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Performing American Literature

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Term Project Proposal

**PROPOSAL**

The current trend in Hollywood is to depend almost exclusively on preexisting intellectual property. Very few new projects are based on original ideas, and, according to Aaron Tracy, the Yale professor who teaches “Art of TV Drama,” many executives will not even hear a pitch if it doesn’t have existing, successful IP to back it. Though this trend has limited the inflow of original content, it is a time ripe for creative adaptation.

As the Golden Age of Television (or the Television Revolution) continues, prestige platforms are increasingly drawn to limited series, special event series, and mini-series. Given that they are shorter commitments for actors, directors, and airtime, they enable networks to take greater creative risks and greenlight more ambitious projects. HBO in particular is known for its mini-series adaptations of novels (e.g. Mildred Pierce, Olive Kitteridge, The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency, etc.), though Netflix, Hulu, and even cables channels like FX have produced short serial adaptations.

For my project, I’d like to combine this unique moment in Hollywood’s digital age with my passion for serialized storytelling. I propose planning a limited series adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s short stories. Each episode would be a different short story. Now of course, given that each episode would be a different short story, the serial element of the mini-series would have to be a bit different since it of course could not be a single narrative broken up into pieces. There would be room to explore the serialized elements of a sequence of Fitzgerald stories—in the ordering, casting, and design of each episode. Many anthology series take place in a single “universe.” What would Fitzgerald’s “universe” look like? Characters from different stories could appear (even in the background) of the others. Given that multiple stories take place within the East coast elite, that is a feasible way to tie the stories together.

It would also be fruitful to explore and describe the process by which these stories would be produced. Since this is a creative project, it is important for me to examine my own identity and role in adapting these stories. They were originally written by a white man, so I (a white woman) feel no qualms about inserting my own voice. However, in some stories Fitzgerald writes about slavery in ways that I could not responsibly adapt in 2018. How can I go about adapting a story like “Diamond as Big as the Ritz” in a way that elevates the themes I (as the screenwriter of this mini-series) choose to pick out of the original story? Once I adapt it, how would a network go about hiring a director and a cast in a way that’s sensitive to the material. White washing, racial sentimentalism, and fetishizing Black suffering have been pressure points for Hollywood in the past decade, and, though the stories are often distinctly white, as we discussed in class, Fitzgerald does not write a world separate from race and the legacy of American slavery. Acknowledging and including this will be a necessary and important part of the process of adaptation.

For more information on which stories I hope to adapt and the faith to the original with which I will adapt them, see GOALS & METHODOLOGIES.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**Bruccoli, Matthew J., Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald: A New Collection*. Charles Scribner’s Sons. New York, NY. 1989**

This is, of course, the book that contains the versions of the stories that I will adapt. I’m sure there are other versions that could help me in this process, but this is the one I bought for class. I also enjoyed reading the short intros to the stories, and I think they could inform some aspect of the aesthetic of the show or even some small easter eggs within the episodes.

**Gopnik, Adam. “As Big as the Ritz.” *The New Yorker*. September 22, 2014.** [**https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/22/big-ritz**](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/22/big-ritz)

This article, though not actually as much about “Diamond as Big as the Ritz” as the title would suggest, provides a lot of color and background on Scott and Zelda. Gopnik explores the ways in which their writing and their lives have continued to inspire imitation, adaptation, and reporting. All of this background is helpful because it informs the ways in which Scott and Zelda appear in his various stories—knowledge of the author will help in adapting his texts. And, of course, it helps apprise me of the various adaptations in the landscape (see FIELD SURVEY for more on this.)

**Salisbury, Mark. “David Fincher: Guardian Interviews at the BFI.” *The Guardian*. January 18, 2009.** [**https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/feb/03/david-fincher-interview-transcript**](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/feb/03/david-fincher-interview-transcript)

Fincher talks about the joys and challenges of directing *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), which is helpful in conceiving a televisual adaptation project. He talks about his process—everything from the script to his workflow. Looking into the ways in which his movie is faithful to the spirit of the original story but departs from it in other ways will be important in making those decisions for this project.

**The various film adaptations of Fitzgerald’s work and life.**

These films (and television shows) provide examples of ways in which one could interpret, design, perform, and generally engage with Fitzgerald’s work and world. Whether it’s Baz Luhrmann’s maximalist, colorful approach, or Fincher’s darker take, they provide insight into the process of interpreting a written text for the screen, and they are part of a legacy this project aims to enter into. Knowing and appreciating (or critiquing) existing work with similar goals will inform the goals and processes of this project.

A perfect transition into the

**FIELD** **SURVEY**

**Fitzgerald’s work**

There have been a number of film adaptations of Fitzgerald’s stories, but, of course, most of them are adaptations of *The Great Gatsby*. They include:

*The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922), a silent film, no copies of it still exist

*The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), David Fincher

*The Last Time I Saw Paris* (1954), Richard Brooks, based on “Babylon Revisted”

*The Last Tycoon* (1976), Elia Kazan (screenplay by Harold Pinter), the story was unfinished, so the adaptation process was unique

*Tender Is the Night* (1962), Henry King

*G* (2002), Christopher Scott Cherot, based on *The Great Gatsby*

*The Great Gatsby*

* 1926, Herbert Brenon
* 1949, Elliott Nugent
* 1974, Jack Clayton (screenplay by Francis Ford Coppola, but originally by Truman Capote)

Coppola said this of the adaptation process: “I was shocked to find that there was almost no dialogue between Daisy and Gatsby in the book, and was terrified that I'd have to make it all up. So I did a quick review of Fitzgerald's short stories and, as many of them were similar in that they were about a poor boy and a rich girl, I helped myself to much of the authentic Fitzgerald dialogue from them. I decided that perhaps an interesting idea would be to do one of those scenes that lovers typically have, where they finally get to be together after much longing, and have a "talk all night" scene, which I'd never seen in a film. So I did that – I think a six-page scene in which Daisy and Gatsby stay up all night and talk. And I remember my wife telling me that she and the kids were in New York when The Godfather opened, and it was a big hit and there were lines around the block at five theaters in the city, which was unheard of at the time. I said, "Yeah, yeah, but I've got to finish the Gatsby script." And I sent the script in, just in time. It had taken me two or three weeks to complete.” His adaptation was praised by renowned screenwriter William Goldman.

* 2002, TV Movie, Robert Markowitz
* 2013, Baz Luhrmann

**Fitzgerald himself**

*Last Call* (2002), Henry Bromell

*Waiting for the Moon* (musical play), 2005

*Zelda—An American Love Story* (musical adapted from *Waiting for the Moon*), 2016

*The Last Party: S. Fitzgerald's Last Day* (musical play), 2004-06

*Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* (1994)

*Zelda* (TV Movie), 1993

*F. Scott Fitzgerald in Hollywood* (TV Movie), 1976

*F. Scott Fitzgerald and 'The Last of the Belles'* (TV Movie), 1974

*Beloved Infidel* (1959)

*Villa America* (Play), 2007, by Crispin Whittell

*Midnight in Paris* (2011), by Woody Allen

*Genius* (2016)

*The Paris Wife* (novel) by Paula McLain, Sheila Yeger adapted it for a 2011 BBC Radio 4 *Woman's Hour Drama*

*West of Sunset* (novel) by Stewart O’Nan (2015)

*Z: The Beginning of Everything*, 2015, by Amazon Studios

**GOALS & METHODOLOGIES**

I hope to translate the sensory details and specificity of Fitzgerald’s world to the screen. The aesthetics (and politics) of the 1920s present great opportunities for world building on screen. Because, as we discussed in class, it is a challenge to take the inner thoughts that Fitzgerald describes in such detail and present them on screen, I aim to distill the story I adapt (TBD) into *what it does* and go from there. There is no perfectly faithful adaptation that could be interesting. In order for a film adaptation to be worthwhile it needs to expose a new dimension or aspect of the text not as available to a reader. Ideally, the mini-series would be a work of its own merit. (If preexisting IP barred work from being art, there would be little to no art coming out of the Hollywood machine right now…I guess we can debate this.) Since I plan to produce just the script of a single episode and describe the rest of the project in detail in a final paper, it will be difficult to appreciate the completed artistic vision for the project. Perhaps somewhat ironically, I will do my best to convey its (imagined) splendor in writing.

I tried to force myself to decide which story I would adapt by the time I turned this in, but I just haven’t made up my mind yet. I did narrow it down to “Bernice Bobs Her Hair,” “The Ice Palace,” or “Diamond as Big as the Ritz.” I think “Diamond as Big as the Ritz” is the most exciting opportunity for adaptation, but, again, my voice may not be the ideal one for the job. I think both “Bernice” and “Ice Palace” provide interesting opportunities to explore the horror/thriller genre aspects of Fitzgerald’s writing, and I like that they’re from female perspectives. I will continue to mull it over. Feel free to express an opinion on the matter of course!