and chosen to translate that into a story with this particular theme. As Sarah Churchwell writes:

It is no coincidence that [*The Great Gatsby*] was first popularized during the early years of the Great Depression. The impending failure had been clear to Fitzgerald by the time he finished *Gatsby* – and the fact that in 1925 most Americans were still recklessly chasing the dream had a great deal to do with the initial commercial and critical failure of *The Great Gatsby*, which would not be hailed as a masterpiece until the 50s, once hindsight had revealed its prophetic truth. (par. 5)

The majority of critics agree that this theme of the failure of the American dream is expressed throughout the story in various characters, events, and motifs. The next section will discuss the representation of this theme through three of these narrative elements: the character of Jay Gatsby, his pursuit of Daisy, and the opposition between East and West.

## 1.1 Jay Gatsby

Although it is told from the perspective of Nick Carraway, Jay Gatsby is undoubtedly the protagonist of the story. It is his dream which fuels all the events that unfold, and his dream which ultimately fails and leads to the story’s tragic ending. Gatsby’s dream is, for all intents and purposes, the American dream: born into a poor family in the Midwest, the young Gatsby dreams of a different kind of life and leaves for the East in order to create his own happiness, which is reliant on money, success and love. Interestingly, critic Richard Callahan notes that in creating the character of Gatsby, Fitzgerald may have created his own fictional alter ego. It becomes clear from his personal notes that Fitzgerald near the end of his life was convinced that “life is essentially a cheat and its conditions are those of defeat, and that redeeming things are not ‘happiness and pleasure’ but the deeper satisfactions that come out of the struggle;” a

belief that is in stark contrast with his motto in his early 20s, that “life was something you dominated if you were any good” (Callahan 375). Fitzgerald’s acceptance of the unattainability of his American dream seems to parallel Gatsby’s coming to terms with the infeasibility of his; near the end of the novel, Nick says “I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn’t believe [Daisy’s call] would come, and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream” (Fitzgerald 232).

Nick’s descriptions of his character and actions illustrate that Gatsby is both an idealist and an optimist. Though it is assumed by many of his party guests that he is a fraud, a criminal, and that “he killed a man once” (Fitzgerald 62), and although he is indeed involved in some shady business, Gatsby’s dream remains innocent and incorruptible. “The lawn and drive had been crowded with the faces of those who guessed at his corruption – and he had stood on those steps, concealing his incorruptible dream, as he waved them good-by” (221), Nick aptly notes. All Gatsby wants is to win Daisy’s love; and though his method of attempting to charm her with his unlawfully obtained money and possessions is questionable, this intention remains clear and pure throughout, much like Gatsby’s almost innocent optimism about it. “Can’t repeat the past? Why of course you can! I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before” (158-59), he firmly says; and almost until the bitter end he tries to convince himself that his dream is still within reach: “‘I suppose Daisy’ll call too.’ He looked at me anxiously, as if he hoped I’d corroborate this” (220). Pearson fittingly calls Gatsby “a victim of his own warped idealism and false set of values. The American dream is not to be a reality, in that it no longer exists, except in the minds of men like Gatsby, whom it destroys in their espousal and relentless pursuit of it” (645). His misguided belief in the promise of the American dream is what ultimately kills Gatsby.

## 1.2 Gatsby's Dream: His Pursuit of Daisy

The term American dream is usually associated with dreams of money and property; Gatsby's dream, however, is different. He has plenty of both money and property, but these are only the means by which he hopes to achieve his dream of winning Daisy's love. "Gatsby bought that house so that Daisy would be just across the bay" (Fitzgerald 112), Jordan confirms. Gatsby feels that the only way he can compete with Tom Buchanan's old money, and thereby take Daisy from him, is by wooing her with his possessions; and thus, "the struggle over Daisy is fought on the field of property" (Callahan 382). Gatsby is at least partly aware of this, as evidenced by his remark about Daisy that "Her voice is full of money" (Fitzgerald 172). Ironically, this makes Gatsby's dream more quintessentially American than it might seem at first: in the end, it does come down to material wealth. However, this may also be the reason Gatsby does not succeed in fulfilling his dream: he forgets that love cannot be bought with money. After all, Daisy loved him once despite his complete lack of fortune at the time. Since he now feels he has to match Tom in terms of material possessions in order to win Daisy over, Gatsby is too focused on material wealth and thus fails to approach Daisy in an authentic and potentially effective way.

Furthermore, Daisy's portrayal through the eyes of narrator Nick Carraway also serves the theme of the American dream. As stated above, she is the last piece in the puzzle of Gatsby's dream: he has money and material possessions, but Daisy is the one thing that would completely fulfil his American dream – and he does not yet have her. As a result, Daisy has become Gatsby's "tangible American dream" (Murtaugh 41). However, she is portrayed by Nick in an arguably negative way: as a neglectful mother, a dishonest person, and someone who is easily impressed by shallow matters such as material possessions. The premarital loss of her virginity is also emphasized. With Daisy acting as a symbol of the American dream, Fitzgerald seemingly wanted to emphasize the demoralization of it; Daisy stands for "what

has happened to the dream,” designed to “expose the corruption and unworthiness of materialism” (40).

### 1.3 The Opposition between East and West

“I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all – Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life,” Nick notes on one of the last pages of the novel, hitting the nail on its head (Fitzgerald 253). The American dream affected people all over the United States: in their pursuit of it, those from rural areas migrated to the metropolitan East. Thus, it is likely no coincidence that all of the main characters in *The Great Gatsby* come from the West: they too are lured by the excitement and decadent lifestyle of the East, but their Western character and values prevent them from fitting in completely. Ultimately, they are all disappointed by what the East offers or fails to offer them and therefore leave. As Richard Lehan argues: “An idealized America, a lost innocence once located in the idea of the West, better existed in the past than the present. And thus at the end of the novel Nick seeks that ideal – and returns to the West. And Nick’s words to Gatsby – “you can’t repeat the past” – become words that he fails to apply to himself” (10). The innocent ideal no longer exists for those in pursuit of the American dream because the dream itself has become corrupted; and so has the lifestyle in the epicentre of this dream, the East. The West still represents the uncorrupted, traditional American dream; and people from the West are “the embodiment of the true American dream and the principles in which America was founded, in a sense the American identity” (Murtaugh 42). This explains their inability to fit in in the East: they do not belong in this materialized and demoralized world.

## 2

## Gatsby's Dream Adapted for the Screen

This chapter will discuss the 1974, 2000 and 2013 film adaptations of *The Great Gatsby* in non-chronological order: the 2013 adaptation will be dealt with first, followed by the 1974 and the 2000 adaptation, respectively. When discussed in this order, the parallels between the films are clearest; it allows for a logical comparison of the 2013 and the 1974 film, which are quite different and therefore interesting when contrasted, as well as a comparison of the 1974 and 2000 adaptation, which are quite similar. Using the three themes discussed in the previous chapter (i.e. the character of Jay Gatsby, his pursuit of Daisy, and the opposition between East and West) as criteria, it will attempt to judge the adequacy of the representation of the theme of the failed American dream. These criteria are arguably the most important in representing this theme: Gatsby's dream is the driving force behind the entire story, and an accurate representation of both his dream and his approach to it are thus essential. Daisy acts as the personification of the American dream, and the opposition between East and West provides a rationale for the ultimate failure of Gatsby's dream. The three criteria were also chosen because of their measurability. The theme of the opposition between East and West, for example, is either dealt with in the film or it is not. Jay Gatsby is either the idealist blinded by his dream he appears in the novel, or the way in which he is represented does not lead to that conclusion. By comparing the filmic representation of these criteria to their representation in the original, it can be established what elements the films are lacking – and thus, why their representation of the main theme may be insufficient.

## 2.1 *The Great Gatsby* (2013)

This adaptation of Fitzgerald's original is not the most faithful one: director Baz Luhrmann has taken a few liberties in translating the story to the screen. Some aspects have been modernized: most noticeably the music, which is a mix of 21<sup>st</sup>-century pop and hip-hop songs – not at all the classic jazz one would expect in an adaptation of a novel that is often termed “the classic Jazz Age novel”. Most critics and movie reviewers have taken issue with this alteration (*Bloomberg*'s reviewer Mark Beech deemed it “a commercial shotgun marriage that threatens to go awry, damaging the credibility of both the movie and the brands” and stated that “Fitzgerald's character [...] would never listen to will.i.am”), but Luhrmann, who is famous for his eccentric take on classic stories, explains: “Fitzgerald put music front and center in the novel. He put African American music, jazz, as the star of the book. He wanted it to feel right here, right now. When I set out to write with Craig Pierce, I said there's another form of African American music and it's right here, right now – and that's hip-hop” (Smith).

Apart from the music, Luhrmann has also altered the beginning of the story: Nick's famous opening lines have been simplified (he tells us that his father gave him the advice to “always try to see the best in people,” instead of “remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had” (Fitzgerald 1), but even more interesting is that the story does not start upon Nick's arrival in New York, but rather with recovering alcoholic Nick reminiscing about his time in New York from inside a sanatorium. “When I came back from New York I was disgusted” (00.02.04), he tells his psychiatrist, who encourages him to write his story down – and thus begins the story as we know it from Fitzgerald's novel. The opposition between East and West immediately comes into play here; Nick's remark about coming back from New York illustrates that not only is he no longer in New York, he has come back to the place he originally came from – the Midwest. This is consistent with the end of the novel, in which Nick mentions returning West also. At the end of the film, he reinforces

his sentiments about the East with the words “After Gatsby’s death, New York was haunted for me. That city, my once golden, shimmering mirage, now made me sick” (02.06.18). The opposition between the scenes that take place in New York (the East) and the few scenes at the sanatorium located somewhere in the West is most noticeably marked by the contrast between the weather conditions. As we know from the original story, the events thereof all took place over the course of an exceptionally hot summer, which is consistent with the weather conditions in the film; the sanatorium, however, is nearly snowed in.

The film does not introduce the viewer to Gatsby, arguably the main character, until it is already nearly forty minutes underway. Up until that moment he is more of a presence in the shadows, of whom we sometimes catch a glimpse as he is standing on his dock or watching Nick from inside his house. Gatsby’s obsession with Daisy is then revealed to both Nick and the audience fairly quickly through Jordan Baker, who excitedly tells Nick that “[Gatsby] bought that house just to be near her. He threw all those parties hoping she’d wander in one night. He constantly asked about Daisy, I was just the first person that knew her” (00.47.32). This is reinforced much later in the film when, in the night following the car accident that killed Myrtle Wilson, Gatsby tells Nick his life story, causing Nick to conclude: “It was all for her. The house, the parties, everything” (01.58.07). However, the film also shows that Gatsby’s dream of winning Daisy’s love is not solely about Daisy. “If only it had been enough for Gatsby to just hold Daisy. But he had a grand vision for his life and Daisy’s part in it” (01.07.48), Nick explains in voice-over. It is at this moment that the theme of Gatsby’s American dream is made explicit for the first time. By means of these two sentences, the audience becomes aware that this is not just the story of a man’s wish to obtain a woman’s love; it goes beyond that. It is about this man’s wish to create the life he envisioned for himself – and while Daisy is an important part of that life, she is not the end goal. Gatsby’s resistance to Daisy’s suggestion that they run away together conveys this too; “It’s so hard to

make her understand. I've gotten all these things for her, and now she just... she just wants to run away" (01.20.40), he tells Nick; "We're gonna live here, in this house – you and me" (01.16.48), he tells Daisy. To Gatsby, simply being with Daisy is not enough if it is not in the palace he has built for himself. He wants the complete picture of the life he has dreamt up for himself. "My life has got to be like this. It's got to keep going up" (01.21.00), he explains to Nick, thereby perfectly conveying this attitude. The film also rather extensively shows Gatsby's life story via flashbacks, in which we see him as a young boy living in poverty, on Dan Cody's yacht and during the war. These flashbacks aid the audience in understanding Gatsby's character and the origins of his dream. Curiously, the part where his father shows up at Gatsby's house after the latter has died and provides Nick with even more insight about Gatsby's life has been left out of the film.

Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy is central to the film but, as discussed above, it is also made clear that she is not his only, nor his ultimate goal. As in the book, a connection between Daisy and money is often made; although the quote "Her voice is full of money" is not in the film, this sentiment is conveyed through other statements. Near the beginning of the film when Nick goes to visit Tom and Daisy at their house, he introduces Daisy (in voice-over) to the audience with the words: "Daisy Buchanan, the golden girl" (00.07.30). A little later, when Nick attends his first party at Gatsby's and is accompanied by Jordan Baker, one of Jordan's jealous suitors snaps that "Rich girls don't marry poor boys" (00.47.32). Although this remark is directed at Nick in relation to his flirtation with Jordan, viewers familiar with the book know that this statement is also applicable to Gatsby and Daisy. The remark then almost seems to foreshadow what is yet to come.

## 2.2 *The Great Gatsby* (1974)

This adaptation, directed by Jack Clayton, is perhaps the most famous of all *Gatsby*-adaptations and generally regarded as a very faithful one. Setting, fashion and music are all

true to the era in which the novel is set, and much of the dialogue is verbatim from the original as well. A striking alteration, however, is the fact that the main characters all seem to have been aged up slightly in comparison to the book; namely Gatsby, Daisy and Nick all look quite a bit older than their descriptions in the book lead to assume. It seems the director and scriptwriters were aware of this as well, since Gatsby (played by Robert Redford) at some point in the film states that he and Daisy have not seen one another for a long time, “eight years next November” (00.52.19). In the original, this line reads “Five years next November” (Fitzgerald 124). The filmmakers may very well have deliberately altered this line to explain the increase in age of the main characters. Confusingly, however, Nick states his age later on: “It’s my birthday. I’m 30.” (01.45.56), and this does correspond with his age in the book: “I just remembered that today’s my birthday. I was thirty.” (Fitzgerald 194). No explanation for this inconsistency is given in the film, so it seems most likely that either the “eight years next November” was an unintentional error, or the scriptwriters forgot to change Nick’s age accordingly.

Whereas in the 2013 adaptation most emphasis is placed on the character of Jay Gatsby, in this adaptation it is Daisy Buchanan who seems to be the most rounded character: many of her lines are very telling of her character and also seem to foreshadow the outcome of the story. Near the beginning of the film, she teases Nick about Jordan, causing Nick to say: “Daisy, I have no money. Would Jordan marry a man with no money?” – to which Daisy replies: “Of course not. It’ll just have to be an affair then” (00.25.50). Although she says this in a joking manner, it is indicative of her actual opinion on this matter: to rich girls like Jordan and herself, marrying a man without fortune is, indeed, out of the question. This idea is reinforced later on when Gatsby asks her why she did not wait for him when he was fighting in the war, and she, seeming almost angry, replies: “Because rich girls don’t marry poor boys, Jay Gatsby. Rich girls don’t marry poor boys!” (01.09.00). When she and Gatsby are having

an intimate conversation, she stands by this idea once more:

Gatsby: "I'll love you forever."

Daisy: "Be my lover, stay my lover."

Gatsby: "Your husband."

Daisy: "No." (01.24.10)

It is clear that Daisy will never give Gatsby what he wants: she will never marry him, nor will she leave Tom. She does want to be with Gatsby, but she wants him only as a secret lover, while living her perfect, accomplished life with Tom for the rest of the world to see. Her remark that "It'll just have to be an affair then" was not a joke after all. Whereas in the book Gatsby is the one who asks too much of Daisy by urging her to tell Tom that she never loved him, in this version it is Daisy who clearly wants to ask too much of Gatsby. "Of course you've never loved anyone but me. I love the way you love me," she tells Gatsby, and this illustrates just how selfish she is. More so than in the 2013 version and even more explicitly than in the book, Daisy is here portrayed as the true "golden girl" who only cares about material wealth. The famous quote "Her voice is full of money," which is used in this adaptation (01.33.45), does not nearly seem to cover how shallow this Daisy is.

The portrayal of Daisy thus seems to be more than accurate, since her values are made even more explicit than in the original; the character of Gatsby, however, is less rounded than in the book. Robert Redford's Gatsby is clearly infatuated with Daisy and wants her to leave Tom for him; it is also stated that she is the reason why he wanted to have all the wealth he now possesses. "You know that I bought this house just to be across the bay from you?" (01.23.13) he tells Daisy; and Jordan mentions to Nick that "[Gatsby] says he's read the paper for years, just on the chance of catching Daisy's name" (00.46.19). There is no doubting Gatsby's love for Daisy; but it is never made quite clear that Daisy is not the only thing he wants. Unlike in the 2013 version, no word is said here about Daisy merely being a part of the

life Gatsby envisioned for himself – not by Gatsby himself (he does not suggest that Daisy should come live with him; compare the quote from the 2013 film “We’re gonna live here in this house – you and me”), not by Nick, in voice-over or otherwise (compare the 2013 film quote “He had a grand vision for his life and Daisy’s part in it”), nor by any other character. Winning Daisy, in other words, seems to be Gatsby’s only and ultimate goal – it is never explained that Gatsby’s true dream goes beyond that. The only time this subject is touched upon is when, in accordance with the novel, his father is introduced near the end. With regard to his son running away, he says that “He knew he had a big future in front of him. He always liked it better in the East. [...] He rose to his position in the East” (02.13.00). These few and still very vague lines seem to barely scratch the surface of Gatsby’s dream.

Likewise, the opposition between East and West is also barely touched upon. Besides Mr. Gatz’s remarks that Gatsby rose to his position in the East, the only time any distinction is referenced is when Nick runs into Tom near the end of the film and tells him: “I’m going back West. I’m too squeamish for the East” (02.18.00). Neither East nor West, let alone any sort of existing distinction between them, is mentioned at any other point in the film, and these two offhand comments do not establish a significant theme.

While on a superficial level this film is very true to Fitzgerald’s original, closer analysis reveals that it has neglected to incorporate the essence of what is arguably the most important theme: Gatsby’s dream. This Gatsby has a dream, but it is not the one he has in the novel. As a result, this adaptation is a solid film, but it is not a very good adaptation. Roger Ebert perhaps summed it up best when he tried to think of a reason why the closing voice-over of the film leaves out the last and arguably most famous sentence of the novel: “Maybe because the movie doesn’t ever come close to understanding it.”

### 2.3 *The Great Gatsby* (2000)

This film is the least critically acclaimed one out of the adaptations discussed in this paper – it is a made-for-TV movie, which evidently had a considerably lower budget and significantly shorter runtime than the two other films. As a result of the latter limitation, many changes to the original story have been made: scenes and events have been left out or are presented in a different order. For instance, the film starts by showing the scene of Gatsby's death: Gatsby floating around on an air mattress in the pool, while Wilson creeps up behind him and then fires a single shot. The same scene is shown again near the end of the film at its "right" place in the story. In the same vein, the audience is presented with flashbacks to Gatsby and Daisy's first meeting before they are even introduced to the character of Gatsby in the present.

Strangely enough, this does work for the story: by presenting us with Gatsby and Daisy's entire "story-so-far" prior to them meeting again for the first time in years, the significance of this meeting when it finally does occur seems much greater: more suspense has been built, so the pay-off is more rewarding. It also adds to illustrating the contrast between Gatsby's poverty in the past and his present wealth: the transformation is more obvious and therefore considerably more impressive.

The theme of the opposition between East and West is dealt with in this adaptation, although it does seem to suddenly come out of left field near the end. In voice-over, Nick says:

After Gatsby's death, there was nothing to keep me in the East. The bond's business had lost its charm, and I heard Jordan Baker was engaged to another man. I was ready to return home. [...] The East was haunted for me now beyond my eyes' power of correction. I had lost my capacity for wonder. [...] We were all from the Middle West, Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I. Perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life. (01.29.16-0.31.15)

This speech, large parts of which are verbatim from the book and some of them referencing its famous closing lines (e.g. “I had lost my capacity for wonder”), indeed shows Nick’s belief in an irreconcilable opposition between East and West. However, since such an opposition is not referenced at all in the preceding, this voice-over does seem a little like “telling instead of showing” – but it is most definitely a step forward from the 1974 film, which does not touch upon this theme at all.

With regard to the other two themes, this film sadly suffers from much the same issues as the 1974 film. Gatsby is once again represented as being madly in love with and utterly devoted to Daisy, but the larger part of his dream is lacking once more. “[Tom] underestimates us, Daisy. He doesn’t know how much we love each other. He can’t have you, I won’t let him. I’d sacrifice everything for just one kiss. He’s not capable of understanding that” (01.04.14), he tells Daisy: but Fitzgerald’s Gatsby seems to be a lot more like the Tom he contemptuously describes here. That Gatsby would most definitely not sacrifice the life he had built for himself for one kiss: he wanted to have it all. Nick does make some astute remarks with regard to Gatsby and his dream: in the opening voice-over of the film, he describes Gatsby as having “some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life” (00.01.07), which likely references Gatsby’s belief in the promise of the American dream; after Gatsby and Tom’s row at the Plaza, Nick comments that “Jay Gatsby had broken up like glass against Tom’s hard malice. It was all going too fast now. He knew that he had lost part of his dream” (01.16.29); and after Gatsby’s death, he remarks: “I was left with the remnants of Gatsby’s dream. Some newspaper clippings of Daisy and the bonds he had forged” (01.28.36). The fact that he not only mentions Daisy as part of Gatsby’s dream but also the bonds which made him rich seems significant. These comments, however, are few and far between and easily overlooked. Thus, the “non-Daisy” part of Gatsby’s dream has not been completely left out of this adaptation, but it is also not emphasized in a measure appropriate for such an important

theme.

As for Daisy: contrary to the 1974 film, she is here portrayed as a fairly sympathetic character. Not just sympathetic at first glance, which one could argue she also appears to be in the novel, but even a closer look does not reveal her as someone who only cares about money and status. “I’ve been everywhere and seen everything and done everything. Sophisticated. God, I’m so sophisticated” (00.08.30), she says to Nick in a sort of mocking tone, almost evoking pity. The “Her voice is full of money”-quote is thrown in (00.53.50), seemingly in order to make the viewer aware of what sort of person Daisy actually is (curiously, it is also said by Gatsby in a tone best described as “disgusted” – not at all as the compliment it almost appears to be in the book), but this once again seems more like telling than showing. Like the 1974 adaptation, this film seems unable to convey the complexity of Gatsby’s dream.

## Conclusion

How is the theme of the American dream represented  
in film adaptations of *The Great Gatsby*?

Though arguably the most important theme of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly how the novel conveys the idea of the failure of the American dream. The events of which the story is made up naturally play a large part (if Daisy were to leave Tom and marry Gatsby, Gatsby's dream would likely be considered fulfilled instead of failed and thus the theme would be different), but the events an sich are not all that is needed to convey a theme. Notions such as "mood", "spirit", and "tone" of a novel are equally important, though much harder to define or measure. For many critics, however, these are the defining factors in determining how successful an adaptation has been (Hutcheon 10). Such subjective criteria make it difficult to formulate objective statements with regard to the quality of an adaptation.

This paper has sought to take an "as-objective-as-possible" approach to *The Great Gatsby* and its adaptations by attempting to find criteria which are essential in conveying its central theme, and yet measurable. As discussed in the first chapter, these criteria are:

- the character of Jay Gatsby;
- his pursuit of Daisy (or, stated more accurately: his pursuit of Daisy as part of his larger dream);
- and the opposition between East and West.

Applying these criteria to the three adaptations which were subject of inquiry has yielded remarkable results. The 2013 adaptation, often criticized as being too modernized and ludicrously extravagant, proves that despite its alterations and liberties taken, it has understood and preserved the underlying theme of the original. This adaptation does not seem to get stuck on the Gatsby-Daisy-Tom love triangle, but goes deeper than that by developing the character of Jay Gatsby much further. This gives insight into the true extent of his dream –

which goes beyond winning Daisy. It is also the only adaptation out of the three which actually shows the East-West opposition, instead of merely mentioning it.

The 1974 adaptation is often praised for its faithfulness to the original; but while this may be true on a superficial level, closer analysis focusing on the aforementioned criteria reveals that it is not quite as faithful on a thematic level. Gatsby's dream is represented in an incomplete and thus inaccurate manner and the opposition between East and West is barely mentioned. One could argue that the end result is still the same and the theme of a failed American dream is still clearly recognizable; but due to neglecting to portray these important criteria, it has become an entirely different failed dream. It is not the same dream Fitzgerald's Gatsby has.

The 2000 adaptation is often overlooked due to being a made-for-TV movie; a term which, to many critics, equals inferior quality. The film admittedly has flaws, but on a thematic level it does certain things a lot better than the acclaimed 1974 adaptation. The opposition between East and West is not represented in the best way imaginable, but certainly not altogether ignored. The film does not succeed in portraying the full extent of Gatsby's dream, but it is clearly hinted at a couple of times and that is more than can be said for its 1974 counterpart.

In conclusion, the theme of the American dream is best represented in the 2013 film adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*. Despite its changes on a superficial level, this film provides the most complete adaptation of the thematic aspect of Fitzgerald's original. The 1974 and the 2000 adaptation both ultimately fail to portray the part of Gatsby's dream that is not concerned with Daisy, and consequently fail to sufficiently convey the main theme. This difference in accuracy of representation might have to do with the differing views of the directors; with regard to his 2013 adaptation, Baz Luhrmann has stated that the questionable moral values associated with the American dream in *The Great Gatsby* remind him of

contemporary post-9/11 society (Ohneswere, par. 4), which might explain the emphasis on the thematic aspect in this adaptation. Moreover, it is not unlikely that Jack Clayton, who directed the 1974 adaptation, neglected the thematic aspect in favour of the romantic angle of the story, as his remark that Gatsby and Daisy's relationship is "the absolute essence of the word romance" leads to believe (Ebiri, par. 5). This is, however, speculative; further research into this subject is to be recommended.

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