

# Adapting history and literature into films

Many thousands of movies are adaptations from historical or literary sources. History is generically **dealt with** by cinema in the **epic**, **period** or **historical film**. **Film historians** generally distinguish the epic group from the strict historical group by its **sheer** size, expense and the sumptuousness of the movie's costumes and sets. The period film is distinguished by the fact that the setting can be set in the far distant past or the immediate present. **Although** literature, history and movies are distinct forms of communication, thousands of solutions and adaptations have been found so they can **get along** and have fruitful relationships. The first key is the nature and tradition of adaptation itself. Tales evolve and one generation adjusts the stories of the past to the present time and to its modern needs and ways of **storytelling**. How a story is told is as important as its **subject matter**. For example, there have been numerous versions of *The Great Gatsby* by Francis Scott Fitzgerald. The most famous one is the 1974 adaptation. The script was written by Francis Ford Coppola. In 2000, William Goldman, who loved the novel, said he actively **campaigns for** the job of adapting the **script**, but was **astonished** by the quality of Coppola's work:

**although:** *sebbene*  
**astonished:** *meravigliato*  
**to campaign for:** *fare una campagna a favore*  
**to deal with:** *trattare*  
**film historian:** *storico del cinema*  
**to get along:** *andare d'accordo*  
**to hire:** *assumere*  
**period film:** *film d'epoca*  
**script:** *sceneggiatura*  
**shabby:** *squallido*  
**sheer:** *mero*  
**storytelling:** *narrare*  
**subject matter:** *contenuto*  
**subtleties:** *sottigliezze*  
**tacky:** *pacchiano*  
**to trample over:** *calpestare*



"I still believe it to be one of the great adaptations... I called Coppola and told him what a wonderful thing he had done. If you see the movie, you will find all this hard to believe... The director who was **hired**, Jack Clayton, is a Brit... He had one thing all of them have in their blood: a murderous sense of class... Well, Clayton decided this: that Gatsby's parties were **shabby** and **tacky**, given by a man of no elevation and taste. As shot, they were foul and stupid and the people who attended them were foul and silly."

Fitzgerald knew Hollywood and even if working as a screenwriter was a negative experience, it gave him material for his unfinished novel *The Last Tycoon*, filmed by Elia Kazan in 1976. The career of its hero, Monroe Stahr, is based on that of the celebrated Hollywood **producer** Irving Thalberg.

The most recent adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* is a 2013 Australian-American 3D drama film co-written and directed by Baz Luhrmann – which stars Leonardo Di Caprio. Here is the opinion of it by the film reviewer Philip French:

"Baz Luhrmann's hyperactive adaptation **tramples over** the **subtleties** of the Francis Scott Fitzgerald classic. Fitzgerald did more for Hollywood than that it has done for him and it made mediocre movies of his books."

Apart from Fitzgerald, two other famous writers had a **fractious** relationship with Hollywood: William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway.

Faulkner collaborated with Howard Hawks (film director, producer and screenwriter) on “two genuine Hollywood classics”: *The Big Sleep* (taken from a Raymond Chandler novel, 1939) and *To Have and Have Not* (Ernest Hemingway, 1937) in the 1940s. According to Adrian Wootton – writer, **broadcaster**, programmer and **chief executive** of Film

London – Hemingway did not want to write for Hollywood but he loved interfering from behind the scenes and telling the **directors** and **producers** who they couldn’t cast and which **scriptwriters** to use.

**broadcaster:** *giornalista radiofonico*  
**chief executive:** *direttore generale*  
**fractious:** *teso, nervoso*  
**scriptwriter:** *sceneggiatore*

## 1 Answer the questions about the passage.

- a. Have you read *The Great Gatsby*?
- b. Have you seen any of the numerous adaptations of the novel?
- c. Is Goldman’s opinion biased?
- d. What is a Hollywood classic in your opinion?
- e. What do you think the critic means by the adjective “hyperactive”?

## 2 Find a synonym or give a definition for each of the words in bold in the text.