

TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

Nothing great about this Gatsby

In an age when many novels are written with the sale of film rights in mind, the novel is no longer considered the final expression of a story. Regrettably, many regard the book as an introductory sketch, with the expectation that the final details will be nailed down, and the characters fully fleshed out, in the film.

There are those who would have us believe that this is the natural order of things, that a film adaptation of a novel is no different from putting Aeschylus on stage.

What utter nonsense. If there is no meaningful distinction between oral and written forms of expression, what this implies is that there is no difference between what one thinks and what one says. There goes literature, and with it, civilisation.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, for example, is a first-person narrative told from the point of view of Nick, Gatsby's neighbour. The reader has access not only to what Nick says to those around him, but also to what he is really thinking under the polite chit-chat. The divide between Nick's interior life and his outward social graces is not a literary device – it is an integral feature of his social class. Without it, the whole plot is shot to hell.

In a film version, the director has a responsibility to keep that inner-outer dualism alive. Francis Ford Coppola did not even attempt to do this in his ornate 1974 film version, silencing the subtext altogether.

In a new made-for-TV film adaptation, director Robert Markowitz manages to preserve the interior dialogue by having the narrator read vast passages of Fitzgerald to us, as if this were an instalment of "books on audiotape". This decision is so amateurish that I half-expected the actors accidentally to read the book's page numbers aloud as well (A&E, January 14, 8pm ET/PT.)

This production treads on thin ice beginning with the interpretation of the Gatsby character himself. As



Mira Sorvino as the dim coquette Daisy in 'The Great Gatsby'

conceived by Fitzgerald, Gatsby is a bootlegger lying about the source of his wealth. He buys an opulent mansion along Long Island's north shore, just to be near Daisy, a socialite whom he had wooed briefly while stationed in a Kentucky army base during the Great War. He fabricates a past for himself: a pharmaceutical scion, an Oxford graduate, who once "lived like a raja in the capitals of Europe".

This television adaptation makes the fatal error of condemning Gatsby immediately as a huckster (in the novel, the information is revealed more gradually). As played by British-born actor Toby Stevens, the character is instantly and manifestly unlikeable, constantly smirking and over-sexed – the sort of person with whom Daisy and Nick would never consort, not even out of morbid curiosity. I vastly prefer Robert Redford's rendition of the role from the Coppola version:

tasteful, charming, inscrutable.

The A&E version, meanwhile, having already blown its cover, soon runs into the problem of how to build up to the mystique surrounding the name of Gatsby. They accomplish this by playing voices in the background that whisper "Gatsby!" repeatedly, as in the song "Maria" from *West Side Story*.

Actress Mira Sorvino is competent as the dim coquette Daisy, who has learned the valuable life lesson that "a pretty little fool is the best thing a girl can be in this world". To its credit, however, this production has excised some of the more misogynistic excesses of Fitzgerald's original prose. I can't imagine someone of Daisy's background saying, as she does in the book: "Tom reads deep books with long words in them."

This production's overarching atmosphere is irretrievably flawed. Aside from costumes and vintage

cars, this film doesn't feel like a snapshot of the Jazz Age – a term Fitzgerald himself coined. For one thing, the amount of jazz played in the film is far surpassed by pseudo-romantic tinkly AM radio music, the type one hears in the dentist's waiting room.

The acting style is anachronistic as well. Paul Rudd, for example, while quite talented, is excessively Generation X in his role as Nick: he expresses too much visible boredom, eye-rolling, and adolescent smirking for someone who has allegedly fought in a war.

Nick tells us: "Gatsby represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn." But Rudd's Nick is so scornful from the word go that he has no room to wiggle. There is no way of knowing whether he has any real convictions about Gatsby, or anything else.

Here again, I prefer Coppola's casting choice over this one: in that earlier version, Sam Waterston's Nick tries, to the bitter end, to reserve judgment on Gatsby. When he shouts to Gatsby, "You're better than all of them put together," he seems to believe it, if just for a moment. When Rudd says the same line, his insincere manner seems to retract the compliment immediately.

When I first received the review tape for *The Great Gatsby*, I was so excited that I hugged the box and twirled it around the room. When I actually sat down and watched the tape, however, my expression looked a lot like the one Paul Rudd wears throughout much of this film: fraught with cynicism and self-reproach for having had so much hope at the outset.