For the love of Gatsby
“Fidelity, Voyeurism and Baz Luhrman’s Rose-Coloured Glasses”

There are few works that are as revered or as secure in their canonicity as F Scott Fitzgerald’s 1925 novel The Great Gatsby. It is often cited as a leading contender for the title of “The Great American Novel”. Until now the novel has not been tremendously well served by filmmakers, with the best-known adaptation being Jack Clayton’s 1974 film starring Robert Redford as Gatsby.

Baz Luhrmann’s 2013 adaptation of the novel arrived with much anticipation following reports of a huge budget, lavish set design and the use of 3D. With this came concomitant concerns about a lack of fidelity in the novel and an emphasis on spectacle that would lose sight of the more intimate and thoughtful moments in Fitzgerald’s writing.

Luhrmann faced a challenge in adapting Fitzgerald’s novel, with a first-person narrator, Nick Carraway, who filters the reader’s perception of the characters and events. What works on the page does not work on the screen. Luhrmann can’t simply use long voiceovers to replicate the effect without losing the impact on the viewers, so alternative methods were utilised. The concept of Nick as a writer and author of the (presumably non-fiction) book is established in the first few pages of the novel “Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book”. Luhrmann expands on this to have Nick (Tobey Maguire) and others refer to him as a writer. Tom (Joel Edgerton) introduces Myrtle (Isla Fisher), his mistress, he says “Nick’s a writer” – an introduction that is absent in the novel.

Other techniques utilised to position the audience to view Nick as a writer include Nick sitting in front of a typewriter and words superimposed over the screen providing a visual representation of the writer at work. This is most noticeable at the end of the film, where a flurry of typewritten letters approximating a snowfall over the city of New York and Nick emerges unshaven and apparently a broken man as a result of his experiences. The jumble of letters represents his disordered emotional reaction to Gatsby’s death and his disenchantment with the East that prompts him to return to the Midwest.

Luhrmann appears to be seduced by the character of Gatsby, however Fitzgerald’s Gatsby provides conflict for Nick. In the opening pages Nick explains Gatsby “represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn” but then goes on to praise his “extraordinary gift for hope” and say “that he turned out all right at the end”. Nick is simultaneously attracted to and repelled by Gatsby, seduced by the glamour but sickened by the grimy underbelly. In Luhrmann’s film, however, the glamour dominates, when we are introduced to Gatsby, fireworks explode all around as we get a lingering close-up on his face with its winning smile.
Cinema is entirely dependent on the act of viewing, as we sit and watch events unfold before our eyes on the screen. Nick Carraway is also a voyeur, observing what goes on in his neighbour’s mansion, and giving us a distanced and critical viewpoint on the lives of Gatsby, Tom and Daisy (Carey Mulligan).

The director plays up this idea of watching others, making it a motif in the film. The key scene that illustrates this is the party in the New York apartment, where Nick observes that “our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was him too, looking up and wondering”. Visually the camera panning across a string of apartment windows reinforces this, each providing a vignette of other people’s lives. Luhrmann includes many other shots of people watching each other during the course of the film, usually through windows that serve to symbolically represent the barriers between people, in particular the impediment separating Daisy and Gatsby.

Watching is a significant theme in the novel, particularly through the symbolism of TJ Eckleburg’s giant eyes on the advertising billboard in the Valley of Ashes. In both the novel and the film, Wilson says “God sees everything” as he looks at the billboard. In the film frequent use of the billboard is made, with its penetrating gaze, perhaps most strikingly when Myrtle is run down. After being hit by the car, slow motion is utilised in the foreground of the bespectacled gaze of the billboard.

Most adaptations make a number of cuts in order to keep the film to a reasonable running time. The role of Jordan Baker (Elizabeth Debickil) is reduced so the audience do not get a sense of the developing relationship between Nick and Jordan; this returns Nick to the role of the neutral (and neutered) observer of the grand passions of others. The most noticeable alteration of a scene is the rearrangement of events after Myrtle’s death and the omission of the funeral service in which Mr Gatz, Gatsby’s father, turns up to farewell his son. At the end of the novel, Nick reflects rather uncomfortably on Gatsby’s shady path to wealth, whereas Luhrmann ends on an elegiac note that emphasises Gatsby’s determined love for Daisy.

In the scene showing Gatsby’s death, Luhrmann departs from the novel significantly. Fitzgerald writes that no telephone message arrived for Gatsby while he was in the pool, and has Nick reflect that he had “an idea that Gatsby himself didn’t believe it would come, and perhaps he no longer cared. Luhrmann allows for no such diminishment of Gatsby’s hopes and dreams, showing Daisy’s hand picking up a receiver and having the phone ring just before Gatsby is shot.

Despite Gatsby being deceived, Luhrmann leaves us with the feeling that he was full of his “heightened sensitivity to the promises of life” right until the end, whereas there are no rose-coloured glasses with Fitzgerald he would not leave us quite so sure.