

**“An Indefinite Procession of Shadows”:
Fitzgerald on Film in *The Great Gatsby***

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Abstract

This article examines F. Scott Fitzgerald’s representation of film in *The Great Gatsby*. Offering a close reading of Chapter VI of the novel, I seek to demonstrate that cinema functions in it as a means of metaphorically underscoring the illusory nature of Gatsby’s lifestyle and identity. Although critics have tended to focus on the crucial role film plays in Fitzgerald’s later fiction, I argue it is here, early in his career, that Fitzgerald begins to work out the themes that consume him in its final phase.

Keywords

Fitzgerald, *Gatsby*, film, metaphor, illusion

Much has been written about the movies made from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) over the years—up to and including Baz Luhrmann’s recent 2013 adaptation of the novel. Far less has been written about what Fitzgerald makes of the movies in *The Great Gatsby*. This is perhaps not altogether surprising. After all, cinema is not a central focus in the book, as it would become in later works by the author: most memorably his unfinished, posthumously published novel, *The Love of the Last Tycoon* (1941), and his Pat Hobby stories for *Esquire* magazine (1940-41). It is unfortunate, however, since the movies have a crucial, if brief, cameo in *Gatsby*. Offering a close reading of their appearance in Chapter VI of the novel, I argue in this short article that Fitzgerald’s treatment of them prefigures his representation of cinema in the later works just mentioned and others, like his last completed novel, *Tender is the Night* (1934), and his *American Mercury* short story, “Crazy Sunday” (1932). Indeed, *The Great*

Gatsby suggests that his attitude toward film was formed long before his move to Hollywood in 1937, and that he had already begun, early in his career, to work out the themes that would consume him in its final phase.

Readers will remember that Chapter VI occupies a pivotal place in Fitzgerald's novel, following the chapter in which the romance between Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan is rekindled, and preceding the chapter in which the horrific automobile accident that permanently severs their relationship occurs. It details Gatsby's attempts to woo Daisy away from her rich, philandering husband, Tom, by displaying for her the vast wealth and social status he has accumulated since they separated five years earlier, driven apart as much by his lack of means as by his service in the First World War. Its centerpiece is a lavish party that he hosts at his West Egg estate for just this purpose. Daisy attends, along with Tom and Nick Carraway, the book's narrator. Also among the partygoers are a number of luminaries and celebrities, including movie stars, directors, and producers. Daisy is particularly struck by one female star, "a gorgeous, scarcely human orchid of a woman who [sits] in state under a white plum tree" (111), attended by her director. The rest of the party "offend[s] her" (111), however. From old money and the Old South, she is appalled by West Egg society and its lively but vulgar brand of *nouveau riche*. The party marks the beginning of the end of her attraction to Gatsby, as she starts to realize that he is not and will never be her equal, socially, despite his newly-acquired fortune and famous connections. His apparent suitability as a lover and future husband is an illusion. Gatsby senses the chasm separating them as well, but continues to believe that it can be bridged, that he can, as he memorably insists to Nick, "repeat the past" (116) by reclaiming Daisy. This is a tragic delusion, of course—something Nick understands very well and the rest of the novel bears out. In presenting himself as a refined and successful gentleman, Gatsby is not only fooling others (or aiming to), he is also fooling himself. "Jay Gatsby" is a fiction and his dream of reuniting with Daisy is pure fantasy. Unreality, then, is the central theme of Chapter VI of *The Great Gatsby*. My interest here is in how Fitzgerald employs film as a metaphor to convey this theme to readers.

In the first place, Fitzgerald uses cinema to highlight the illusory nature of the ritzy lifestyle Gatsby has adopted in order to win Daisy back. The party he hosts for her is a glittering affair, but the razzle-dazzle masks an underlying emptiness, an absence of real culture. This is implied

through Fitzgerald's references to film, an upstart medium he paints as superficially seductive but ultimately hollow—all surface and no depth. The movie stars at the party suggest that it is just a show, a production staged for Daisy's benefit. Fitzgerald writes that the "scarcely human" female star Daisy admires evokes "that particularly unreal feeling that accompanies the recognition of a hitherto ghostly celebrity of the movies" (111). She embodies the bewitching glamour of cinema, but also serves as a reminder of its fundamental insubstantiality. As the party's "director," Gatsby seeks to create a cinematic veneer of excitement and sophistication that will impress his guests. He encourages Daisy, Tom, and Nick to assume the role of movie spectators: "Look around" (111), he urges: "You must see the faces of many people you've heard about" (111). He also attempts to cast them in the parts required for the movie he is shooting in his head: the one in which Daisy leaves Tom and returns with Gatsby to Louisville, where they marry and live happily ever after. Gatsby demotes Tom to a minor role by introducing him around as "the polo player" (111). Meanwhile, he tries to make Daisy over into his leading lady. His efforts on this score are paralleled by those of the actual director at the party, who maneuvers his star into a moment of intimacy by the end of the night, as Nick observes: "They were still under the white plum tree and their faces were touching except for a pale thin ray of moonlight between. It occurred to me that he had been very slowly bending toward her all evening to attain this proximity, and even while I watched him I saw him stoop one ultimate degree and kiss at her cheek" (113).

Unfortunately for Gatsby, his guests are not taken in by the cinematic sleight-of-hand his party represents. They refuse the roles he devises for them—"I'd rather not be the polo player" (112), Tom tells him—and see more than he intends them to. Tom, his "arrogant eyes roam[ing] the crowd" (111), dismisses the "sparkling hundreds" (111) in attendance as a "menagerie" (114). Daisy, as already noted, is "appalled by West Egg" (113), although she is loath to admit it to Tom. Even sympathetic Nick, "looking at it again, through Daisy's eyes" (110), is forced to acknowledge the banality beneath the "many-colored, many-keyed commotion" (110) of Gatsby's social circle. Nick had come to regard West Egg as "a world complete in itself, with its own standards and its own great figures, second to nothing because it had no consciousness of being so" (110), but he now registers its cultural inferiority. It is another world indeed, but one

grounded in fantasy rather than in reality, an “unprecedented ‘place’ that Broadway [has] begotten upon a Long Island fishing village” (114-15). Given the metaphorical use to which Fitzgerald puts film in the novel, Nick could have just as aptly described it as a place begotten by Hollywood. Gatsby presides over a dream factory. Like the movies, his parties purvey an illusion of elegance and exclusivity that belies their essential gaudiness and superficiality. In Fitzgerald’s view, cinema is flashy, but it lack class—a point cemented earlier in the novel when Tom’s callow mistress, Myrtle Wilson, stops to buy a “moving picture magazine” (31) as she, Tom, and Nick make their way to the New York City apartment Tom has rented for his secret rendezvous with her. The same is true of the life Gatsby has made for himself and Daisy. Underneath the patina of fame and fortune, it is no more substantial than the indistinct figures Daisy, Tom, and Nick watch through the blinds on the windows of Gatsby’s mansion as they wait for their car after the party: an “indefinite procession of shadows” (114) that recalls images flickering on a movie screen.

Fitzgerald uses film as a metaphor for more than just Gatsby’s empty lifestyle, however; he also uses it as a figure to limn Gatsby’s lack of identity. Chapter VI opens with an ambitious young reporter appearing on Gatsby’s doorstep with questions about his past. Only at this point do we discover from Nick who “Gatsby” really is: one James Gatz of North Dakota, who, unsatisfied with his lot in life, invented as a teenager “just the sort of [man] that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent” (104). Leaving behind his parents, “shiftless and unsuccessful farm people [...] [whom] his imagination had never really accepted [...] as his parents at all” (104), he struck out on his own, driven by an “overwhelming self-absorption” (105) decidedly cinematic in nature. As Nick tells us: “The most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted [Gatsby] [...] A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain [...] Each night he added to the pattern of his fancies until drowsiness closed down upon some vivid scene with an oblivious embrace” (105). These film-like reveries—private, nightly screenings of “his Platonic conception of himself” (104)—were a “satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy’s wing” (105). In the end, Gatsby’s romantic faith in his ability to fashion his own identity was seemingly confirmed, after much youthful wandering, through a chance meeting with millionaire yachtsman Dan Cody, who afforded him the opportunity

to fill out the “vague contour of Jay Gatsby” (107) with the “substantiality of a man” (107).

Significantly, though, Nick follows this story with an anecdote demonstrating that the man is not as substantial as he might appear. Curious about their notorious new neighbor in West Egg, Tom Buchanan and two friends from East Egg, “a man named Sloane and a pretty woman in a brown riding habit” (107), drop by Gatsby’s house on horseback one afternoon when Nick is over for a visit. After a few drinks, the woman impulsively invites Gatsby to dinner at her home, a gesture that clearly meets with Sloane’s disapproval. Nick notices this right away; Gatsby, on the other hand, does not. “Gatsby looked at me questioningly,” Nick relates, “He wanted to go and he didn’t see that Mr. Sloane had determined he shouldn’t” (109). His cinematic powers of imagination, acute though they may be, betray him. A true believer in the myth of his own reinvention, he fancies himself fully the equal of his high society guests; Sloane, however, finely attuned to the realities of class and cultural pedigree, instantly perceives his inferiority. He may look the part of a substantial man, but behind the flash and the money, he is a nobody. Tom sees this as well; when Gatsby leaves them for a moment to collect his things, he turns to Nick in astonishment: “My God, I believe the man’s coming [...] Doesn’t he know she doesn’t want him?” (109). Before Gatsby returns, the trio hastily departs, leaving Nick to make their excuses to their host, who emerges from his house, hat and overcoat in hand, just as they are disappearing down the drive. This anecdote succinctly captures Gatsby’s tragedy. His “unutterable visions” (117) have led him this far, but can take him no further. It is they, not “reality,” that prove unreal. For all their potency, they are, like film, chimerical. Certainly they have no power to alter the way Gatsby is regarded by the world he desperately wishes to break into: he may look like one of its inhabitants, but he will never be one of them. His cinematic romanticism is finally no match for social reality; his dreams are so many fairies’ wings dashed against the rock of the world. The tragedy, of course, is that he does not yet realize this. He remains determined, in Chapter VI of the novel, to bridge the distance between himself and Daisy—to “fix everything just the way it was before” (117), to repeat the past, just as one might rerun a movie through a projector.

Film, Fitzgerald suggests figuratively in *The Great Gatsby*, is a seductive but dangerous medium. Its superficial glamour disguises a

fundamental lack of substance. It is a beautiful illusion not to be mistaken for reality. Indeed, Fitzgerald's novel can be read as a cautionary tale about the alienating power of movies as mass culture. In it, cinema becomes an emblem of the burgeoning society of the spectacle, a prime force contributing to the growing unreality of reality in twentieth-century American life. It is worth noting that Fitzgerald was by no means the first writer in the US to paint film in such terms. In fact, his attitude toward the cinema is almost as old as the medium itself, appearing in key passages of such turn-of-the-century novels as *McTeague* (1899) and *The House of Mirth* (1905). It was also a defining feature of later "Hollywood novels" like *Merton of the Movies* (1919) and *The Skyrocket* (1925). More to the point, *The Great Gatsby* was not the last work in which Fitzgerald framed film as an alienating force in modern American culture, an enemy of the real. It was, rather, a pioneering work that laid the foundation for his later fiction, which obsessively returns to this theme. Its influence is clearly visible, for example, in *Tender is the Night*, a novel dealing with a renowned psychoanalyst whose life (and marriage) unravels after he falls in love with a young movie star he meets on the French Riviera. It is also manifest, of course, in *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, which revolves around a talented Hollywood producer who loses faith in the movies but cannot establish a real-world relationship with the woman he loves. This is the reason, ultimately, why Fitzgerald's treatment of film in *The Great Gatsby* deserves more attention than it has received to date—it was a sign of things to come. As Nick says of Gatsby and his vision of himself, so we can say of Fitzgerald and his vision of cinema in the novel: "to this conception he was faithful to the end" (104).

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