ENDURING HOPE
THE LEGACY OF *THE GREAT GATSBY* IN THREE DIMENSIONS

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ABSTRACT

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In this analysis of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby I compare it to the 2013 film adaptation of the same title by Baz Luhrmann. I explore four key elements crucial to an informed understanding of the novel’s most poignant theme, the transformative effect of the American individual’s response to hope: narrative point of view, the use and function of music, the use and function of fashion, and the use and function of the automobile. I examine the novel for its presentation of themes regarding the principle characters’ capacity for hope and the perception of reality that results from their responses; in tandem I examine the film for ways in which it effectively captures the essence of these themes. Most notably I focus on the particularly contemporary choices Luhrmann made for his film and the opportunities that are presented for new and renewed readings of the novel. I argue that the film is, in spirit, a faithful adaptation of a period novel that successfully maintains its own contemporary relevance.

Along with joining in conversation with scholars who have compared earlier film versions to the novel, such as Dennis Cutchins, who discusses the benefits of film adaptation analysis in the teaching of literature, I also examine critical scholarship on Fitzgerald and The Great Gatsby novel, and Baz Luhrmann’s film techniques, as well as
literary, sonic, and dramatic scholarship that investigates film adaptation and interpretation.
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INTRODUCTION

For many readers *The Great Gatsby* has become a sacred text in the American literary canon. Decades of scholarship have been devoted to this relatively small piece of work – a mere 184 pages in the authorized text edition by Scribner’s. The bare bones of Fitzgerald’s life have been picked over in the archives at Princeton, the University of South Carolina, and New York City; biographical accounts of the lives of Scott and Zelda have been weaved together from their collections of letters; original manuscripts and short stories of Fitzgerald’s that test-ran characters, themes, and relationships that would eventually end up in *The Great Gatsby* have been scoured for additional insight and context; literary journals are dedicated to the work of F. Scott Fitzgerald; to date five attempts to adapt the novel to film have been made, and the seemingly inexhaustive list of books of *Gatsby* and Fitzgerald criticism continues to build. In fact, during the drafting of this thesis, yet another book on Gatsby’s greatness has entered the popular scholarship scene: Maureen Corrigan’s *So We Read On: How “The Great Gatsby” Came To Be And Why It Endures* (Little, Brown and Co., 2014).

Topics of analysis from every theoretical lens have been applied to this text, from classic formalism to historical, cultural, psychological, and socio-anthropological approaches. A chapter-length overview of twenty-first century *Gatsby* scholarship, “Twenty-First Century G” in Robert Beuka’s *American Icon: Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby” in Critical and Cultural Context*, identifies the continued trend of traditional frameworks but with new threads of comparison that move away from the already...
established connection to John Keats, to the influences of Dickens, Kipling, Chekhov, and Chaucer (118). In addition, *Gatsby* connections have been made to the “new physics” of Einstein, Freudian psychology, ties to popular culture of Fitzgerald’s day, links to emergent communication technology, perspectives on economics and class, American capitalism and Marx’s “commodity fetish” (Beuka 119). Essays and articles explore the significance of jazz and African American culture; modernity, the rise of the city, the machine, and suburban sprawl; and the performativity of romance, sexuality, gender, and of race and ethnicity (Beuka 120-25). In classrooms, students are encouraged to continue to consider the meaning and significance of the American Dream, the role of landscape and geography, the function of time and its correlation to the perception of reality, of past and present, of identity and representations, of travel and the ever-present automobile, and the novel’s stance on morality and mortality (Beuka 125 -34).

It seems as though everything that can be said has already been said, already been explored, and yet we come back to it again and again. Australian director Baz Luhrmann brought us back with his three-dimensional (3-D) film adaptation of the novel which debuted in theaters in May 2013. Once again, the American public flocked back to its beloved book, forming reading groups and hosting Roaring Twenties themed cocktail parties. The promise and hope of greatness got our spirits up once again, even if we knew it might be difficult for the film to deliver, or for the book to live up to the expectations of our collective memory. While most readers will agree that the novel is undeniably great, we often have trouble articulating just what it is that makes it so great, mostly because we have trouble articulating what, exactly, the book is about. As Corrigan makes the point in
her introduction to So We Read On, “Anytime you try to explain to someone who hasn’t read it what The Great Gatsby is ‘about,’ the book fades into just another novel about love gone wrong. [...] Flailing around, you fall back on the truth: that maybe it’s not so much the plot of Gatsby that makes it great but the way it’s told, that incredible language again” (Introduction). Indeed, most readers will acknowledge that it is not the novel’s plot that is its strength; it is the haunting, prophetic, revelatory nature of Fitzgerald’s prose, not the action or the spectacle of those wild party scenes, which causes the feelings of desire, ambition, greatness, and hope to stir within us.

As a result, criticism of Luhrmann’s film by Gatsby loyalists has been mixed, although generally it has received at best mediocre reviews (the film has a Metascore of 55 from a compilation of 45 critic reviews on Internet Movie Database). Some critics were mildly amused by the various enjoyable aesthetic aspects of the film, however overly ambitious or underdeveloped. The Chicago Sun Times calls it “a cinematic hot mess,” and “big and bold and brassy,” but admits Luhrmann gets it right after all (Roeper). The New York Daily News advises, “If you haven’t read the book in a while, wait until after you see the movie. That way, you can appreciate Luhrmann’s frankly superficial approach,” conceding, however, that “this version has undeniable allure” (Weitzman). The review from Roger Ebert’s website confesses “Luhrmann’s adaptation of The Great Gatsby isn’t a disaster,” and that “[e]ven when the movie’s not working, its style fascinates” (Seitz).

Most were annoyed with Luhrmann’s outlandish rendering of cinematic exploits in true Baz-flash fashion. Entertainment Weekly laments, “Luhrmann goes to the …
extreme, transforming the high school reading-list perennial into an ADHD workout” (Nashaway); Film.com bemoans, “Alas, Gatsby is more often consumed with lavish costumes, loud music and limp rehearsals of Fitzgerald’s famous text verbatim, at times even thrown at the screen as part of a clumsily included framing device” (Gross). The Wall Street Journal and Rolling Stone both considered the film to be “lifeless” (Morgenstern; Travers). Surprisingly (or, maybe not), nearly every critic was outraged by a few choice deviations from the plot (only two of the film reviews researched were empathetic to Luhrmann’s framing device – more on this later).

Let us not forget, however, that our beloved novel met with similar scorn. Ironic similarities abound between reception of this film and the novel’s initial critical reviews. “Upon its publication in 1925,” writes Beuka in the first chapter of American Icon, the novel “met with mixed reaction from critics in the major newspapers and literary journals” (1). In an overview of the initial critical reception of Fitzgerald’s legendary work, Beuka writes, “sales of The Great Gatsby were less than half of those of both … This Side of Paradise and The Beautiful and the Damned,” noting that during Fitzgerald’s own lifetime the novel was “something of a flop” (3). Just as Luhrmann’s film was received, many of Fitzgerald’s critics “viewed The Great Gatsby as an exciting diversion, but not a great novel that would stand the test of time” (Beuka 3). Shortly after the novel’s initial release in 1925, Isabel Peterson in the New York Herald Tribune, is cautious with her praise: “‘In reproducing surfaces, [Fitzgerald’s] virtuosity is amazing. He gets the exact tone, the note, the shade of the season and place he is working on; he is more contemporary than any newspaper….’” But then, Paterson reveals the novel’s fatal
flaw: “‘But he has not, yet gone below that glittering surface except by a kind of happy accident, and then he is rather bewildered by the results of his own intuition’” (Beuka 3). Paterson wasn’t the only one who criticized Fitzgerald “for getting the surface right at the expense of real depth;” H.L. Mencken’s review in the *Baltimore Evening Sun* “complained that the novel ‘is no more than a glorified anecdote, and not too probable at that’” concluding that the “‘story is obviously unimportant,’” citing its ‘basic triviality’” (Beuka 3).

Both Luhrmann and Fitzgerald were upbraided for their highly modern, stylized nature – Luhrmann for his “unapologetically garish riot of color and costumery parading before a restless camera,” and “go-for-broke impulses” (Phipps); Fitzgerald for his “depiction of a reckless, fast-living youthful set” (Beuka 5). An anonymous reviewer in the *Kansas City Star* may as well have been talking about Luhrmann when he writes, “‘Mr. Fitzgerald is a clever writer, but in *The Great Gatsby* his chosen field is so sordid and depressing that if the cleverness is there it is obscured by the details of his story’” (Beuka 6). And just as criticism of the film rings with disgust over the obnoxious use of flashy colors, in-your-face party explosions, and dismissive treatment of the novel’s important themes, Harvey Eagleton’s review of the novel in the *Dallas Morning News* is nearly identical in its contempt of Fitzgerald’s masterpiece: “‘The book is highly sensational, loud, blatant, ugly, pointless. There seems to be no reason for its existence’” (Beuka 6). The novel has endured, however, and reasons for its existence continue to be searched for and celebrated. Before Luhrmann’s latest endeavor, four other films sought,
unsuccessfully (according to most critics), to bring to life what seems to be destined to live on only in our imaginations.

And so here we are, nearly nine decades after the novel’s first publication, with a film that has attempted to address the failings of previous adaptations by attaching itself to the source of what eventually became hallmarks of the novel’s now recognized genius: an experience of the senses, meditations on modernity and excess at its most obscene, combined with a narrative complexity that floats just beneath the surface. It is fitting that criticism of the film should be as mixed as the novel’s. Both were considered too flashy, too showy, too modern – “a novel for one season,” “immense and overwrought,” admired for beautiful prose and colorful cinematography, but uncertain as to whether they are works really worth placing in the canon of great, or even “good,” literature or film.

Good cinema or not, Luhrmann’s adaptation responds to signature features of the novel in a strikingly contemporary, appropriately ironic way. *The Great Gatsby* is a profound novel about the way we (as individuals and as a nation) continue to reach out with hope and how this longing shapes our reality. It spoke to and about its generation through the myriad of contemporary, on-point, often satirical references (almost to a fault, and some so specific or subtle that they are now lost on modern readers) to fashion, celebrity, music, and popular social thought. *Gatsby* the film effectively captures the essence of this most central of the book’s theme in a way particularly contemporary to the 2010s, the way the novel was contemporary to the 1920s, and both deliver tongue-in-cheek representations of images and ideals we try so hard to keep “straight.” In spite of ourselves, we have mythologized Jay Gatsby to be the embodiment of the American
Dream the same way we’ve mythologized the extravagance of the Jazz Age, and the soothing purity of Fitzgerald’s prose. But Gatsby, the Jazz Age, and Fitzgerald’s prose are neither of these things without also being corrupt, banal, and disconcerting. Gatsby’s tragic allure, the significance of the insidiousness of the Jazz Age, and Fitzgerald’s prophetic language was years in the making – nearly thirty – before scholars began to recognize the merits of this now front-runner of great American novels.

I make this point not to argue for Luhrmann’s place in cinematic history – I happened to enjoy the film very much, and I argue for its recognition as an apt resource for re-reading the novel, but I am certainly no film critic. My point is that we tend to get possessive of our treasured Gatsby, ever on the lookout for anything that might tarnish its good name or discolor a novice’s virgin experience of the text. It seems we’ve been guilty of re-inventing The Great Gatsby ourselves. Let the book stand on its own two legs, old sport – it’s done just fine so far.

While the film apparently has its cinematic flaws, it nevertheless takes up key elements of the novel that have been remiss from previous adaptations: the invented narrative framing device; the emphasis on modern, contemporary, cutting edge music (specifically hip hop) and fashion; and the visual effect of filming in 3-D to mimic the rushing, chaotic motif of automobiles and the onslaught of modernization. If we see Luhrmann’s film as one interpretation, one possible reading of the novel, and not as a definitive translation of the whole piece, we can allow it to return us to the motifs that Fitzgerald, and current literary scholarship, clearly identifies as significant. In his article, “Adaptations in the Classroom: Using Film to ‘Read’ The Great Gatsby,” Dennis
Cutchins reminds us that “both film adaptations and literary analysis are, at their centers, acts of interpretation,” adding that “in adapting a work of literature for the screen, writers and directors are forced to change, ‘adapt’ the text, and often these changes expose the limitations or boundaries of both media” (295). Luhrmann was well aware of these boundaries and limitations, and says pointedly in a bonus features interview, “but, I wanted to solve that problem” (“The Greatness of Gatsby”). Luhrmann addresses head-on what Cutchins points out is a central conflict of the film/novel dichotomy: “Adaptations function in the liminal space between what is ‘literature’ and what is ‘popular culture’ and some adaptations even seem purposefully designed to blur the line between literature and film” (Cutchins 296). Luhrmann’s choice to blur these lines unlocks new ways of analyzing the novel. The allure of the novel is the way it speaks to and about the relentless striving of the American spirit: “And so we beat on…. In spite of everything we keep trying, we keep holding out hope. That is our legacy. Gatsby turned out alright in the end because he maintained hope in his dream, no matter what. What disgusted both Nick and Fitzgerald were the rich who seemed to need no reason to hope for anything, and by the “foul dust” which preyed on the rest of society, causing them to slowly and desperately cling to a false sense of hope or give up on it all together. Baz Luhrmann, in wanting to solve the problem of successfully adapting the novel to film, responded to the hope that allows one to believe in a dream and pursue it against all odds.

In the analysis that follows, I will conduct a close re-reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby. My analysis is inspired by four distinct features of Baz Luhrmann’s film adaptation: the narrative framing device that announces the occasion for
Nick’s telling of the story; and the motifs of sound, style, and speed. The narrative frame – Nick’s first-person account of the story – is a central significant feature of the novel. It is how the theme of enduring hope is first revealed, and the portal through which we experience the events of that summer. It is specifically through sensory experience that both Nick and reader make sense of the New York of Nick’s memory. Three sensory modes – aural, visual, and kinetic – dominate and pervade the descriptive imagery of the novel, which directly influence our interpretation of the novel’s central theme: the sense of enduring hope that characterizes the American spirit and shapes our reality as we strive for, or fail to realize, our dreams.
PART I: THE CENTRALITY OF NICK CARRAWAY’S NARRATION

In order to understand the significance of the “extraordinary gift for hope” that compels Nick to champion for Gatsby when all the rest have forsaken him, one must grasp the significance of the novel’s point of view (Gatsby 6). The Great Gatsby is historically and stylistically placed within the tradition of American Modern writing concurrent with Hemingway, Faulkner, and Eliot, which focuses on “ordinary characters in often mundane circumstances, struggling with the racial, economic, and moral issues of American life” (Nagel 169). It is also a novel in the Realist tradition, which tends to be told in the first person, and is “tightly restricted to the speaker’s personal experience… and presented not as certain information but as the most sensible explanation of what happened” (Nagel 170-71). While readers easily understand that the literary point of view is first person, belonging to Nick Carraway, “the central importance of point of view to a novel like Gatsby… often escapes them” (Cutchins 297).

Although the title of the novel bears Gatsby’s name, it is Nick’s first person point of view, and his particular way of retelling the story, that insists the novel is not about Jay Gatsby; it is about Nick. It is only through Nick’s eyes that Gatsby is revealed and through Nick’s revelations that Gatsby matters. Any insight into Gatsby’s character is fundamentally an insight into Nick’s. The novel does not begin, “Let me tell you the story of a man named Gatsby;” rather, it begins with Nick’s reflection: “In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I’ve been turning over in
my mind ever since” (Gatsby 5). We are first conditioned to Nick’s voice and narrative positioning, and Fitzgerald makes clear that Nick is the one who will be supplying all the relevant and evaluative information. Take notice of how much information Nick provides at the outset of the story: numerous contextual clues that are intended to fill in the subtle, yet very significant, aspects of Nick’s character once the story gets underway and we start getting wrapped up in the newness of New York and the wonder of Gatsby. Even once Gatsby is mentioned, he is embedded within the self-reflective justification of the conditions upon which Nick exempts Gatsby from his otherwise blanketed scorn of all things East:

...there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. This responsiveness had nothing to do with that flabby impressionability which is dignified under the same name of the “creative temperament” – it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found and is not likely I shall ever find again. No – Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men. (Gatsby 6-7)

This is a statement of transition, of recognizing the passing of time and the end of an epoch. Modernity was upon us as a nation. The virgin discovery had already taken place in the form of exploring physical territory and building an empire upon it. The new discoveries were to take place among the landscape mind. To this end, the reason we are
compelled by Gatsby’s story is because Nick is compelled by Gatsby’s story. We are compelled by Nick’s storytelling and by his revelations, which brings us back to the central importance of narrative point of view.

The novel is psychological in nature, requiring us to understand the characters and events through Nick Carraway’s perspective, and Fitzgerald takes great care in introducing us to Nick right away so that we have a solid sense of his motives and biases before we go to New York and meet Gatsby. Nick makes several striking declarations about his character that identify him as the unreliable narrator, but instead of allowing this label to control our evaluation of Nick’s or anyone else’s character, let us examine the implications of his statements. The first one he makes is “I’m inclined to reserve all judgments” (Gatsby 5). If we follow this passage what Nick is really saying is that he reserves all initial judgments, and by “reserve,” he means “to put aside,” to hold, or test. He still judges, and in fact has a habit of declaring final judgments throughout the novel, but he leaves room for doubt until enough evidence has been submitted for him to make an acceptable assessment. An acceptable assessment to whom? Well, to himself, obviously. Remember, this is Nick’s story, and we can say so with authority because the first half of the first chapter centers squarely on his background and his decision-making rationale, and how and why it was he got out to New York in the first place. We return to a Nick-centered discourse at various points in the novel which serve to pull us away from Gatsby or anyone else just long enough to readjust our vision of the world through Nick-colored lenses. This is a cognitive exercise in processing an experience, and Nick’s task
is not to tell us about a man named Gatsby, but to make sense for himself why he admired a man he would have otherwise scorned.

The key to understanding Nick’s admiration for Gatsby is also related to his habit of reserving judgment, and it is our first introduction to the novel’s central theme: “Reserving judgment is a matter of infinite hope” (Gatsby 6). The entire rest of the novel is an exercise in reserving judgment, of holding out hope that there is something good to be found among the ruins of that summer. When Nick recognized Gatsby’s gift for hope, he recognized that gift in himself. He knew if he let his capacity for hope die, he would turn out like the rest of them: cynical, abandoned, careless – and justified.

In addition to introducing the central theme of the way our capacity for hope shapes our reality, the centrality of Nick as our narrator is also significant because he is the grounding force of the novel’s emotional sphere. While it is argued that the novel does not contain a moral center, it does contain in Nick a clear point of reference. Nick's presence, his interjections and insistence on self-reflection throughout the story are what allow us to enter the magic of that summer in 1922 – not just because he is the one telling the story, but because he is our tether. His association with the middle west and the middle class is what seems to ground him more than any other character. He is safe from the swirl because he has a solid foundation that he came from and can return to. We may not be able to trust his ability to be a reliable narrator, but we trust him to keep us from going off the deep end with the others. As readers, we are the ones who balloon safely to the ground through the highs and lows of the story, just like Daisy and Jordan appeared to
do so when we meet them for the first time at the Buchanan mansion one warm, windy evening.

Although Nick is the central narrator, a critical question is why, for a book titled *The Great Gatsby*, it matters that the story is about Nick, not about the title character. It is because Nick is the only full character that exists in the novel. He is the only one with any emotional depth, with any ability for self-reflection, the only one who actually changes, and his powers of observation are what help us to understand the dangerous, addictive, yet unavoidable allure of striving for more. Significantly, Nick is the only one who does not strive for more, in a material sense. He starts to – his reason for going to New York in the first place was to take the next step in adult life and begin a career, and that career was on Wall Street, the most symbolically ambitious place in America. But he never takes flight the way others around him attempt to do. He buys a volume of bond books with the *intention* of studying... but never does. His romantic pursuits are equally ambivalent. I think it is because he senses the danger, the misguided aim, and grasps quite clearly that the influences around him are not worthy of emulating or impressing. It is clear that Nick’s quest is for self-actualization, not social acceptance. He is privileged in that regard, being that his middle class positioning allows for this level of reflection, as well as a certain level of self-control. Other characters in the novel do not have that luxury. However, as has already been acknowledged, Nick is not completely immune to the allure of the big city and all its promises, and the story that unfolds is an accounting of how even a level-headed “normal person” can't help but be captivated by the power of a single dream (*Gatsby* 5).
Much is revealed about Nick’s thought process and evaluative criteria; when he acknowledges a trait in someone else, it is often a way of acknowledging a bit of that trait in himself, or at least the potential for that trait. He claims to have been “unjustly accused of being a politician because [he] was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men,” and as a result has learned that “the intimate revelations of young men or at least the terms in which they express them are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions” (*Gatsby* 5-6). Accordingly, Nick’s “intimate revelations” must be plagiaristic as well, and he must know this, which is why he makes the observation. He is or has been obviously suppressing something – why else would he be writing in such a reflective manner – and is wary of being plagiaristic. We learn that he dislikes dishonest people and hopes not to become one himself, conceding of course, that it may not be entirely possible. In fact, Jordan accuses Nick of being dishonest and careless. Just before Nick’s return to the Middle West, he happens upon Jordan. In a psychologically revealing conversation, Jordan and Nick have the following exchange:

“Oh, and do you remember – ” she added, “ – a conversation we had once about driving a car?”

“Why, – not exactly.”

“You said a bad driver was only safe until she met another bad driver? Well, I met another bad driver, didn’t I? I mean it was careless of me to make such a wrong guess. I thought you were rather an honest, straightforward person. I thought it was your secret pride.” (*Gatsby* 186)
This, quite possibly, is the statement that has weighed on Nick’s mind all this time and is the catalyst for his accounting of the events that summer and his role in them, for although he replies that he is “too old to lie to [him]self and call it honor,” he confesses he was “angry, and half in love with her, and tremendously sorry” (*Gatsby* 186).

Of the three sound film versions that have already been produced (one silent film was made in 1926 but only a trailer for it exists now), none have been successful at conveying that central narrative perspective. Multiple flaws are noted of the 1974 Clayton & Coppola version of *Gatsby* but one in particular is its failure to “comprehend the significance of the novel’s point of view, or of Fitzgerald’s ability to evoke feelings with language” (Cutchins 297). In what most critics believe to be an egregious departure from the novel’s text, Baz Luhrmann chose to open his film using a framing device that places Nick Carraway in The Perkins Sanitarium. He is there seeking help for insomnia, anger problems, and “morbid alcoholism.” His therapist asks him to elaborate on some vague references Nick has made to a certain summer in New York, and a man named Gatsby. Nick, not comfortable yet talking about these incidents, is encouraged to “write it down.” Luhrmann’s framing device addresses the problem of point of view while turning the film into a literary event, and in effect invites us to return to the novel, rather than treating the film as a surrogate.

Luhrmann recognized the importance of Nick’s narration as vital to the telling of the story:

Essentially the problem [with Nick’s narration] is it’s got to be a lot of voice-over. Disembodied voice-over. And by that I mean you just have a voice talking. So do
you just have him read the book? The problem is the audience become very
disconnected from him. It’s great to find a reason why you actually see the
character not just speak, but you see him tell somebody. [...] We needed the
character that he reveals the story to to encourage Nick to reveal his feelings and
his relationship with Gatsby. (*Visual Poetry*)

Luhrmann’s framing device seems to make perfect sense in this regard. As was
mentioned earlier, the novel opens in a quite intimate and personal confessional style: “In
my younger and more vulnerable years, my father gave me some advice that I’ve been
turning over in my mind ever since. […] He didn’t say any more but [my father and I
have] always been unusually communicative in a reserved way and I understood that he
meant a great deal more than that” (*Gatsby* 5). The next several paragraphs read like
someone simultaneously sharing and thinking during a therapy session, or while writing
in a personal journal. These are musings on Nick’s part that indicate a deeper emotional
connection, suggesting that the speaker, Nick, is psychologically on the cusp of
addressing a subconscious revelation but is still in the process of talking around the
subject before coming at it head-on. Luhrmann explains:

This idea that [the therapist] encourages Nick… who once liked writing, but had
rejected it, to write it down … We discover that at the end of the unfinished
[Fitzgerald] novel *The Last Tycoon*, Fitzgerald had the same idea but never did it.
… [W]e created the character of the doctor so that Nick had not only someone to
confess to, but also something to write for and someone to read to. (*Visual Poetry*)
The argument for Nick’s story of that summer being a therapeutic exercise can also be located directly in the text, supported by the shift in Nick’s performativity that occurs between the third and fourth paragraphs of the first chapter. Before that point it is as though he is lost in thought, but with the beginning of the fourth paragraph he seems to have become aware of his audience: “And, after boasting about this way of my tolerance, I come to the admission that it has a limit. Conduct may be founded on the hard rock or the wet marshes but after a certain point I don’t care what it’s founded on” (Gatsby 6). He is suddenly much more assertive and moralistic and seems to have remembered what it is he is trying to accomplish.

This framing device also serves to call attention to the fragility of mental health in the 1920s. The excess and lawlessness and moral abandon that swept the nation also swept through the nation’s psyche. By the end of the decade, any sense of reality was sufficiently strained and people began to break in dramatic and tragic ways. Fitzgerald reflects upon the devastating mental toll the twenties took in his posthumously published collection of essays and journal notes, The Crack Up:

By 1927 a wide-spread neurosis began to be evident…. I remember a fellow expatriate opening a letter from a mutual friend of ours, urging him to come home and be revitalized by the hardy, bracing qualities of the native soil. It was a strong letter and it affected us both deeply, until we noticed that it was headed from a nerve sanitarium in Pennsylvania.

By this time contemporaries of mine had begun to disappear into the dark maw of violence. A classmate killed his wife and himself on Long Island, another
tumbled “accidentally” from a skyscraper in Philadelphia, another purposely from a skyscraper in New York. One was killed in a speak-easy in Chicago; another was beaten to death in a speak-easy in New York and crawled home to the Princeton Club to die; still another had his skull crushed by a maniac’s axe in an insane asylum where he was confined. These are not catastrophes that I went out of my way to look for – these were my friends; moreover, these things happened not during the depression, but during the boom. (20)

While this “wide-spread neurosis” occurred after the time frame of *The Great Gatsby*, the novel anticipates this type of reaction, and certainly individuals were beginning to experience this loss of control. It is easy to dismiss the intense psychological impact the war and the emerging twenties had on American citizens. It is hard to imagine anyone being sad, sick, or disturbed, because we often associate the twenties with roaring parties and obliviously obnoxious wealth. The truth is that the war and the sudden influx of money and technology were traumatizing and disorienting, and what we perceive as a “roaring good time” was an escape and a type of surrender to the internal chaos resonating throughout the country, manifesting itself most prominently in the East. Nick, being highly astute, perceptive, and self-reflective, admits to nearly being in such a state when he says, “When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart” (*Gatsby* 6). If we consider as well the fact that Nick was a WWI veteran, then it becomes quite evident that the story of Gatsby is Nick’s way of processing a personal and social reality that had become so
distorted from a hopelessly dissatisfying war and a rapidly deteriorating sense of morality and order.

Another way this downward spiral of mental health is represented through the oppressive confrontation with mortality. Fitzgerald’s sense of the futility of aging is palpable in the novel. At the end of the climactic scene between Tom and Gatsby over Daisy at the Plaza Hotel, Nick reveals it’s his birthday. He is thirty years old: “Before me stretched the portentous menacing road of a new decade … of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief-case of enthusiasm, thinning hair” (Gatsby 143). Prior to this reflection, while still gathered at the Buchannan’s for lunch, Daisy cries out to the group, “What’ll we do with ourselves this afternoon… and the day after that, and the next thirty years?” To which Jordan responds coolly, “Don’t be morbid” (Gatsby 125). Gatsby’s obsession with the past and Daisy’s glittering youth reiterates these fears of getting older and losing any sense of purpose, of having to face each day without anything to hope for. As Fitzgerald reflects back on the time leading up to and during the writing of The Great Gatsby, we can recognize that the novel holds the initial articulations of this sense. Again, from The Crack Up:

Of course all of life is a process of breaking down, but the blows that do the dramatic side of the work – the big sudden blows that come, or seem to come, from the outside – the ones you remember and blame things on and, in moments of weakness, tell your friends about, don’t show their effect all at once. There is another sort of blow that comes from within – that you don’t feel until it’s too late to do anything about it, until you realize with finality that in some regard you will
never be as good a man again. The first sort of breakage seems to happen quick – the second kind happens almost without your knowing it but is realized suddenly indeed. (69)

It is this anxiety of both knowing and not knowing the blows that are about to come, and the effect of being shaken from the core into a different person altogether that perhaps is why Fitzgerald knew Gatsby had to die, and why Nick had to flee New York, why he had to write it all out and make sense of it – to get at the head of all of it before the experience consumed him with its blows.

In the rapidly changing society of New York, Nick witnessed both an extremely misguided and a deflated sense of hope that fixated on the trappings of wealth and status as the means for a fulfilling existence. A particularly interesting discussion on the disorienting effect of modern society on the psyche is David Hart’s comparison of modernity with the imagery of magic in the novel and the implications of the very real psychological effect the “magic of modernity” has on both the individual and the collective consciousness of a society entering a given stage of modernity. In his essay, “Anything Can Happen: Magical Transformation and The Great Gatsby,” Hart states that “magic is the essence of modernity” and cites sociologist and theologian Peter Berger who points out “the quality of the surreal” that is present in both magic and modernity. Berger cites Jonathan Raban, author of Soft City, who “argues that modern urban life is characterized by magic and not (as is more customarily thought to be) by rationality” (41). The narrative point of view of The Great Gatsby – Nick’s – is indicative of the psychological processing of the magical appearance of modernity and its subsequent turn
or fading away to the real and the actual. Although the real always eventually surfaces, the fact of magic’s pervasiveness is what jades and jars those, like Nick, who experience for the first time the manipulable nature of reality, its unpredictable nature, and its ability to metamorphose at any moment. Each significant event that Nick recounts dissolves from a type of magical beginning into a broken illusion of disorder and disappointment. By the end of Nick’s first visit to the Buchanan’s, which began with majestic imagery of opulence and luxury, both Daisy and Tom have revealed their state of cynical restlessness and Nick leaves feeling “confused and a little disgusted” (Gatsby 24). The scene at Tom and Myrtle’s apartment evolves innocently enough from a drunken afternoon in which “everything that happened [had] a dim hazy cast over it,” full of “cheerful sun” (Gatsby 33) into a fragmented jumble of incidents in which “people disappeared, reappeared, made plans to go somewhere, and then lost each other, searched for each other, found each other a few feet away,” until finally Tom breaks the illusion by breaking Myrtle’s nose and suddenly there are “bloody towels upon the bathroom floor and women’s voices scolding, and high over the confusion a long broken wail of pain” (Gatsby 41). Gatsby’s first party begins with music and “blue gardens” where “men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars” (Gatsby 43) and ends with the destruction of a wrecked automobile and “caterwauling horns [that] had reached a crescendo,” and the lingering feelings of “sudden emptiness” and “complete isolation” (Gatsby 60). The film powerfully projects this transition of reality though the amplification of sound, by transposing Nicks words from the page onto the screen, pulling images in and out of the focus of the foreground, creating moments of acute meta-
cognition, and through dramatically shifting the mood and tone of these scenes to match the feeling of “coming down” from a chemically-induced high.

The whole event of that summer begins with the magic feeling of naïve idealism. Nick recalls, “with the sunshine and the great bursts of leaves growing on the trees – just as things grow in fast movies – I had that familiar conviction that life was beginning over again with the summer” (Gatsby 8). Nick’s narrative is his attempt to psychologically process the realization that what he “actually” experienced in New York was in fact the touch of magic, and he must now make room for the transformation of reality while still maintaining his ability to distinguish between the two. Through it all, Nick struggles to maintain his capacity for infinite hope.

What follows is an investigation of the things “that temporarily closed out [Nick’s] interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men” (Gatsby 7). The novel was Fitzgerald’s attempt to comment on the various forms of “foul dust” that existed in his time; Luhrmann not only recalls these concerns from the novel but draws up new and still existing concerns that prey on us today. Fortunately, like Fitzgerald, and like Nick, Luhrmann maintains that capacity for hope by re-presenting this story to us through a new lens, reminding us that although we are prone to being “borne back ceaselessly into the past,” that action is coupled with the hope-filled determination that “tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther…” (Gatsby 189).
PART II: SOUND, STYLE, AND SPEED

THE SENSORY EXPERIENCE OF NICK’S NEW YORK

At the core of Fitzgerald’s novel is evocative, imagistic prose that appeals deeply to our senses. It is one of the reasons the novel is so tempting to filmmakers – all those colors and sounds and places rushing and eddying in and out of Nick’s memory just begging to be brought to life. Yet successfully adapting the text has proven to be as elusive a task as painting a dream. It is imperative that the three-dimensional effect of Luhrmann’s adaptation not be glossed over as merely an experiment in modern technology. Many viewers who saw the film in 3-D reported its dizzying, intrusive effect, and the feeling of sensory overload. It is true, the film seen in 3-D has the potential to create an uncomfortable, even nauseating experience at times. But this is precisely what Nick began to experience as he became more entangled in the new world of New York. A common adage of English teachers is that if you dislike a novel, the author is probably doing his job right. Meaning, whenever one experiences discomfort or disgust with what she is reading, it means the author is tapping in to a deeply held value, belief, or ideology that the reader does not want to have challenged. It means the reader is being forced to experience the world in a way she is unaccustomed to and has to spend time orienting herself to a different perspective. It also means the reader may be experiencing an empathetic response to characters who are also experiencing hardship. The same logic should hold true for film.
The rise of the new movie industry during the twenties provides necessary context for understanding the significance of Luhrmann’s choice to film in 3-D. “The movies… came into their own,” writes Lehan in a chapter on the historical context of *The Great Gatsby*, “when directors like D.E. Griffith moved away from the fixed camera and used innovative camera techniques, including the close-up, the long shot, the fade-in and fade-out, and the high- and low-angle shots” (7-8). Fitzgerald would have probably considered Luhrmann’s production too gaudy; Fitzgerald was actually critical of the movies for their inability to capture the subtlety and complexity of the written word. Yet, the “overdone” production quality of the film is a prime example of one of those grating and lurid components of New York in the twenties that “preyed on Gatsby” and eventually disgusted Nick (*Gatsby* 6). Additionally, it is precisely the bright, brash, intense, loud, over-the-top effect that Luhrmann’s 3-D technology provides that allows viewers to ponder more thoughtfully the surreal events Nick experiences – events which drive him to such a level of disgust for careless people, and which cause him to reserve judgment of Gatsby.

Daniel Hart locates Gatsby and his New York in the realm of modern magic and surrealism. The surrealist effect of the film lends itself to this thread, translating directly to the visual, aural, and kinetic fields of images and concepts that appear abstractly in the novel. Hart’s examples of magic imagery, such as Daisy and Jordan at the Buchanan mansion “rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house” (*Gatsby* 12); The Buchanan’s majestic estate with animated landscape (“the lawn started at the beach and ran toward the front door... jumping over sundials...
drifting up the side…) (*Gatsby* 11); the negroes in the limousine, “the yolks of their eyeballs roll[ing] toward [Nick] in haughty rivalry” support Hart’s claim and highlight the confused perspective that Nick works to make sense of (*Gatsby* 73). Even examples that are less magical still convey a distorted or confused sense of reality. Conflation of a story with, or the depiction of life versus, the “actual” is expressed through minor characters, such as the man from whom Myrtle buys her dog, who “bore an absurd resemblance to John D. Rockefeller” (*Gatsby* 31) and through admissions like Nick’s that his family’s tradition is to claim descendancy from the Dukes of Buccleuch, “but the actual founder of my line was my grandfather’s brother” (*Gatsby* 7). It is this intentional acknowledgement of the actual that Hart says “excludes Nick from the magical Gatsby world” (Hart 39). Indeed, it is Nick’s astute ability to differentiate between the actual and the magical that is the impetus for his telling the story of Gatsby in the first place, and which contribute to Nick’s ability to reserve judgment and maintain hope that everything will turn out all right.

In the following sections I will explore Luhrmann’s treatment of sound, style, and speed for new ways in which to approach the novel. Sound incorporates the lyric quality of Fitzgerald’s writing, specific references to music, sound imagery, and sonic experience. Style refers to manner of dress, preferences or idiosyncrasies of personal taste among the characters, and the general popular trends in design, art, and culture. Finally, speed relates directly to the proliferation of the automobile, the sense of individual autonomy, freedom, and social recklessness that ensued, and the furious onset of technology and modernity that contributed to a sense of dissociation evident in the blur
and chaos of Nick’s entry upon and egress from New York. All three of these modes contribute to a sense of blurred vagueness, chaos, superficiality, or impression of feeling (versus articulation of the object), which in turn affect the need for Nick to resolve his conflicting experience via a retrospective analysis.

**Sound: Low, Thrilling Voices and Yellow Cocktail Music**

The aural landscape of *The Great Gatsby* is an integral force that powerfully shapes the reader’s experience. In the absence of actual physical sound, the novel’s prose invokes the effect of a movie soundtrack through its heavy inclusion of aural imagery in the way of voices (of individual characters and in group conversation), sounds made by inanimate objects (curtains, utensils, telephone rings, car engines), and music (jazz compositions, wedding marches, song lyrics). Sound conveys meaning in a special way in the novel: it transforms reality and is transformed by its environment, taking on colors and creating forms. It contributes to the magic of Gatsby’s parties and their surreal effect; and it produces the hypnotizing effect Daisy has on men. The lyric quality of Fitzgerald’s prose is what captivates many of the novel’s readers – it is beautiful, it is flowing, it is soothing; it is romantic and often reads like a poem.

From the moment we step into the world of New York in 1922, we enter a world of sound. Nick rents his house “on that slender riotous island” (*Gatsby* 9). Tom’s speaking voice was “a gruff husky tenor” with “a touch of paternal contempt in it” (*Gatsby* 11). A “snub-nosed motorboat” at the Buchanan mansion bumps “the tide offshore,” contributing background noise to the scene (*Gatsby* 12). We have the “whip
and snap of the curtains and the groan of a picture on the wall. Then… a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows” (*Gatsby* 12). There is Daisy, who “laughed, an absurd charming little laugh, and [Nick] laughed too” (*Gatsby* 13). Nick’s first words to Daisy are a stutter: “I’m p-paralyzed with happiness” (*Gatsby* 13). And we experience Daisy’s famous voice:

She hinted in a murmur… (I’ve heard it said that Daisy’s murmur was only to make people lean toward her; an irrelevant criticism that made it no less charming)... [and] began to ask me questions in her low, thrilling voice. It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again… there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered “Listen,” a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there are gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour. (*Gatsby* 13-14).

We hear the sounds of conversation at the dinner table: “Sometimes [Daisy] and Miss Baker talked at once, unobtrusively and with a bantering inconsequence that was never quite chatter, that was as cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes in the absence of all desire” (*Gatsby* 16-17). And then, the telephone call: “When, almost immediately, the telephone rang inside and the butler left the porch Daisy seized upon the momentary interruption and leaned toward [Nick]... [She] whispered enthusiastically” secrets about the butler; “her voice compelled [Nick] forward breathlessly as [he] listened” (*Gatsby* 18). Initially, the inclusion of sound serves to underscore Nick’s
powers of observation, for if Nick is recording what he hears, it means he is listening closely and paying attention.

At the same time, though, there is an abstract quality of sound that creates a dreamy feeling when reading. When we have a very vivid dream we can "see" it clearly internally, but when we try to actually describe it to someone or write it down or try to see it outside of its emotionally associative context, concrete descriptions elude us. They vanish. Symbolically, sounds work on us through the prose on a subconscious level to create the feeling of being in a dream, of not being able to completely articulate what one is hearing or experiencing and thus mimics in an imposed act of solidarity Nick’s struggle to accurately recall the past and his feelings toward it.

One of the most interesting sounds that stands out is the murmur – there is a lot of murmuring in the novel in general, but especially from Daisy, who of course, is Gatsby’s dream to be realized. We have already heard some of Daisy’s murmuring; it continues at the initial Buchanan dinner: “the butler came back and murmured something close to Tom’s ear whereupon Tom frowned, pushed back his chair and without a word went inside. As if his absence quickened something within her, Daisy leaned forward again, her voice glowing and singing” (Gatsby 19). Later, when Nick and Jordan are alone at the table, we are drawn to more murmurs: “I was about to speak when [Jordan] sat up alertly and said ‘Sh!’ in a warning voice. A subdued impassioned murmur was audible in the room beyond and Miss Baker leaned forward, unashamed, trying to hear. The murmur trembled on the verge of coherence, sank down, mounted excitedly and ceased altogether” (Gatsby 19). Finally toward the end of the evening, “Tom and Miss Baker sat
at either end of the long couch and she read aloud to him from the ‘Saturday Evening Post’ – the words, murmurous and uninflected, running together in a soothing tune” (Gatsby 22). The murmur motif is reiterated in the gossip and hearsay surrounding Gatsby’s identity and source of wealth. Because Nick’s summer begins with needing to be concerned with inaudible information, contributing to his sense of confusion and distortion, the sonic experience of the novel is made all the more significant.

Sound also appears to have the literal function of being able to “call” things into being, another aspect of its transformative power. It certainly is the impetus for the commencement of Gatsby’s parties:

By seven o’clock the orchestra has arrived – no thin five piece affair but a whole pit full of oboes and trombones and saxophones and viols and cornets and piccolos and low and high drums. [...] The bar is in full swing and floating rounds of cocktails permeate the garden outside until the air is alive with chatter and laughter and casual innuendo and introductions forgotten on the spot and enthusiastic meetings between women who never knew each other’s names.

The lights grow brighter as the earth lurches away from the sun and now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music and the opera of voices pitches a key higher. Laughter is easier, minute by minute, spilled with prodigality, tipped out at a cheerful word. [...] 

Suddenly one of these gypsies in trembling opal seizes a cocktail out of the air, dumps it down for courage and moving her hands like Frisco dances out alone on the canvas platform. A momentary hush; the orchestra leader varies his
rhythm obligingly for her and there is a burst of chatter as the erroneous new goes around that she is Gilda Gray’s understudy from the “Follies.” The party has begun. (Gatsby 44-45).

Just a while later, Nick describes the Englishmen who spoke “in low earnest voices to solid and prosperous Americans… agonizingly aware of the easy money in the vicinity and convinced that it was theirs for a few words in the right key” (Gatsby 46). This description evokes the sentiment of “ask and you shall receive,” and in this context obtaining money becomes a linguistic event. Aural imagery coupled with the creative power of sound contributes to Nick’s sense of wonder, causing him to reserve judgment, thus relying on his store of infinite hope.

Sound is evocative and explicit references to music in the novel and the film have the effect of conjuring a feeling, a "sense" – that gravitational pull toward the object of desire. It is what Gatsby feels for Daisy, what Americans feel for wealth or success, what the Dutch sailors felt when exploring the New World. When actual music and lyrics are present, we get pulled into the cultural milieu of the symbolic referent. Luhrmann takes advantage of the layering effect of 3-D to infuse the referential significance of opticals with melody or sound, in a combination he calls “poetic glue.” “Poetic glue is a combination of Fitzgerald’s actual words and the images that he’s trying to describe,” explains Luhrmann. “As well as that, we layer on top of that scene upon scene upon scene. In essence, they’re like the old silent film montages but they’re in 3-D. They’ve got three levels and layers. And through it we flowed images and words, and it’s bound together by voice and music. So it’s a kind of little poem that joins a very ordinary
scene… a cinematic poem, I guess” (“Visual Poetry”). A prime, albeit slightly clichéd, example of music carrying loaded symbolic reference in the film is the moment Gatsby is finally revealed on screen. In the buildup to the introduction of our eponymous character, Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* is tinkling in the background. Although the song was not performed until 1924, and therefore slightly anachronistic to the events of that summer of 1922, since its debut and consequent success, virtually every American can identify that piece and connect with it, at least subconsciously, as integral to our national cultural heritage. While Luhrmann was most likely going for the immediate accessibility of the song, and its dramatic crescendo that fits perfectly with the revelation of our story’s hero, the association of that particular song with Gatsby speaks to the novel’s treatment of the American dream, and to current scholarship regarding nation, race, and identity.

Gershwin, describing his composition process, states: “I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness” (Cowen). The novel takes up each of these elements and weaves them through the fabric of the entire narrative, making this piece an obvious choice for a modern film adaptation. The film, through the use of that song at that particular moment, not only takes up these same elements, but takes our treatment of them to another level, tying them directly to our first visual impression of Gatsby, rather than subtly weaving them through the narrative. Our attention is focused more acutely on Gatsby’s physical appearance as Nick’s narrative voice-over repeats part of this well-known description of Gatsby:
It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced – or seemed to face – the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just so far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. (Gatsby 52-3)

While there is no specific musical accompaniment to this passage in the novel, save the general party music in the background that we can assume is a combination of popular dance music and jazz, the soundtrack of the film heightens the spectacularly confusing nature of Gatsby’s presence, mansion, and party, sonically sending forth the message, “this is America, where anything is possible.”

The aural connection made in the film between jazz and hip hop also elicits a heightened sense of the American Dream, especially in regards to reinvention and reaching beyond the destiny initially prescribed by society. Although there is a tremendous amount that could be said about the inclusion of jazz in the novel – after all, the author is the man who coined the phrase “The Jazz Age” – my aim is to focus on the ways Luhrmann’s twenty-first century adaptation bring us back to the novel for new readings. Rather than discuss the specific details of 1920s jazz references, I have chosen to examine the way the film deviates from more historically accurate musical choices. I explore the effects of imposing a contemporary music genre – hip hop – onto the narrative and how the genre both reinforces the novel’s central themes and informs new
readings of the text. Specifically, I argue that the use of hip hop in the film underscores the novel’s theme of enduring hope by reconnecting us to the spirit of the American Dream, the allure and wonder of New York, and the sonic energy of jazz. In her October 2013 article “Fade to Black, Old Sport: How Hip Hop Amplifies Baz Luhrmann’s *The Great Gatsby,*” Regina Bradley investigates the “cultural allure” of Fitzgerald’s novel, particularly in light of the hype surrounding Luhrmann’s adaptation. Hip hop legend Jay-Z not only executive produced the soundtrack, but the film as well. Not surprisingly then, the soundtrack draws heavily on hip hop, and features four tracks by Jay-Z. Although critics, again, decried the soundtrack for its tastelessness and lack of creativity and originality, what has been largely overlooked, until now, is the underlying subtext of the film’s music, significantly the hip hop tracks. I’ll be the first to concede, the soundtrack as an album is not especially spectacular; however, Luhrmann’s decision to cast Jay-Z as an executive producer and feature soundtrack artist reveals much about why and how we continue to be “born back” to this enduring tale.

Bradley points out Luhrmann’s regular use of modern music to deliver “sonic cues of contemporary (youth) popular culture,” as in his adaptation of *Romeo + Juliet* and his turn-of-the-century musical extravaganza *Moulin Rouge!* (1). In the case of *Gatsby,* Bradley explains how Luhrmann took it “up a notch, looking to hip hop culture as a bridge between the roar of the 1920s and the noise of the present” (2). I agree. Hip hop functions significantly in this film not only to make the movie hip and draw correlations to jazz as being a “cool” underground, African-American genre, but also to give a pulse to the elusiveness of the American Dream.
Hip hop connects us sonically to the feel and energy of jazz, which Fitzgerald relied upon to fuse visual, tactile, and aural imagery. These sensations conflated with Nick’s perception of reality, contributing to his sense of awe and wonder. “The question for me in approaching Gatsby,” explains Luhrmann in an interview with Rolling Stone, “was how to elicit from our audience the same level of excitement and pop cultural immediacy toward the world that Fitzgerald did for his audience… and in our age, the energy of jazz is caught up in the energy of hip hop” (Blistein). We can feel that energy and the blending of senses in Fitzgerald’s description of Gatsby’s parties. Consider again the passage referred to previously which begins “By seven o’clock the orchestra has arrived” (Gatsby 44). The syntax of the next three paragraphs pulses and overflows in much the same way hip hop’s rhythmic beats and often syntactically complex lyrics do, linking and wrapping images with conjunctions and minimal punctuation the way poetry wraps and layers images with line and stanza breaks.

Luhrmann effectively connects hip hop to the pulsing energy of urban, expanding, money-hungry, boundary-Pushing New York when we see it for the first time through Nick’s memory of that summer. Less than five minutes into the film, we are transported back to New York City, 1922. As twenties-era looking footage shows streets overflowing with people and cars, stacks of money growing, scantily clad flappers dancing, and bottles of bootleg liquor spilling over, Nick recounts how that summer, “the tempo of the city approached hysteria. The stocks reached record peaks and Wall Street boomed in steady golden roar; the parties were bigger… the morals were looser, and the ban on alcohol had backfired, making the liquor cheaper” (The Great Gatsby). We visually free
fall from the top of a skyscraper to meet Nick in the middle of a bustling New York sidewalk about to embark on his new adventure, and he concludes, “Wall Street was luring the young and ambitious – and I was one of them” (*The Great Gatsby*). The sonic accompaniment to this scene is Jay-Z and Kanye West’s “No Church in the Wild,” a bass-heavy, militaristic, electric track off their album *Watch the Throne*. Several lines from the first verse are included in that montage: “Tears on the mausoleum floor/ Blood stains the coliseum doors/ Lies on the lips of a priest/ Thanksgiving disguised as a feast/ Rollin’ in the Rolls-Royce Corniche…” (Carter). The scene benefits from the pulsing beat, the embedded symbolism of hip hop as modern, cool, and underground, and the implications of the lyrical message (intentional or not) which has the potential to reach its associations all the way back to the original album; *Watch the Throne* was released to critical acclaim in 2011, meaning viewers familiar with Jay-Z would likely have already been familiar with the song and the album. The soundtrack transitions seamlessly to a traditional sounding jazz ditty and we move from the hustle and bustle of the city to Nick’s modest bungalow in West Egg. This is an interesting transition in that it signals two very important distinctions: first, that Nick is not associated with hip hop’s “cool,” and second that jazz is no longer modern in the same sense it was during the novel’s initial release.

Today, the term “jazz” is not as synonymous with “black” and the contemporary definition of “cool” as “hip hop” is. There really have only been two successful white hip hop artists – New York based group Beastie Boys and Detroit rapper Marshall Mathers (also known as “Eminem”) – to gain both mainstream popularity and genre credibility
since hip hop’s inception. Jazz, as a genre, has reached such a widespread level of acceptance among mainstream white audiences that it no longer carries the urban underground connotation it once did. In fact, to be a jazz enthusiast these days often implies one is cultured and has been educated according to conventional middle- or upper-class standards. It seems imperative then that Luhrmann forego historical accuracy in exchange for the immediacy of hip hop. Whereas a reader can pause the action of the novel to look up lists of referential names, allusions to popular novels, brands, and movies, and current events of the twenties, a film viewer doesn’t have that option. We don’t get much more explicit historical grounding from the film beyond that opening scene. The rest is implied, in this case through the soundtrack. Nick’s commentary is an apt summation of the atmosphere of the twenties, however it only takes up a few minutes of the entire film. In the introduction to The Lawless Decade: A Pictorial History of the Roaring Twenties, author Paul Sann articulates more fully the violence and chaos of the era:

The law that had the greatest impact on the wide and wonderful land evoked the least obedience from the people. Liquor—good, bad, indifferent or deadly—flowed like a giant waterfall all during the thirteen wobbly years of the thing Herbert Hoover called "an experiment ... noble in purpose." But the bootlegger was not alone; he dealt only in the happy juice. His errands made Prohibition a sopping-wet farce but there were many other laws ground into the dust during the vibrant and tumultuous years from the Armistice to Repeal.
Criminal laws, moral laws, civil laws, social laws, political laws, religious laws—name them.

The convulsive shocks of The Twenties left very little unturned as the once-sacred barriers of tradition and custom were broken down. For better or worse, the populace would never again be inhibited by its own past. All the old playing rules went out of the book.

If contemporary viewers do not truly understand what was happening to the country’s sense of law and order, then understanding how jazz factored into the sonic fabric of the age – and the novel – is also sometimes hard to grasp. If we can understand the literal unraveling of the conventions of the past, then Nick’s desire for “a sort of moral attention” and Gatsby’s frenzied attempt to provide the things he assumes Daisy wants can be felt more emphatically in the composition of the novel, and the novel’s musicality takes on even more significance. Nick is able reflect on these events throughout the duration of the novel, but a song like “No Church in the Wild,” with its embedded violent symbolism, swiftly delivers the sense of widespread moral corruption that reigned during the twenties without slowing down the pace of the movie’s action.

One of the most intriguing scenes in both the novel and the film is the one in which Gatsby drives Nick over the Queensboro Bridge. It is a scene filled with ostensibly tall tales about Gatsby’s past, but that Gatsby, over the course of the drive, manages to validate with evidence of photos and medals. It is this scene which calls to mind for Nick the wonder and possibility that New York offers, and the scene that ends with Nick’s declaration that “anything can happen…. Even Gatsby can happen” (Gatsby 73).
Contributing to Nick’s sense of awe and wonder at the world around him are Gatsby’s very existence, the view of the city from the bridge, and a conspicuous limousine “driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish Negroes” (Gatsby 73). The inclusion of this limousine and its occupants has always been a curious one for scholars – the explicit mention of “Negroes” is found nowhere else in the novel, and Nick’s only reaction to the observation is to laugh “aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry” (Gatsby 73). The meaning of this detail is ambiguous at best. Yet Luhrmann does something to this scene that provides the most immediately plausible interpretation, while maintaining the text’s original ambiguity. In the novel, Nick describes their crossing over the bridge:

“Over the great bridge, with the sunlight through the girders making a constant flicker upon the moving cars, with the city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps all built with a wish out of non-olfactory money. The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty of the world. […] As we crossed Blackwells Island a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish Negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry.

“Anything can happen now that we’ve slid over this bridge,” I thought; “anything at all….”

Even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder. (Gatsby 73)
As Bradley notes, “the novel does not describe a sonic accompaniment to Carraway’s observation of the black folks in the limousine, [but] there is an inherent understanding of the ‘modish’ fashion of the black folks as jazzy, as cool” (5). In the film, a light jazz tune follows Nick and Gatsby from West Egg and onto the bridge. Immediately, the volume is amplified and the song switches to Jay-Z’s “Izzo (H.O.V.A.)” as the limousine comes into view. The shot slows down as they pass Gatsby’s car and the sense of wonder that Nick has been experiencing transfers automatically to the stylish partygoers. The music fades as the camera closes in and picks up the sound of the “buck” snapping his fingers at the chauffeur for more champagne. The scene is couched between the voiced-over statements “By the time we reached the bridge I was impossibly confused,” and, after the fingers snap, “I didn’t know what to think,” followed by the unmistakable crescendo of “Rhapsody in Blue” as Nick ponders the potential of life (The Great Gatsby).

While the sonic accompaniment is appropriately matched to the scene’s action and mood, the most fascinating aspect of Luhrmann’s rendition is that the inclusion of hip hop, in particular the track “Izzo,” at once makes sense of the “haughty rivalry” that is perhaps too subtly suggested at in Fitzgerald’s prose. From the previously acknowledged symbolism of the hip hop genre, to the song itself and Jay-Z as rapper and executive producer, everything about this scene signifies the narrative of the American Dream, made even more impactful by the fact that the dream is associated with African Americans. “Izzo (H.O.V.A.)” debuted in 2001 and became Jay-Z’s first top ten single on the Billboard 100. The track deals with his success as a drug dealer, his struggles with the record industry, and growing up in the projects. The song is one of his most identifiable
and well-known party anthems. In essence, the selection of this track is a reference to
Jay-Z’s rags-to-riches rise to fame, and his status in mainstream American culture, which
emulates the black limousine riders.

Since the release of “Izzo,” Jay-Z has become one of the most successful
businessmen in America, arguably in the world. According to Empire State of Mind, the
unauthorized biography of Jay-Z’s rise to fame by Zack O’Malley Greenburg, “In
November 2009, Newsweek declared Jay-Z the fourth most important newly minted
tycoon of the decade, between hedge fund king John Paulson and Facebook founder
Mark Zuckerberg” (6). One of Jay-Z’s famous lines is, “I’m not a businessman – I’m a
business, man” (Greenburg 6). He is a rapper, producer, entrepreneur, and sports agent.
He is also the self-proclaimed “ambassador of New York” – and you would be hard
pressed to find anyone who disagrees. Of his single “Empire State of Mind,” released in
2009 as a tribute to 9/11, Atlantic Records chief executive Craig Kallman says, “Jay-Z
did what most would consider implausible – create an anthem as important to New York
as Frank Sinatra’s ‘New York, New York’ … His version is exhilaratingly original and
fresh, and captures the essence of today’s Big Apple” (Greenburg 5-6). Not only has Jay-
Z become a successful artist and entrepreneur, he has become a national cultural icon; he
even endorsed Barack Obama for the 2012 presidential elections. Def Jam Records
founder Russell Simmons affirms Jay-Z’s cultural clout: “Jay-Z helped change the face of
America and its racial politics…. Without hip hop there is no Barack Obama, and without
Jay-Z, hip hop wouldn’t be where it is today” (Greenburg 6). By casting Jay-Z as an
executive producer of the film, soundtrack, and as a feature artist, Luhrmann effectively
delivers a symbolically loaded message in the span of approximately twenty seconds, as most twenty-first century audience members will bring this information with them when recognizing a track like “Izzo” in a film released in 2013. Gatsby’s similar rise to American celebrity is paralleled here, yes, but the “haughty rivalry” also means he has competition, from whom Nick may have previously assumed would be an unlikely opponent – the African American male. Indeed, observing this scene from Gatsby’s opulent car in 1922, it certainly would seem as if anything was possible.

*Style: Beyond the Dreams of Castile*

If Luhrmann’s film failed the critics in delivering a compelling screenplay, it succeeded in producing gorgeous, award winning costumes. Producer, costume and production designer Catherine Martin outdid herself, partnering with designers like Prada, Tiffany & Co., Fogal, and Brooks Brothers to create a breathtaking tableau of elegance, decadence, and desire (“Razzle Dazzle”). Of all the references to contemporary visual culture in *The Great Gatsby*, those related to style, my inclusive term for clothing and hairstyle fashions, architectural design, and interior decor, help to underscore the sense of hope many Americans have for becoming successful and being accepted. Clothing assists in defining personal image by indicating class, wealth, belonging to a group, and so forth. This was certainly the case for Gatsby, who was convinced he could impress Daisy and win her back by reinventing himself into a dapper, finely dressed millionaire. He almost succeeds.
The filmic treatment of style functions as more than a visual prop. “In terms of telling the story of The Great Gatsby,” says Martin in a featurette on the film’s fashion, “[Luhrmann] really wanted to respect the historical background milieu in which the story is set. However, he also wanted it to feel incredibly contemporary and also be able to… connect with a modern audience who weren’t versed in all of the nuances of the culture of the 1920s” (“Razzle Dazzle”). As a result of Martin’s styling, the costuming of the film carries an enormous amount of symbolic weight in a way that perhaps the novel is not as effective at delivering any longer, at least not for twenty-first century readers. Textual references to specific styles and the detailed nuances of fabric or color can be accurately generalized as “fancy,” “stylish,” or “expensive” characteristics, but they may not convey the cultural relevancy of wearing a certain style with as much impact. Martin’s embellishment of traditional Brooks Brothers and Tiffany’s designs, and the retro-inspired designs of contemporary designer Prada may not be entirely historically accurate, but they do accurately capture the social and cultural significance of such fashions, working on the audience in the same way the novel’s references did. Rather than detract from the historical accuracy of the era, Martin points out how the styling emphasizes many of the popular styles of the twenties that are difficult to visualize as time moves forward:

Miuccia Prada… really wanted to know how we justified the anachronistic choice of this collaboration. Both Baz and I felt very strongly that Prada, as a brand and as a design force, looks to the past for a lot of its inspiration, but it’s always done in a way that looks completely towards the future. […] I think it’s the perfect
mixture of old and new of beauty and elegance and modernity all coming together in a kind of fusion of sparkle. So, [Prada] uses all these historical references, but in an unexpected and modern way, and that was very much the spirit of the twenties. And, it [fit] in… with the way Baz wanted to tell this story… it had absolutely contemporary relevance but [was] also… very rooted in its historical basis. (Razzle Dazzle)

The effect is that everyone who sees these elaborate costumes gains a better understanding of what it meant to be able to wear such a dress, or how, exactly Gatsby’s pink suit differed from the type of suit worn by someone like Tom.

While the film’s treatment of fashion may not render as many new readings of the novel, Martin’s emphasis on fashion and her attention to detail remind us that the references to style in the novel are not just there to make Nick’s New York pretty to look at; they carry thematic significance. The story of Nick’s New York begins and ends with fashion, and the film’s styling impressively brings to life important attributes of New York and its characters. One of Nick’s first defining descriptions that situates him within New York is his “weather beaten cardboard bungalow” and his “old Dodge,” followed by the assertion that he lived in “the less fashionable of the two” Eggs (Gatsby 8-9). Nick immediately contrasts his home with that of his neighbor’s, “a factual imitation of some Hotel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool and more than forty acres of lawn and gardens” (Gatsby 9). Nick’s own house, by comparison, “was an eye-sore” (Gatsby 9).
Nick turns our gaze then “across the courtesy bay” where “the white palaces of fashionable East Egg glittered along the water,” and our story begins (Gatsby 10). The last interaction Nick has with anyone from that summer is a chance meeting with Tom, in front of a jewelry store window. When they depart, Tom enters the store “to buy a pearl necklace – or perhaps only a pair of cuff buttons,” and they are rid of each other forever (Gatsby 188).

The story of New York also begins and ends with the Buchanans, and their colossal testament to class and belonging in the form of beautiful architecture, beautiful decor, and beautiful clothes and jewelry. After a brief synopsis of Nick’s relationship to the Buchanans (Daisy was his third cousin; he’d gone to New Haven with Tom), which serves as a preview of the grandeur and breathlessness to come, Nick parts the curtain and we enter the world of the East. Before us towers an elaborate “cheerful red and white
Gregorian Colonial mansion overlooking the bay” with a lawn that stretches a quarter mile from beach to front door, sundials, brick walls, “burning gardens,” “a line of French windows, glowing… with reflected gold… and Tom Buchanan in riding clothes was standing with his legs apart on the front porch” (Gatsby11). Nick says it was Gatsby “who represented everything for which [he has] an unaffected scorn;” Gatsby may have represented those things, but the Buchanans were the legitimate embodiment of them (Gatsby 6). The Buchanans with their built-in, carefully bred, privileged and careless disregard for anyone who is not inherently from the same stock – they are what “preyed on Gatsby” (Gatsby 6). The entire introduction to the Tom Buchanans is a descriptive sandwich of architectural dazzle and carefully tailored fabrics. It is a sensual onslaught of all the things money can be.

Fig. 2 The Buchanan Mansion, as Envisioned by Baz Luhrmann. Source: ArchitechturalDigest.com, 2013. Web.
The film’s visual representations of style help to clarify details in the novel that a twenty-first century reader may not readily pick up on. For instance, Daisy’s memorable reaction to Gatsby’s wardrobe in chapter five (“I’ve never seen such beautiful shirts before”) may seem like an odd way to express the conflicting emotions that were working on her in that moment. It is a powerful scene, and in the film Gatsby has excitedly gotten caught up in showing Daisy his mansion and all the wealth he has accumulated just for her. We see his wardrobe, a towering wall of shelves stacked with every imaginable color of shirt. He tosses one shirt after another over the closet railing down onto Daisy who gasps at the bright colors, bold patterns, and rich textures. Here is how the novel describes the scene:

Recovering himself in a minute he opened for us two hulking patent cabinets which held his massed suits and dressing gowns and ties, and his shirts piled like bricks in stacks a dozen high.

“I’ve got a man in England who buys me clothes. He sends over a selection of things at the beginning of each season, spring and fall.”

He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them one by one before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher – shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple green and lavender and faint orange with monograms of Indian blue. Suddenly with a strained sound Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily.
“They’re such beautiful shirts,” she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. “It makes me sad because I’ve never seen such – such beautiful shirts before.” (Gatsby 97-98)

What is it about the shirts, exactly, that triggers her response? In his article “The Great Gatsby and the Arrow Collar Man,” Thomas Dilworth argues Gatsby is a narrative articulation of the figure in the iconic 1920s Arrow Collar advertisement campaign. The campaign was one of the most successful in advertising history, and the first to employ the marketing of a persona rather than emphasize the product (the next such successful campaign would not appear until Philip Morris’s equally iconic Marlboro Man came along in the 1960s and ‘70s). Created by J.C. Lyendecker, the Arrow Collar Man was “an extremely handsome, well-knit, well-off, well-groomed” figure, and “his expression is almost always calm, introspective, or blasé – the 1920s equivalent of ‘cool’” (Dilworth 83). In chapter seven Daisy admits to being in love with Gatsby by saying, “You always look so cool… You resemble the advertisement of the man –” which Dilworth cites as additional support for his Gatsby - Arrow Collar Man connection (Gatsby 125).

Fitzgerald’s description of Gatsby plays up the idea of the Arrow Collar Man, who “is often in the company of a pretty girl…. Essentially a pinup boy, [he is] an icon of flawless, fashionable American masculinity…. The Arrow Collar Man was the ideal of many [of Fitzgerald’s] contemporary readers” as well as those who didn’t read, but flipped through magazines, played cards, saw posters or billboards – people like Myrtle Wilson (Dilworth 84). Tom Buchanan also embodies the Arrow Collar Man ideal, and Dilworth points out that the major difference between Gatsby and Buchanan is a surface-
level detail, though it is not shallow in significance. Tom, because of his background of old money and good breeding carries himself with a sense of entitlement and confidence that Gatsby lacks. This discrepancy is visible in several scenes, often signaled by Gatsby’s nervous tapping or forced, stylized speech. Jay Gatsby may look like the Arrow Collar Man, but Tom Buchanan is that man (Dilworth 85).

The association of Gatsby with the Arrow Collar Man reinforces the concept that “clothes make the man,” that by wearing the right suit, joining the right clubs, and going to the right parties, one can become successful, handsome, and popular. Myrtle Wilson has similar aspirations for acceptance in the upper circles of society, and the film plays up her vivid, flamboyant style which juxtaposes dramatically with Daisy’s and Jordan’s elegant and cool presence. Martin’s collaboration in the film with traditional and modern designers is a testament to the enduring cultural relevance of style in any era, but it also celebrates the twenties as the birth of twenty-first century fashion. As much as style functions symbolically to indicate class and social status, it also contributes to the modern, exciting, sexually liberated feel of the Roaring Twenties. In terms of style being indicative of changes in social attitudes, Myrtle’s character presents a complex and conflicting paradox of the times. While her character perhaps best reflects the burgeoning freedom of the new fashion trends, at the same time, her desperate and tragic story arc reveals the limits and conditional nature of fashion’s ability to liberate. In her novel Fashion and its Social Agendas, Diana Crane discusses influences on the evolution of women’s fashion from the Middle Ages into the twentieth century. It used to be the case that women’s fashion choices were dictated by their socio-economic status,
either because of sumptuary laws, common in the Middle Ages, that “specified the types of material and ornaments that could be used by members of different social classes” or because activities engaged in by members of specific classes determined the necessity of wearing certain styles over others (4). In the advent of post-industrial society, however, “a person has unparalleled freedom to construct new identities outside the political spheres; social identity is no longer based entirely on economic status” (Crane 10). While this latter statement is generally true, especially for twenty-first century readers, the spherical freedom enjoyed today had not yet evolved enough for a woman like Myrtle to fully appreciate. Myrtle’s style certainly is a matter of personal expression and identification, yet it is mostly an expression of economic and social aspiration – who and what she wants to be – as opposed to an identification with who she really is, or is allowed to be. Myrtle’s style choices reveal a desire to live a life beyond her current social position, evidenced by her interest in celebrity tabloids, her preference for the newer, colorful taxicabs (she lets several cabs pass before choosing a fashionable lavender one to take her, Tom, and Nick to her apartment in New York), her request for a trendy pet dog, and her seductive body-conscious clothing that sets her apart from the grey ash of her domestic life. Her style is an attempt to transform her reality by announcing that she does not identify with the socio-economic world of her husband, George. Although Tom provides her an escape from the Valley of Ashes, it is only temporary, for even in her New York apartment her common social placement prevails. The film’s carnivalesque styling of Myrtle’s apartment, her guests, and the party that ensues there that afternoon makes blatantly clear the discrepancy between the worlds she
and Tom inhabit, inviting the investigation of the role of fashion and narratives of gender and identity performativity. Myrtle represents the emerging modern woman, yet she is distasteful, vulgar, sexually explicit, and in the end, Myrtle dies. The social world of the twenties was rapidly changing, but traditional barriers still existed. Like Gatsby, Myrtle believes she can one day manage a position in New York’s upper society; while she may gain temporary access, she will never be fully integrated.

Fig. 3 Isla Fischer as Myrtle. Source: Collider.com, 2014. Web.

Reflecting back on our introduction to Tom in his riding clothes, the image of the Arrow Collar Man takes hold once again. Contrasted with Myrtle and Gatsby’s contrived attempts at gaining acceptance through style, Tom effortlessly oozes confidence and entitlement: “Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of that body – he seemed to fill those glistening boots until he strained the top lacing and you could see a great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved
under his thin coat” (Gatsby 11). We are given an account of Tom’s relationship with his clothing – or rather, the relationship Tom’s body has with his clothing – before we actually see or hear Tom in action. Here is where the sharp yet subtle contrast between Tom and Daisy’s East and Nick and Gatsby’s West begins to be articulated. Whereas Tom commands the clothes to change – he casts off their “effeminate swank,” forces the laces to strain, and demands the thin coat to reveal his pack of muscle – it is the clothing that transforms Gatsby. Dan Cody outfits the newly born Jay Gatsby with “a blue coat, six pair of white duck trousers and a yachting cap” (Gatsby 106). In a scene which reinforces the social divide between Gatsby and Tom, the detail of Gatsby “with hat and light overcoat in hand,” abandoned at the door by Tom and his riding friends adds to the pathetic nature of the scene, as though Gatsby could ever fit in with Tom’s crowd because he had the right outfit (Gatsby 110). And in spite of Gatsby’s dashing charm and flare (or perhaps because of it), Tom is not fooled by Gatsby’s pink suit.

Fig. 4 Joel Edgerton as Tom Buchanan. Source: Ingkid.com, 2014. Web.
Like Tom’s, Gatsby’s introduction is prefaced by elaborate descriptions and reflections that speak about and around him before conferring upon him any agency of his own. However, Tom’s characterization is concrete, tangible, solid, and his characterization is confirmed by the ease and sense of natural ownership Tom has with his environment, most significantly with his clothing. Conversely, Gatsby’s introduction is shrouded in mystery, hearsay, and distortion (the chaos and drunkenness of the party, that captivating smile that causes a type of tunnel-vision). For all the detailed description Nick waxes, none of Gatsby’s clothing is described until that “one morning late in July” in chapter four, when Gatsby and Nick drive over the Queensboro Bridge (Gatsby 68). Nick makes no mention of Gatsby’s attire until it becomes clear to him that something about Gatsby isn’t adding up, when “Gatsby began leaving his elegant sentences unfinished and slapping himself indecisively on the knee of his caramel-colored suit” (Gatsby 69). What Nick senses but has not quite articulated yet, and what Fitzgerald implies loud and clear with these two corresponding yet contrasting introductions, is that Gatsby isn’t comfortable in his own skin. As a result, Nick isn’t entirely comfortable with Gatsby, either. Tom may be a bigoted bully, but at least Nick knows exactly what he is getting. Gatsby is frustratingly more difficult to understand.

Justification for Nick’s unease is made even more concrete during the lunch scene in that “well-fanned Forty-second Street cellar,” where the source of Gatsby’s money becomes evident (Gatsby 73). In this case, the stand-out piece of attire does not belong to Gatsby, but to Meyer Wolfsheim, the “denizen of Broadway” and gambler who fixed the 1919 World’s Series (Gatsby 77-8). While Gatsby has excused himself from the lunch
table to take a call, Wolfsheim takes the opportunity to verify Gatsby’s Oxford claim and to vouch for Gatsby’s character and “fine breeding” (Gatsby 76). Immediately before assuring Nick that Gatsby can be trusted with a “friend’s wife,” Fitzgerald draws our attention to a telling piece of Wolfsheim’s suit:

“I see you’re looking at my cuff buttons.”

I hadn’t been looking at them, but I did now. They were composed of oddly familiar pieces of ivory.

“Finest specimens of human molars,” he informed me.

“Well!” I inspected them. “That’s a very interesting idea.”

“Yeah.” He flipped his sleeves up under his coat. (Gatsby 77)

In this case, the meaning of “accessory” is at work on all levels. The meeting with Meyer Wolfsheim was based on Fitzgerald’s own meeting with Arnold Rothstein, a Jewish-American racketeer, businessman and gambler who became a kingpin of the Jewish mob in New York. Those cuff buttons are pointed out when Nick is most suspicious of Gatsby, and those buttons become associated with Gatsby’s shady “gonnegtions” to bootlegging and racketeering. I know when I first read The Great Gatsby, I had a difficult time conceiving of the idea that someone would wear molars as cuff buttons, and therefore had a difficult time picturing what they might look like and comprehending their significance. The film changes Wolfsheim’s cuff buttons to a tie pin, probably to make them more visible, and the effect is just as disturbing as I am sure Fitzgerald intended. A matter of infinite hope, indeed, for Nick to reserve judgment of Gatsby, a man associated with bootleggers, gamblers, and, quite likely, murderers.
Style continues to communicate the intricacies of Fitzgerald’s novel, which the film diligently supports, during the origin story of how Daisy and Gatsby met. Perhaps fashion plays its most significant role in establishing the dynamic between Daisy and Gatsby. Explicit description of their dynamic is absent from the novel’s prose, however, if we allow the clothes speak, we see that Fitzgerald’s inclusion of style communicates the magic of their relationship, serving also as a conduit in the reconstruction of Gatsby’s story. In one of the rare occurrences when Nick isn’t telling the story, Jordan Baker is able to place her memory of Gatsby by recalling what she was wearing the day she met him:

I was walking along from one place to another half on the sidewalks and half on the lawns. I was happier on the lawns because I had on shoes from England with rubber nobs on the soles that bit into the soft ground. I had on a new plaid skirt also that blew a little in the wind and whenever this happened the red, white and blue banners in front of all the houses stretched out stiff and said tut-tut-tut-tut in a disapproving way. (Gatsby 79)

This passage establishes the centrality of clothing; the sensory experience Jordan has with her shoes and her skirt helps transport her back to that day. We will witness this same sensory relationship to clothing and emotion when Daisy and Gatsby reestablish their connection after five years.

Daisy, too, is remembered by Jordan for the way she used to dress in white and had a “little white roadster” (Gatsby 79). The symbolism of a young southern belle named Daisy who dresses in white and drives a white car fits with her description as the
“golden girl” with a voice “full of money.” As Gatsby and Daisy’s relationship is revealed we see more definitively the role of fashion and style. The story goes that Gatsby asked Daisy to wait for him once he’d returned from the war. What he couldn’t tell her at the time was that he was penniless. He had nothing more than his love to offer her, and he knew that wasn’t going to be enough. Daisy tried to wait, but without any assurance of what it was she was waiting for, she instead accepted Tom’s proposal the following year. While it may seem that the strand of pearls that Tom gave to Daisy the day before their wedding was evidence of Daisy’s shallow materialism, they are a powerful symbol of what money could buy; valued at three-hundred-fifty-thousand dollars in 1918, those pearls today would be worth nearly six million dollars (measuringworth.com). No wonder Gatsby is compelled to go to the extreme. It is not a joke when he realizes he has to be able to impress Daisy with money – this is not “mere” materialism. It was a point in time when generations of established family money was suddenly being met by the fast accumulation of equal wealth by “nobodies from nowhere” (Gatsby 137). However distasteful the idea may be, the implications of challenging the social identity of those who “come from money” and the uncertain identities of the nouveau riche were being felt and had unknown consequences that would have given Daisy and her family reason to be anxious about an outsider with an unknown past.

Gatsby’s attempt to transform Daisy’s perception of him commences in their reunion scene. It is their first meeting in five years, and Gatsby, awaiting Daisy’s arrival for tea at Nick’s has symbolically chosen silver and gold for his clothing color palette.
When Daisy excuses herself to the powder room, Gatsby admires out loud the accomplishment of buying his mansion, which “only” took him three years to earn. Just as he and Nick are discussing money, Daisy returns, with “two rows of brass buttons on her dress gleam[ing] in the sunlight,” the very image of freshly minted coins (Gatsby 95).

The film’s emphasis on fashion draws us to the importance of what clothing symbolizes, and the underlying messages of who these characters are, what they aspire to, and how they view life. Each character’s reality either influences or is influenced by their personal style choices. For Nick, these choices either reinforce or contradict his assessment of each character; they become another piece of evidence he must weigh before reaching his final judgment.

Speed: That Disconcerting Ride

The automobile symbolized a newfound freedom, independence, and liberation for drivers in the twenties, and thus a renewed sense of hope in the future, of modernity to transform reality and make more things possible that had been previously out of their reach. Of course, this newfound freedom came with a cost, and much of the decade consisted of learning that with such power comes great responsibility. The growth of the automobile and the coinciding literal and figurative recklessness of the era gives greater significance to the sense of danger, chaos, power, and status that looms in both the novel and the film. From 1920 to 1929, the number of registered automobiles in the US grew from a little over 8 million to over 23 million. During the decade, an average of 25,000 people were killed and 600,000 injured. Stoplights had yet to become an institution, and
when they did appear, lacked symbolic conformity; some lights had twelve different colors (Lehan 9). In much the same way that style is treated, Luhrmann’s film foregrounds the prevalence of automobiles. Their bold inclusion contributes to the atmosphere of fast, frenzied energy, danger, and open possibilities.

As a literary device, automobiles aid in developing characterization, and what we observe from the characters’ relationship to automobiles are the ways in which modernization, in the form of technological advancements, shapes reality for these individuals. Nick’s “old Dodge” appears as part of his initial description of unfashionable West Egg (Gatsby 8). It is otherwise nondescript, and it can be assumed to be sturdy and reliable, as he reports driving it to the Buchanan’s and one or two other instances without incident. Generally, though, Nick chooses public transportation; he doesn’t seem to have a strong affinity toward or opinion about having a car. This attitude communicates his “middle” ground placement among the other characters, but also suggests his somewhat conservative and reserved tendencies to stick with the old or established rather than race flashily toward the future.

In stark contrast to Nick’s old Dodge is Gatsby’s cream colored Rolls Royce (later referred to as yellow, by witnesses of Myrtle’s accident). It is new, flashy, expensive, custom, fast, and made to be seen. In fact, Gatsby’s car makes such an impression in the novel that Luhrmann decided to change the model to a Duesenberg because he felt it delivered the more characteristic flash and modernity that Gatsby is popularly known for (Visual Poetry). Gatsby’s automobile is one of the objects he acquires in order to prove his financial status and hopefully to impress Daisy. He drives it
often, or suggests driving it. Indicatively, the only time Gatsby takes public transportation is during his back story. He comes back to St. Louis to try to find Daisy after she has married Tom. He is still penniless, and as the train pulls away, his dream is lost to him for the first time. In the same way Nick conjectures about Gatsby’s thoughts at various points in the narration, I imagine the same emotions flowed through Gatsby as he rode in his taxi away from Daisy’s the morning after the accident. I assume the former moment of dejection was the beginning of his transformation into becoming the New York millionaire tycoon. It makes sense that Gatsby would favor his own automobile, which represents everything he has become, to the public transportation and lost dreams of his past.

Neither Daisy nor Tom have very strong associations with automobiles, which speaks to their comfortable, already established social positions. In other words, they don’t need a car to speak for them – their Buchanan name speaks for itself. They also don’t desire as strongly the freedom and independence of an automobile because their wealth already affords them those things. Daisy’s white roadster paradoxically conflates purity and innocence with speed and independence, and with the sexual freedom available from an automobile. We see that Tom’s transportation choices are similar to Nick’s; Tom does not get a thrill out of having or driving a car. He generally takes the train or is driven by a chauffeur, another throwback to the old traditions, to his old money. What does stand out is Tom’s association with horses. He is an accomplished, aging polo player, he has a polo field on his property, and our first image of Tom is in the cruel, hulking glory of his riding clothes. In a short but pivotal scene that is easy to
overlook, Tom gives Gatsby the ultimate snub the day he visits Gatsby’s mansion on horseback. The one thing Gatsby hasn’t got is a horse. Horses symbolize the old establishment and breeding. They were also being phased out of utility in favor of the automobile – too much expense and upkeep and too unreliable. Ironically, horses couldn’t “keep up” with the advantages of the automobile. In contrast to Tom’s initial association with horses, accentuating his association with the old establishment, Gatsby’s initial association to transportation is with the hydroplane, an example of the new age and cutting edge modernity.

Jordan’s association with automobiles is rather dubious. She is a bad driver and she is careless with them. They provide the backdrop for Nick’s discovery that she is a liar (she leaves the top down on a borrowed car and lies about it), and she nearly hits a man while driving (the action that prompts those famous lines about careless drivers and careless people). She is also the one to tell the story of Tom’s accident in Santa Barbara (while she and Nick happen to be driving around town) and she is in the car with Tom and Nick when they come upon Myrtle’s accident. Jordan is either responsible for or privy to the reckless nature of automobiles.

Finally we come to George and Myrtle. The Valley of Ashes is grey, dead, slow, and Wilson’s garage is ineffectual in extending any status or wealth. George wants to buy Tom’s car so he and Myrtle can leave, indicating the liberating effect of the automobile. Myrtle, in an attempt to escape – another reference to automobiles offering freedom – runs out to summon Gatsby’s car (believing it is Tom) but is resolutely prevented from ever leaving when Daisy hits her on the way back from New York.
The overriding focus of Luhrmann’s adaptation is the impact of modernization on society. By highlighting the elements of modernity that Fitzgerald wrote about, Luhrmann makes correlative commentary on the effects of modernity in our own time, amplifying especially the technological advances that are shaping us today through the use of 3-D special effects. Peter Berger’s book, *Facing Up to Modernity* (1977) outlines from a philosophical perspective the “dilemmas” of modernization encountered by society that we see being confronted in the novel. According to Berger, modernization has meant

the transformation of the world brought about by the technological innovations of the last few centuries…. This transformation has had economic, social, and political dimensions, all immense in scope. It has also brought on a revolution on the level of human consciousness, fundamentally uprooting beliefs, values, and even the emotional texture of life. A transformation of such vastness could not have taken place without profound [psychological] anguish….

The abstraction of modernity is rooted in the underlying institutional process on which modernity rests – the capitalist market, the beauracritized state… the technologized economy… the large city… and the media of mass communication. […] On the level of social life, …abstraction has entailed the progressive weakening if not destruction, of the concrete and relatively cohesive communities in which human beings have found solidarity and meaning throughout most of history. (70-72)
An example of these effects, symbolically connected through the presence of the automobile, is poignantly expressed at the end of chapter three. Nick has just recounted his first attendance at Gatsby’s party, which ended with the wrecked automobile on the front lawn, driver and passenger both incapacitated and completely oblivious of their culpability in the matter. Nick breaks from this memory to reflect more generally on his adjustment to life in New York, commenting that he “began to like New York, the racy, adventurous feel of it at night and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye” (Gatsby 61). As he continues to ruminate, we see evidence that Nick is experiencing some of the psychological anguish and loss of cohesion and solidarity within a community:

Again at eight o’clock, when the dark lanes of the Forties were five deep with throbbing taxi cabs, bound for the theatre district, I felt a sinking in my heart. Forms leaned together in the taxis as they waited, and voices sang, and there was laughter from unheard jokes, and lighted cigarettes outlined unintelligible gestures inside. Imagining that I, too, was hurrying toward gayety and sharing their intimate excitement, I wished them well. (Gatsby 62)

The automobile here serves as the express representation of modern technological advancement, inducing a sense of alienation, transforming the world and forcing Nick to discover new ways of navigating his existence.

In another analysis of modernity’s effect, David Hart discusses the function of automobiles in the novel to symbolize the reckless celebration and pursuit of freedom. Hart argues that the magical properties of automobiles in the novel serve as “the perfect
expression of the modern spirit” (44). He directs us to the coupling of magic and modernity citing Italian aesthetic theorist F.T. Marinetti’s *Futurist Manifesto* (1908) as recognizing the unique connection the automobile has with modernity. Characterizing the automobile as “a machine controlled by the individual himself,” and “the ultimate expression of individual autonomy… [it] conferred upon [the individual] the gift of speed. It annihilated space… each car [reflected] the personal signature of its owner” (44). While Hart concedes that Fitzgerald’s interpretation of the automobile and its intended function in the novel was “much more ambivalent than Marinetti’s… [he] grasps their significance and gives them a central role in this novelistic phenomenology of the modern spirit” (45). Hart refers to Berger who writes about the impact of strangers and strangeness of the city. Berger makes the simple yet profoundly impactful claim that the city is one of those places – a special kind of place – where “reality is not what it seems; there are realities behind the reality of everyday life; the fabric of our ordinary lives is not self-contained, it has holes in it…. Thus when people say that New York is a surrealistic place, they are saying more than they intend. They are making an ontological statement about the reality of human life…. Anything at all can come through the holes in the fabric of ordinary reality.” (Hart 43) And so it does, as Nick discovers. Luhrmann has us experience these holes in reality as well; the computer-generated imagery (CGI) which produced all of the automobile scenes challenges our willingness to suspend belief while recognizing the obvious artifice at play. Rather than attempting to create a realistic representation though, the magic,
cartoonish nature of the automobiles in the film echo the absurdity of events and reactions Nick observes. Consider once again Nick’s bizarre ride in Gatsby’s fantastic automobile filled with amazing stories, stretching all the way over the bridge and into the city. It starts with a description of Gatsby’s Rolls Royce: “It was a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hatboxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns. Sitting down behind the many layers of glass in a sort of green leather conservatory we started to town” (Gatsby 68). Only an exaggerated representation of this automobile will do, for surely there is no way an automobile like this could exist in real life – so that is exactly what Luhrmann provides. “And then came that disconcerting ride” (Gatsby 69). Luhrmann delivers a scenic adventure in which the automobile appears to be practically driving itself, seeming almost capable of taking flight, an aesthetic effect that faithfully translates Fitzgerald’s prose:

We passed Port Roosevelt, where there was a glimpse of red-belted ocean-going ships, and sped along a cobbled slum lined with the dark, undeserted saloons of the faded gilt nineteen-hundreds. Then the valley of ashes opened out on both sides of us, and I had a glimpse of Mrs. Wilson staring at the garage pump with panting vitality as we went by.

With fenders spread like wings we scattered light through half Astoria -- only half, for as we twisted among the pillars of the elevated I heard the familiar “jug-jug-spat!” of a motor cycle, and a frantic policeman rode alongside. […]
Over the great bridge, with the sunlight through the girder making
a constant flicker upon the moving cars, with the city rising up across the
river in white heaps and sugar lumps all built with a wish out of non-
olfactory money…. *(Gatsby 72-3)*

Contributing to the surrealistic effect of automobiles, Fitzgerald inscribes them as sharing
agency with the characters, and thus some kind of control over human fate, as they aide
or betray them. On the weekends that Gatsby has parties, “his Rolls-Royce became an
omnibus bearing parties to and from the city … while his station wagon scampered like a
brisk yellow bug to meet all trains” *(Gatsby 43)*. People “got into automobiles which bore
them out to Long Island and somehow they ended up at Gatsby’s door” *(Gatsby 45)*.
Automobiles are in effect contributing to society in almost a similar manner as humans.
Richard Lehan, recognizing the novel’s concern with technology and modernity,
observes:

> Repeatedly the characters talk about the automobile and careless driving until it
becomes a major refrain. The owl-eyed man is in the car that wrecks its wheel
leaving Gatsby’s party; Tom is involved with another woman in a car shortly after
his honeymoon … Jordan Baker (whose name is taken from the names of two
cars) drives recklessly; and, of course, Daisy runs over Myrtle in Gatsby’s
chrome-swollen car. … The machine separated man from nature, transformed the
landscape, helped create the modern city, and enlarged the scale on which man
lived as life became “less and ever less human.” *(Lehan 88)*
Gatsby’s automobile, with its three-note horn, green house of windshields, and custom made leather seats, actively transports him to a different social level through its function as a status symbol. It also transports Nick into the magic “anything can happen” world of New York. The automobile confers a confusing sense of responsibility, represented in the novel through sophisticated, descriptive passages of the whirling, dangerous thrill of a drive, and the film’s approach is to visually induce the same sense of disorientation, whiplash, and jarring nausea.

Automobiles function in this novel to reiterate the enormous effect of modernization on society and the individual, an effect that has greatly distorted reality, calling into question for Nick basic assumptions about the world by which he used to operate. By emphasizing and exaggerating their presence, the film reminds us of the automobile’s significance in the story, and what the film does with its allotted time frame is to provide us that feeling of restlessness, and jolting, chaotic rapidity that is conveyed through Fitzgerald’s whirling prose. Because the reader controls the pace of the story, it is possible for sensory detail like this to get broken up, slowed down, or forgotten. But the film is able to deliver the experience in its entirety. As queasy as critics are from Luhrmann’s rapid-motion filming, his dramatic emphasis on the magic power and audacity of the automobile forces that same response from the viewing audience that lurched through Nick that summer. And, although automobiles signify distortion, chaos, and even at times death, they also augur the hope for the future and the ability to keep moving forward.
CONCLUSION

*It isn’t really about, in the end, script, or design, or music. It’s really about the evolution of the story and storytelling. And in the end, it’s not so much that you go, “the baby is finished,” it’s just that the baby can’t help but be born.*

*Baz Luhrmann, “The Greatness of Gatsby”*

After decades of scholarship, *The Great Gatsby* has earned its place in the canon of great literature for continuing to surprise us with layer upon layer of meaning and experience. The novel’s narrative point of view, enhanced by aural, visual, and kinetic imagery, creates the lens through which we experience one tragic summer in New York, 1922. It is Nick Carraway’s story that we read, his reflections we consider as we encounter careless and desperate people, extravagance beyond comprehension, wild abandon, majestic inventions, and the extraordinary gift for hope. We journey with Nick as he struggles to make sense of a reality that got twisted and transformed, causing him to question whether he could trust what was “real” anymore, whether he could trust anyone, let alone himself, anymore. In spite of the insidiousness that pressed ever closer to him, Nick resolved to allow himself to be renewed with hope, realizing perhaps that it was futile to fight against it. In the end, it is not only Gatsby’s romantic readiness that inspires us, but Nick’s ability to reserve judgment, to look past the foul dust, and see beauty in the midst of corruption.

Just as so many of us are inspired by the novel, director Baz Luhrmann was also inspired. He held out hope that he would be able to “fix” the problem of translating
Nick’s interior dialog through film, and that he would be able to infuse the film with the same inspiring energy that he experienced when he read it. His response to that hope resulted in the reinvention of Jay Gatsby. Every time one of us is borne back to this novel, we reinvent James Gatz into the Gatsby of our dreams. Sometimes we fail – in fact, I’m not sure if any of us are ever completely satisfied with our rendition of such an elusive ideal. There is always a little bit further we can go, a little deeper we can explore. Luhrmann’s adaptation of The Great Gatsby is an invitation for us all to reserve judgment, to wait and see if maybe, just maybe, things will work out all right in the end.

It is in our nature to repeat the past. We have spent decades trying to understand Fitzgerald’s life, and Gatsby’s life, by scouring original sources. We have tried to make sense of what we have read by applying innumerable lenses and proposing endless analyses. By reflecting on our lives and reimagining what we could have done different, how we could have done better, we simultaneously imagine our futures. When Luhrmann brought us back with his film we got excited about the parties and the love story and the perfect description of what life was like back then. But when the film debuted, we suddenly remembered, that’s not what the story is about. Luhrmann’s film asks us to repeat the past by revealing all the difficult parts of the novel, the parts we would like to forget are there – the opulence, the carelessness, the materialism, the corrupt and ambiguous morality. In revealing the difficult parts of the novel, we are forced to go deeper. Because of Luhrmann’s film we now have even more reasons to consider the vices of our day: racism, homophobia, intellectual elitism, the proliferation of technology, the inability to make room for other viewpoints. There were many who
become disgusted, because they were reminded that this story, like life, is about more than what sparkles on the surface.

The existence of the film as analogous to the literary event that the novel is. We have a man who’s telling the story of events that he remembers to the best of his ability. There are lapses in time, the chronology is not fluid, gaps of information have to be filled in by speculation or second-hand information. He has to interpret these events, just as we do. He attempts to be faithful to the actual events of that summer, and that means talking about people and situations that make us question our choices. This is just what Fitzgerald did, and what Nick did. The film, then, is following in the novel’s footsteps. This is exciting because the fact that this is a great American novel means that we can go through the same process of telling a story or reinventing ourselves, of putting something into the world that has meaning. Fitzgerald died before he was ever able to realize the impact his novel has on not just the nation but on the world. He died believing that the world saw his book as a failure, but the amazing part was his capacity for hope – Fitzgerald never thought his book was a failure. He believed it was the best writing he had ever done, even believed it ranked among some of the best writing in the world. This is why Nick could say that Gatsby turned out all right in the end: because those of us who are willing to reserve judgment and hold out hope, to reflect on our experiences and take the time to make sense of them know we will have our realities, our lives, transformed.
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