

tolerance of flow and locality jams the systems that rely on stable categories, making it so that no one category, or series of interlocking categories, is capable of any operative linear knowledge. There is already a sense of this emerging in IBM's discontinuing of its FRT development and Microsoft's halting of their FRT program, as well as American cities' whole-scale banning of such technologies (Hamilton, 2020); this can also be seen in actions like MIT moving its 80 Million Tiny Images database offline in the wake of criticism about its misogynistic and racist data categorizations (Quach, 2020).

However, the ultimate solution, in following a disruptive relationality rooted in affect alongside quantum indeterminacy, is a whole-scale shift away from prior forms of governmentality and its self-preserving forms of power. Again, this requires a foregrounding of equity and abolishment of tactics and strategies that bring violence and/or gatekeeping on the resources attached to citizenship. The seeds for this can be seen in the recent calls to defund and abolish police departments across North America and reallocate those funds to local and intra-agential areas of life that have as great an impact on public safety and potential "injury," according to Butler (public education, mental health, food scarcity, affordable housing), as security-driven apparatuses. Not coincidentally, law enforcement apparatuses have long been incredible consumers of FRT, at the forefront of their use in asymmetrical application on the populations they have been tasked to protect (Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2017). While abolishment of FRT is the most clear-cut and effective solution, the first steps towards this are diverting capital and authority from those power centres that are rationalized and operationalized against perceived threats and behaviours, thereby rearranging and replacing the dominant logics of determinate categorization and hierarchization that have been in place far too long.

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Dany Jacob

Meme-ing Jay Gatsby or Dandyism à l'Américaine: Cultural Declination of *The Great Gatsby*



"If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him."

— F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (4)

The character of Jay Gatsby fascinates beyond his century and era of creation. The recent film production of *The Great Gatsby* by Baz Luhrmann (2013) indicates a renewed interest in F. Scott Fitzgerald's glamorous illustration of America's Roaring Twenties. The allure resides in Jay Gatsby's personae and tragic fate of a dandy, a distinction often

misconstrued to identify a pompous man who pays excessive attention to his attire. Luhrmann's *Great Gatsby* recontextualizes this traditional depiction of dandyism as a caricature of masculinity through Leonardo DiCaprio's play, revitalizing the philosophical and aesthetic qualities upon which dandyism is built and reiterating its cultural importance in our

society. Originating in the 19th century, the figure of the dandy elicits questions of authenticity and performance, of established identity expressions and individualism, and of reality and simulacra. Fitzgerald explores these tropes throughout his 1925 novel, illustrating the different perceptions, practices, and responses of dandiacal behaviour in the face of contested social norms. Luhrmann, in turn, modernizes and revises dandyism by inserting his Gatsby in a contemporary appreciation of America's 1920s, giving *The Great Gatsby* (2013) a new layer of meaning within the sociocultural expression of masculine identity and performance in media.

The transition from the big screen to the meme culture is a clear indicator of how the audience echoed and embraced DiCaprio's on-screen (dandiacal) behaviour as part of their own, inciting a series of cultural (mis)appropriation of dandyism, adding a new tier to modeling male identity and performance. As such, the significance and the use of Jay Gatsby memes hold a unique place in the construction of contemporary cultural identities. The panoply of Gatsby memes on the web and in different online subcultures reinforces the recent revitalization of dandyism, indicating that the dandy is not an antiquated archetype for non-conventional identity expression. Leo-as-Gatsby memes stack and condense a rich sociocultural baggage already present in Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby* with Luhrmann's interpretation through DiCaprio's body and performance on screen. Here, I unpack and weigh these interlocking layers to render a more complete picture of the cultural impact of the dandiacal Gatsby as well as contemporary Gatsby memes and their critical relevance in social interactions. Tracing the history of the dandy figure to the proliferation of Leo-as-Gatsby imagery, I show how today's meme culture encapsulates, punctuates, and comments on the sociocultural and ontological concepts of performance, reality, and simulacra as formulated by Baudrillard and Debord.

Fitzgerald relied on his sartorial interest and knowledge in creating his male protagonists—all of whom are described in terms that classify them as dandy figures. From examining his biography, we know Fitzgerald was exposed to two different kinds of dandyism: the aesthetic dandyism introduced to American culture in the 1880s by Oscar Wilde, and the nineteenth-century French artist-dandy exemplified by Charles Baudelaire, who himself was influenced by the romantic hero popularized by British Romanticism, in particular by Lord Byron (Moers, 121). Thus, having intimate knowledge of the dandy scene and its

internal conflicts, Fitzgerald had at his disposal several models of dandyism and a variety of prototypical dandies and dandy-writers from nineteenth-century British, French, and American society and literature, all of which informed his critical reconstruction of the dandy figure in his novels. Catherine Mintler argues that:

Fitzgerald's interest in twentieth-century dandyism was shaped by the same contradictory discourses about masculinity, performances of public identity, and sartorial display that caused dandiacal dress and behavior to be regarded as controversial among nineteenth-century writers and the general public for whom they wrote. Dandyism is not an opposite construct of masculinity; rather, it is a collection of various sartorial tendencies and behaviors that provide alternatives to very rigid and narrow definitions of masculinity. (109)

The tension between Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby at the core of Fitzgerald's storyline resides in the performance of their masculinities: Buchanan as the archetypal American-bred *alpha male* confronts Gatsby about his gender performance, his class status, and his education – the trifecta of social American upper-class norms. In her article, Mintler describes Gatsby's combination of Wildean and Baudelairean dandyism, each type protesting a set of conventional rules. Baudelairean intellectual dandyism, drawing its ontological core from the writer and thinker Charles Baudelaire, defies socio-aesthetic norms in its sartorial expression and mannerism. Baudelaire himself was part of a long dandiacal evolution, reaching as far back as to the “father of dandyism,” Beau Brummell. Baudelairean dandyism thus stands against overly obtuse and power-driven bourgeois values.

As the new economic power in 19th-century France, the bourgeoisie became the only class still able to afford luxury leisure that previously belonged exclusively to the newly-weakened aristocracy (Stanton, 78). Everything revolved around the stipulation of satisfying the taste of the bourgeoisie, despite it being uncertain and conservative. For a poet like Baudelaire whose soul desires to worship Art, bourgeois values are perceived to be vile shackles and the dandy ought to deliver humanity from them. By his superiority of spirit, the dandy is a greater social being than his society because he knows exactly what role he holds in it. Being a cold and distant observer gives him the ability to perceive his appearance with the eyes of a stranger.

Such access thus gives the dandy self-knowledge and awareness of his society, the ultimate achievement for the *artiste-poète*. This transforms dandyism into the guarantor of unbiased morality in a bourgeois-governed society. The dandy expresses modernity with grace and intelligence by rejecting contemporary sartorial styles and through his artifice contrast, he expresses the idiomatic values of beauty. By incorporating these aesthetic aspects, he creates a new identity, a brand-new individual who can exercise control over his environment. The dandy is permeated by this profound paradox: to please while being unpleasant (Stanton, 148) and despite the non-presence of dandiacal rules, the dandy seems to follow a certain code of honour to make him a man of style, as well as taste.

The second iteration of dandyism originates from Oscar Wilde's interpretation of Baudelaire's ideology and thus his own sense of dandyism. The Irish poet prefers an aesthetic dandyism that contests strict conformist gender identity and performance. For Wilde, the dandy has to be the only object of his desire and his attention, not to mention of his attitude, and by this means he rises to the level of artistic creation: as a work of art or simply as a beautiful object. The individual man is emancipated with a single value that outweighs the casting in the sweltering mass of his globalizing society. “The first duty in life is to be as *artificial* as possible” (Oscar Wilde, *Miscellanies*, 176, author's emphasis), as the poet states, highlighting the deep desire rooted in the dandy to stress his personality and through this experience, (re)discover his identity during each performance. The dandy is forced to re-experience himself and all along this search, he superimposes the masks he has accumulated and keeps his audience guessing— is this his last mask or dandy's 'real' face? Wilde's dandyism stands out mostly due to the juxtaposition of his queer identity and sexuality as part of the dandiacal expression. Prior to Wilde's association, the dandy was neither associated with homosexuality nor considered to be homosexual. Wilde simply pushed the social boundaries of gender identities by wrapping them in new rules of mannerism and performance.

Both dandyisms rely on the malleability of the projection of reality and its fragility. For the dandy Jay Gatsby then, his criticism rises against American conservative economic power and values (Baudelaire) and its conformed gender identity expression (Wilde). Contrasting with Buchanan's preoccupation with sports and women, as well as his aggressive nature, Gatsby throws these ideals back into the bourgeois void and instead offers lavish parties at a grandiose

mansion, piles of fashionable clothes, and luxury cars, arranged in such a way that shifts how we previously understood reality. Gatsby plans to ‘win back’ Daisy by presenting her with the sensitivity and detail-oriented commitment of the dandy, as opposed to the societal values embodied by Buchanan. Unfortunately for Daisy, the Jay Gatsby of high society is a smokescreen for poor *déclassé* Jimmy Gatz, a man desperately trying to surpass himself. But, is there anything more enticing than a man who tries to become a better, more glamorous version of himself for the love of his life only to be met with a tragic demise once the glitter settles?

Jessica Feldman posits that dandyism is “an aggressively defensive pose, the pose of a man who feels isolated and threatened within a society he loathes” (*Gender on the Divide*, 80). Mintler is right to assert that Fitzgerald creates in Gatsby a “new literary evocation of dandyism” (116) that tackles the issues of social class and masculinity. As such, the freshly reinvented Jimmy Gatz compounds in his mannerism the entire dandiacal traditions — from Brummell's urge to improve oneself beyond his class origins, to Baudelaire's anti-bourgeois and new-aristocratic sentiments and Wildean mockery of masculinity conventionalism. While the sartorial expression of Luhrmann's Gatsby can hardly be coined rebellious by today's standards, it does not take away from the impact of this cinematographic take on *The Great Gatsby* in regards to performance and identity. The relevance of the literary text and the inherent cultural stacking we discussed earlier go beyond the simplistic dandiacal opposition to bourgeois norms through fashion or mannerism, it displays new layers in how society dictates conventional performances as well.

Further initial materials for resistance to bioFor a modern audience, Gatsby's getup evokes the metrosexual: groomed, fashionable, and cognizant of his looks, the metrosexual man was the early 2000's dandy. In Jeremy Kaye's words, metrosexuality is transgressive, thus dandiacal, because it adopts the homosexual lifestyle but by remaining fundamentally heterosexual. Written at the eve of Instagram and the postmodern “cult to oneself,” the metrosexual will soon be folded into the mainstream of acceptable (i.e. conventional) masculinities, ironing out the two major dandiacal focuses we have seen under Baudelaire and Wilde and making them seem, outwardly, outdated ‘rebellious expressions.’ However, what seems to be an underlying trope since the rise of dandyism under Brummell is the importance of staging and performance.

Performance is a complex enterprise, Herbert

Blau warns: “There is nothing more illusory in performance than the illusion of the unmediated. It is a very powerful illusion in the theatre, but it *is* theatre and it is *theatre*, the truth of illusion which haunts *all* performance, whether or not it occurs in a theatre” (*The Eye of Prey*, 143). From the extensive historical research done on the dandy¹ we know that dandyism relies heavily on being seen, taking the theatrical out of the theater and onto the streets, making the world his stage, his life a constant performance: “Life just *is* appearance: a plane of images or simulations. The supposed ‘real thing’ that lies behind the images is a fiction we impose on the flux of images. What we have is appearance or imaging itself: a world of simulacra without ground” (Colebrook, 162, 163). Luhrmann taps into a rich sociocultural legacy that exists in Fitzgerald’s source material and gives it his own twist through what Chris Nashawaty described as “high-society swirl with frenzied montages, spinning newspaper headlines, and Cirque du Soleil-style party scenes where flappers on trapezes [...] seem to swing right into your lap and DJs spin 21st-century hip-hop tracks” (*Entertainment Weekly*). Jay Gatsby under Luhrmann reigns up high, in his mansion and governs it through his high-performance personae; he *is* that “little party [that] never killed anyone,” he *is* the fireworks resounding with a crashing boom every weekend, repeatedly offering a new show. He is the “great” Gatsby, a dandy in his own right because he “overtly performs for an audience” (Feldman, 151). And yet, his audience can be reduced to an exclusive person, Daisy. Deeply governed by this dichotomy, Luhrmann understands the paradox that resides in Gatsby’s dandyism: to be seen he must make a spectacle himself and his wealth, must dazzle his spectators and hold their gaze long enough to make a lasting impression, all in the hopes of reaching Daisy across the shore. Luhrmann enhances the performance effect to a maximum through audio and visual effects, showing how deep Gatsby’s need for performativity is contingent on his identity. This latter point is painfully evident when he is seen pacing and staging himself at Nick’s cottage waiting for Daisy, losing his composure under the pressure of finally having the attention of his desired audience.

Struggling to put on a performance both as a dandy and as a respectable man (and ultimately failing at both), contemporary audiences identify with Jay Gatsby’s anxieties and yearning for a truthful, autonomous identity against the pressure to assimilate

1. See Feldman, Gill, Lemaire, Moers, Nye, and Stanton to cite some references.

with the social multitude. Especially in today’s society where being “different” (or “evading conformity” (2), as Feldman articulates) is of the utmost importance, we are reminded of Guy Debord’s quote on the dangers of mass consumption, mass production, and their deeply rooted ties to performativity: “In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into representation” (*Société du spectacle*, 2). Gatsby’s parties are symptomatic of the postmodern need to stand out and let our identity rise to the surface. This translates into a succession of performances, especially if we consider Patrice Pavis’s understanding that giving a performance is “to be endowed with a *je ne sais quoi* which triggers an immediate feeling of identification in the spectator, communicating a sense of living elsewhere and in an eternal present” (*Dictionnaire du théâtre*, 301).

Contemplating the stronghold social media has on our understanding of self-worth as well as our connections to others, performativity is deeply anchored in the social concept of identity, a point that Luhrmann embodies here through DiCaprio’s play on the screen and will later be adopted into meme culture. Yet, while Luhrmann’s Gatsby and in consequence, the memes it produces, are conveying the idea that the performance is simply a mirage in order to hide the painfully ugly truth, the meme has taken to also symbolize the triumph over the mundane, emphasizing the “living it large”-part in Gatsby’s charade. The audience recognizes in Gatsby’s struggles to survive (as a dandy, but also a crook) their own battles, but they relish in the notion of ‘going out with a bang’ as to overcome social platitudes and constrictions. As Blau’s quote underlines, the illusion of performance (and of dandyism) is two-fold: it plays with the idea that it simulates reality but it also delights in the fact that the audience is made aware of the illusion.

The use and popularity of the meme are tightly linked to DiCaprio’s embodiment of Gatsby on the big screen. Encapsulated in one still image, we find here all the core fundamentals of dandyism with a sprinkling of critical performativity. Consciously or subconsciously aware of Baudrillard and Debord’s critical framework on societal construction and reliance on performance and simulacra, Gatsby meme users celebrate the bigger-than-life opportunities only available in such high-performative, “Cirque du Soleil-style” illusions, pointing at the shortcomings of such productions as well as the desire to be part of them. While we could see in this type of behavior a fetishistic

reconciliation between reality and fantasy,² or even a sense of Bakhtinian carnivalesque exuberance in the hopes to live out the illusion even if just for a short while, the oscillating nature of Jay Gatsby as a popular icon in mainstream media is representative of the deep discrepancy within our social performativity. It responds to the continuously felt pressure to perform in congruence with narrow metrics in order to “be,” to exist as a singular individual and as a single voice in the polyphone global stage the world has become. And as such, because they embody and respond to this dual nature, these Gatsby memes can be understood in many ways as postmodern dandiacal responses to social contexts. Using the international success of *The Great Gatsby* as a cultural common ground, the memes become a centralized reference upon which individual users can generate their own cultural plug-in to comment and engage with their society.

Beyond the several catchphrases and quotes that are derived from Leonardo DiCaprio’s portrayal of Jay Gatsby (“old sport”, “can’t repeat the past”, etc.) or adjacent to his performance on the big screen (“a little party never killed nobody”, etc.), Jay Gatsby as a meme generator appeals on many levels, carrying with it a series of complex and interlocking layers of meaning, interpretation, and resonances. The small vignette, animated as a gif or as a simple still picture, draws its sway from the complex compression of DiCaprio’s Gatsby under the lens of Luhrmann’s commentary of Fitzgerald’s novel, which observes the culmination of European dandyism in the American 1920s. DiCaprio thus becomes the face and body for centuries worth of anti-normative behaviour and mannerism, a lifestyle and ideology condensed into a single snapshot. When mimicking Gatsby’s poses, gestures, or even speech pattern, memes communicate beyond the film they originate from. The greater online community recognizes the cultural reference, grasping and contextualizing the tone and intention of the message superimposed on the vignette right away. Though meme culture and its role in our cultural heritage are disputed by critics,³ the proficiency of these memes as cultural highways is incontestable. As a new form of communication, memes are a preferred tool because they not only eternalize and honour mesmerizing performances, but they also convey entire moods and meanings within one still frame. Gatsby memes in turn elevate the dazzling context and reading of Fitzgerald’s *The*

2. See Octave Mannoni, *Les Clefs pour l’imaginaire*, 1969.

3. See *Beyond the Meme* (2019) by Alan C. Love and William C. Wimsatt, as well as Marcelino Ayala’s article.

Great Gatsby through the use of a striking actor and invite us to be part of the pathos and the grandness of Gatsby. Using these memes and meme-able quotes imbues us with the power and weight of this interlocking sociocultural-dandiacal baggage, borrowing it for an instant to become the great Gatsby ourselves. Leonardo DiCaprio raising his glass against a night-sky of fireworks has become synonymous with Gatsby and his struggle, but also with dandiacal exaltation, culminating in a renewed expression of oneself when faced with subjugating social norms.

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I have noticed lately the emergence of an idiom as oft-used as it is insidious. It began when I arrived at my workplace and was met with a latte from a managing partner at the company. What I saw as a gracious gesture prompted a different response from my supervisor, a slight unbeknown to its offender, an offhand remark at once jarring and familiar: *he likes pretty Asian girls*. For me—and, surely, many others—this designation and its variants have become routine. We are categorized using a convenient formula, appearance + race + gender, which functions to condense and dismiss us as *pretty Asian girls*, *cute Asian women*, and *tiny Asian females*. In every case, our image precedes our merit.

Asian women's place in the North American lexicon indicates their peripheral existence in male-dominated Westernized societies as "figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate"; "bodies [without] a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender" and race; and "images of indifference, insignificance, and ineffectuality all [pointing] to a deficit of power" (Said 63; Butler 13; Ngai 18). Since the Western imperialist lens through which the East is imagined positions the West as "self" and the East as "Other," it follows that the former is the standard by which the latter is measured. Representations of the East are thus restrictive, passive, and non-normative as they exist solely to affirm the superiority of the West. Indeed, always regarded as small—that is to say, inconsequential—Asian women can be seen as the epitome of the cute aesthetic. In *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, cultural critic Sianne Ngai contends that "objects already regarded as familiar and unthreat-

ening" bring forth, not only "an aestheticization [of cuteness,] but an eroticization of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for 'small things' but also, sometimes a desire to belittle or diminish them further" (3). The ambivalence with which one objectifies the pretty Asian girl is evident precisely in the word "girl"—frequently used to describe Asian women well into adulthood—which indicates her infantilization and the subsequent need to be controlled. The colloquial preference for "girl" speaks to an Orientalist tradition of fetishization, particularly as it signals a paternalistic relationship between the childlike, Asian object and the powerful, Western subject. Paradoxically, to call someone "cute" is often to offer a compliment with the inference of attractiveness. However, regarding Asian women, what may be attractive to the person deploying the compliment is not the women themselves but the appeal of asserting one's power over them.

1. Cultural critic Edward Said theorizes Orientalism as, "in short, . . . a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient," that is, the Eastern world and its constituents (3). Examining the history of Western scholarship, he argues that the Orient is "Europe's . . . cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (1). The nature of Orientalism ensures that "European [or Westernized] culture [gains] in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (3).