

# The Curious Case of Christopher Tracy

Brian Doan



*Decades before Baz Luhrmann, Prince offered his own take on the intersection of pop style and Fitzgerald-like doomed love with “Under the Cherry Moon” (1986). Years later, the film’s improvisation of history, identity, glamour, and funk is still worth exploring.*

On June 7, 1986 (his 28th birthday), Prince played a celebratory concert in Detroit. Extant video footage that floats on and off YouTube every few months shows the birthday boy decked out in a sharp, '40s-cut canary yellow suit that makes him look like Louis Jourdan performing in a Vincente Minnelli musical. After his bandmate Wendy Melvoin leads the arena audience in an impromptu “Happy Birthday,” a sheepish Prince takes the mic. “I could’ve stayed in Uptown (his nickname for hometown Minneapolis) and partied, but I wanted to come down here and party with y’all!,” he shouts. This is followed by a “Woof!” as his band (the core group expanded with four dancers and a full horn section) plays “How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?” Prince sings along in an exaggerated whine, a smirk on his face, when suddenly his expression becomes a serious performer’s mask, his hands close around his mouth, and he yells out a bird-like “Caw! Caw!” as the band shifts on a dime to the guitar and bass-line of “Lady Cab Driver.” The spotlights swirl around him as Prince continues his call-and-response, clapping and kicking his legs out on either side to the beat. Suddenly, his hands shoot in the air and twirl downward like the moves of a snake-charmer: The band follows his lead and kicks into “Automatic,” a cold, robotic come-on from “1999” that, in the hands of the expanded Revolution, transforms into something warmer, thicker, and more indebted to '60s soul. This callback to an earlier pop moment is enhanced not only by Prince’s modified zoot suit, but also by his James Brown-like dance moves as he sings, and the way that movement eventually links him into a Temptations-style group dance with his troupe.

I’ve watched this video countless times, and I am always riveted. It only lasts two minutes, but Prince’s visual and musical choices trace an entire thread of pop history from 1945 to 1986, from the earliest days of R&B to the mid-'80s version of the pop ecumenism that has always been Prince’s mode of address. I’ve gone on at some length about it here because a month after this show, **“Under the Cherry Moon”** is released. It is the

eagerly awaited follow-up to “Purple Rain,” it is Prince’s directorial debut, and it will become the first real bomb of his career. But it cinematically crafts a similarly eclectic, historically aware, and very cheeky polyvalence, where time bends and logical contradiction (of look, style, race, funk) is blithely ignored. Set on the French Riviera in 1985, the movie’s magpie of influences hopscotches across ’20s jazz, ’30s screwball, and ’50s melodrama, all filtered through Prince’s musicality (there’s only one real production number in the film, but Prince’s comment at the time of production—“People have tried to tell me that a movie is a little bit more complex, but to me it’s just a larger version of an album”—seems like a potent guide to his process). As Baz Luhrmann’s new, pop-driven version of “[The Great Gatsby](#)” opens, it might be worth looking back at Prince’s take on a Fitzgeraldian world, and just how open, playful, and wonderfully strange a model of Midwestern creativity it really is.

Luhrmann’s movie is the fifth time Hollywood has tackled Fitzgerald’s most famous book: As early as 1926 (a year after

“The Great Gatsby” was published to relatively disappointing sales), it was made into a Paramount film starring Warner Baxter, Lois Hale, and William Powell (only a [trailer](#) of this version still exists, but its quick montage of guns, bathing beauties, and melodramatic embraces suggest how easily the surface elements of Fitzgerald’s book could be assimilated into Hollywood genres—and, indeed, how influenced by movies Fitzgerald always admitted he was). Paramount tried again in 1949 (with Alan Ladd in the title role, produced and co-written by future Bond screenwriter Richard Maibaum), and again in 1974, with Francis Ford Coppola writing, Jack Clayton directing, and a very strong cast that included Robert Redford, Mia Farrow, Sam Waterston, and Bruce Dern (only Farrow and Dern seem miscast, but that and Clayton’s erratic direction are enough to make it a noble failure). Mira Sorvino, Paul Rudd, and Toby Stephens starred in a 2000 TV-film of the novel that was made jointly by A&E and Granada Television, but failed to make much of a mark. One of the difficulties any adaptation of “Gatsby” faces is that Fitzgerald’s language is so visual, so evocative, so *cinematic* that it seems made for the screen. But that filmic quality only exists in the words: The constant interplay of description, romanticism, and analysis—where Fitzgerald at once puts us in his world and gives us ironic distance—creates an ever-shifting perspective where earnestness and irony interact promiscuously. It casts a spell, not unlike Gatsby does for narrator Nick Carraway; but literalized on the screen, the mystery dissipates, because the need to show (no matter how opulent the space, or strong the performers) flattens out the riddles generated in the prose.



"Bernice Bobs Her Hair" (Joan Micklin Silver, 1976)

The best "adaptations" of Fitzgerald are rarely the straight translations of his stories (the exception being a superb "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," done for PBS in 1976, with Shelley Duvall). Instead, it's the work that draws on certain elements of milieu, style, and tone that get at his universe most fruitfully, and a lot of them appear on television: the mysterious, class-driven façade of Don Draper on "Mad Men"; the decadent, Upper East Side ironies of "Gossip Girl"; the war-saturated gangsterland of "Boardwalk Empire," its characters unable to escape historical nostalgia. What all of these programs share is a fascination with the clash of the historical and the modernist, the glitter of the new rubbing up against the pull of the old, and that dynamic creating both possibility and tragedy.

What better guide to that groove than Prince, like Fitzgerald a Minnesota romantic whose need for (as one song titled it) a "New Position" is chronic, but always based on a knowledge of what's come before? "Under The Cherry Moon" had a difficult history. Screenwriter Becky Johnston was hired to flesh out a story idea Prince had loosely developed from the lyrics of his song "Condition of the Heart," about a love triangle involving "a woman from the ghetto who makes funny faces, just like Clara Bow"; this developed into a tale of two gigolos on the Riviera who stumble into real love. Music video director Mary Lambert was hired as the film's director, but was replaced by Prince four days into shooting. The movie boasted cinematographer Michael Ballhaus and production designer Richard Sylbert among its crew, but much of the cast was inexperienced: Prince and sidekick Jerome Benton had only appeared in one film, and Kristin Scott Thomas was making her debut. Stage actor Steven Berkoff replaced Terrence Stamp at the last minute as Scott Thomas's father, and Victor Spinetti had a small role, bringing with him pop associations from "A Hard Day's Night" and "Help!," but the rest of the on-screen talent was undistinguished. Prince shot quickly, the film was done in two months, and

it had its world debut in Sheridan, Wyoming, where Prince took MTV contest winner and town resident Lisa Barber as his date (he acted like a perfect gentleman, she told *People Magazine*). The movie cost twice as much as “*Purple Rain*,” took in one-fifth as much at the box office, and except for the concert film “*Sign ‘O’ The Times*” and the even bigger flop “*Graffiti Bridge*,” marked the end of Prince’s movie career.



The financial and critical failure of “*Under the Cherry Moon*” (among major critics, only J. Hoberman gave it a rave) has haunted its reputation, but it’s actually a very enjoyable piece of work. Its most famous scene is also its most emblematic: American gigolo Christopher Tracy (Prince) and his manager/best friend Tricky (Benton) are wining, dining, and mocking heiress Mary Sharon (Scott Thomas) at a swanky restaurant, their teasing reaching a peak when Christopher—in full Groucho Marx mode—grabs a napkin and “crayon” (“That’s French,” he mutters drunkenly) from a waiter and writes “WRECKA STOW” on it, displaying it triumphantly to Mary, and asking her to read it out loud. She responds haughtily that it’s gibberish, but Christopher persists, as Tricky giggles at the edge of the frame: “If you wanted to buy a Sam Cooke record, where would you go?” Christopher asks, his eyes bulging like a cartoon. Catching on to the slang, Mary mutters, “a wrecka stow.” Throughout the movie, as both director and star, Prince is generating an alternative language, which draws on but is in no way indebted to the familiar (and all its attendant codes of emotional response). It’s part professional (and couldn’t help but be, given the experience of Ballhaus and Sylbert) and part defiantly amateur, its mash-up of romance, sitcom, and spirituality at times making it feel like the world’s most expensive experimental film: Figures float in and out of shallow focus, scripted moments dissolve into improvisatory sketches, and the actors seem to delight in bending their characters to their real-life public personae. Questioned by a flustered society woman at Mary’s birthday party (while holding the tarot cards Mary has received as a gift), Christopher is asked “if he does [readings] professionally.” He smiles and responds, “Madam, I do nothing professionally. I only do things for fun.” It’s the movie’s statement of purpose, and how rewarding one finds it depends on how far one’s definition of “fun” stretches.

A good chunk of that fun comes from the film’s fleet intertextuality. Ballhaus had just shot “*After Hours*” (1985), kicking off a long association with Martin Scorsese, and he brings a hard-edged, black-and-white shimmer to “*Moon*,” evoking perfume ad aesthetics and *noir* simultaneously; but where his work with Scorsese blends reference, narrative, and spiritual revelation into something intensely claustrophobic, the blend of these same elements in “*Moon*” is gossamer light—even when Christopher’s life is threatened or his love with Mary reaches a peak, the movie’s tone remains defiantly absurd. The effect is a dissipation of narrative momentum: Instead of moving strictly from point “A” to point “B” in a linear manner, each scene feels like a set of elements on Prince’s mixing board, that he can raise and lower, emphasize or scramble at will. “Life’s a parade,”



Christopher exults to Tricky (thus working the soundtrack album's title into the mix), and Prince's approach as a director is not unlike the conga line that Tricky starts at Mary's party: a surreal mix of high and low ("Every note in a chord is a singer to me," Prince said at the time, speaking of his music and perhaps also his directorial style). A fairy tale narration takes us into movie, but plays over scenes of Prince seducing a woman at the piano; the black-and-white Riviera fantasia evokes Astaire & Rogers, except here "Astaire" keeps Miles Davis fusion records on display at his apartment; a foppish voice speaks through the telephone to one of Christopher's assignations, his voice distorted by modern movie sound design to recall a twenties gentleman (even as Christopher claims a model of modernist cool for himself through comparison: "Billy Eckstine he ain't, baby"); the swanky nightclub is a set design out of "Gilda," but the sudden appearance of a giant boom-box means its soundtrack is the sleek '80s funk of "Girls and Boys" rather than "Put the Blame on Mame."



And of course, Prince is the one doing the theoretical striptease. "Under The Cherry Moon" is hardly a model of feminism: Mary is a rich girl who only finds her true self through love (although Scott Thomas deserves credit for how hard she works to flesh out this stereotype); we never get a real sense of Christopher's or Tricky's other romantic conquests as characters; and in the movie's most infamous scene, a distraught Christopher is reeling from losing Mary, and sees the middle-aged woman hitting on him on the balcony as an almost demonic image. All of that acknowledged, the movie is still fascinating for how often it plays with male homosociality in the relationship between Chris and Tricky (the film's true and mostly acknowledged romance), and how often Prince puts himself under his own gaze.

The first time we see Mary is from behind, running through the mansion at her birthday party dressed in nothing but a towel, which she drops when she gets to the porch and displays her birthday suit to the assembled crowd of "Gatsby"-like revelers. But we see this movement briefly, and it is Prince's body—clothed or half-naked—that holds the camera's fascination. What critics in 1986 took as Prince's directorial narcissism feels more like self-deprecation and performative play 27 years later. The camera dollies in on Christopher as Mary first sees him, all outstretched tongue and sly come-on; it follows him around the party rather than her; it frames him in skin-tight leotards and Edwardian frills; it lingers on him in the bathtub (a parody both of Prince's album photos and of the John Lennon bathtub scene in "A Hard Day's Night"). Mary's first full scene is a goofy

one of her clumsily drumming at her party; when the camera shifts to Christopher, the soundtrack is full of layered, polished drum machines: Christopher, it suggests, has the rhythm to make things move. In Fitzgerald terms, Christopher is both *Gatsby* and *Daisy*.



This performance of an androgynous sexuality contrasts with Steven Berkoff's equally theatrical play: His Isaac Sharon is no less mannered or cartoonish, but at the opposite end of macho, as he swaggers, grunts, grimaces, and does everything he can to thwart Mary and Christopher's romance. The Tom Buchanan-Daisy-Gatsby triangle shifts in "Moon" from a romantic one to a paternal/romantic one, but it's no less invested in class and money, the criminal undertones of *Gatsby*'s business dealings made explicit (Isaac is a corrupt shipping tycoon, while Christopher prostitutes himself in a more playful way). Prince's performance drains Christopher's macho and replaces it with camp, while Berkoff's dials the macho to "11," but in both cases their choices call attention to how constructed those gender codes are, and thus how ripe they are for cinematic refitting (Fitzgerald's descriptions and the narrative arc of *Gatsby*—the tragic self-made man, all artifice and show—do the same thing in a literary manner).

Berkoff's presence also connects the film to 1984's "Beverly Hills Cop," where he played a similarly villainous role, in a moment when black stardom and sexuality was being either reified or re-imagined in mainstream and independent cinema. A month after "Moon," Spike Lee's "She's Gotta Have It" will present a very different, black-and-white vision of black sexuality and auteurship, one whose success will have a seismic effect and create the space for what comes to be known as "the Black New Wave." Despite their many stylistic differences, what the films (and Lee and Prince more generally) share is a desire to play with racial stereotypes, and an interest in doing so by blending a wide range of African-American cultural signifiers with those of European modernism.



"She's Gotta Have It" (Spike Lee, 1986)

"She's Gotta Have It" presents an image of black male sexuality spread across three different characters, allowing Lee to present and spoof various stereotypes: outspoken b-boy Mars, assimilated, conservative male model Greer, and working-class everyman Jamie, all of them interacting with the images of black female sexuality presented by Nola. "Moon" offers only two images of black sexuality—Christopher and Tricky—and those images often overlap, blend and playfully bounce off each other: loverman, romantic fool, sexual object (at one point, during "Girls and Boys," Christopher is on stage, dancing on the piano, and his body and movements dissolve directly onto Tricky doing the same moves—for a split second, they are superimposed, one. It's also notable that the film-ending replay of Christopher's earlier romantic speech, detailing what happens "If two people loved each other..." plays over an image of Tricky (standing on the balcony of his Miami penthouse) rather than an image of Mary—it echoes the way "Gatsby"'s true romance is between Jay and Nick, who loves him far more than Daisy does). These images of black sexuality also bounce off the various white, European gentry along the Riviera, and the film has perverse fun deploying and then mocking this gentry's investment in those stereotypes. Race is only mentioned once in the film (when Christopher and Tricky compare skin tones), but their status as party crashers to the upper class thrives on how well they deploy, exploit, and defuse the exaggerated gestures, dialects, and body images that underpin their performances of different definitions of "blackness" (this includes occasional direct address to the audience, breaking the fourth wall just to emphasize the self-awareness of these constructed images).

The intersection of race and modernism is part of "Gatsby"'s DNA, too: Tom Buchanan is obsessed with the white supremacist theories of political theorist Lothrop Stoddard (who, in one of the book's early jokes at Tom's expense, he misidentifies as "Goddard"), asking Tom, "Have you read 'The Rise of the Coloured Empires'?" and continuing on about how "we've produced all the things that go to make civilization—oh, science and art, and all that." Racial difference becomes one of Tom's markers, a bulwark against personal anxiety: When things are breaking down with Daisy near the end of the novel, he returns to white supremacist beliefs and rails about the dangers of interracial romance, exactly the idea that "Moon" delights in, even as its



deft manipulation of “all the things that go to make civilization” undercuts Tom’s racist bellowing. Published the same year as “Gatsby,” Alain Locke’s “The New Negro” will rebuke Stoddard, declaring, “Negro life is not only establishing new contacts and founding new centers, it is finding a new soul. There is a fresh spiritual and cultural focusing. We have, as the heralding sign, an unusual outburst of creative expression,” and noting that this expression must be read through prisms both national and international: “Although there are few centers that can be pointed out approximating Harlem’s significance, the full significance of that even is a racial awakening on a national and perhaps even a world scale.”



“The Great Gatsby” (Jack Clayton, 1974)

Histories of “Under The Cherry Moon” suggest that Prince chose the French Riviera because he wanted to travel and loved the location, and the script was written to match the setting; but given Prince’s keen sense of pop history and the movie’s effortless evocation of the ’20s and ’30s in its costumes and set design, I suspect it’s also a reminder that, while Jay and Daisy were doomed in West Egg, a post-war generation of black writers and artists were listening to Josephine Baker at the *Theatre des Champs-Élysées* (she made her debut, like Gatsby, in 1925), finding an escape from the suffocating racism of their native land (just as the post-World War II generation of writers and artists, like James Baldwin and Prince’s idol Miles Davis, would in the ’40s and ’50s. Davis would even compose the soundtrack of Louis Malle’s “Elevator to the Gallows” (1958), one of the films associated with the New Wave that would so influence “She’s Gotta Have It,” and released the year of Prince’s birth).

It is “Girls and Boys”—the one outright performance number in “Moon,” full of jazzy, sax-driven funk—that is the film’s peak. At one point, just before her father’s thugs come to drag her away, Christopher and Mary are dancing in and out of the stage lights, creating a silhouette effect that, against the arching stage ferns and musical instruments, evokes the paintings of Aaron Douglas, the Topeka artist who lit out for New York in 1925, just as Fitzgerald was publishing his masterpiece, and became the most important painter of the Harlem Renaissance (among many achievements, he helped to illustrate Locke’s “The New Negro”). Douglas’s synthesis of European Modernism and Egyptian and West African art is full of color, light, abstracted patterns, and concentric circles where, in the words of art historian Shelley Staples, “various elements of past and present in the same mural panel upended the notion of a purely linear conception of historical time.” It would



have a major influence on generations of visual artists, writers, and musicians, and its influence can certainly be seen and heard in Prince's appropriation of '20s Deco and '30s screwball, and most importantly, in his blend of periods and styles on the soundtrack.



Prince recorded the first four songs—which function as a seamless pop overture for the rest of the album—back-to-back on the first day of recording in 1985. He recorded the others over the course of the next eight months, then sent the tapes to Clare Fischer, the Michigan-born composer and arranger who created string sections for certain songs and sent the tapes back to Prince for his approval. The results were extraordinary, as Prince's sense of pop, funk, and jazz structures brushed up against Fischer's blend of jazz and classical arranging to become the sonic equivalent of Douglas's visual abstractions and temporal play (one critic called it "Ravel with drum machines"). It was cultural anthropology with an aesthetic edge, and the album, "Parade," is still Prince's most avant-garde. In the context of the film, this music functions as commentary on the action (as with the melodramatic "Under The Cherry Moon"), punctuation (the title track's elaborate drum patterns take us into the Rivera after the credits), and self-parody (as when Christopher sings along with and air-drums to a cassette of "Prince" in the car, until he spots the headlights of Mary's car, and regains his cool composure).

When Christopher is killed by Issac's thugs at the end of the film, he ascends to heaven, or at least that's what the music tells us: The fragile acoustic ballad "Sometimes It Snows in April" offers a vision of Christopher from Tricky's heartbroken perspective, while the appearance of the actual Prince and the Revolution on the credits, singing "Mountains" while floating in the clouds, suggests a witty play on myths of rebirth, the ending *Gatsby* didn't get. Is it possible that this is also the "heaven" that Duke Ellington wrote of in his work, the code word for Harlem, with all its political and artistic possibilities for a burgeoning black artistic class, one more historical nod to the past by the director, even as his funk closes the film out in the musical future? Or has the green light moved out of the bay and across the continent? At a key moment in "Under the Cherry Moon," Tricky sports a cowboy hat; it's an ironic play on a key signifier of American masculinity, since Tricky is wearing it during a breakdown, but also a reminder of where Jerome Benton and Prince are from—the Midwest that Fitzgerald (himself a St. Paul native) refers to throughout "*Gatsby*" as "the West," without any qualification. For Nick Carraway, it's a space of retreat from an East he no longer wants any part of; for Fitzgerald, a space he

escaped. But for Prince it remains the frontier in all senses, the center out of which stretches his endless creative horizon, where concentric circles of style, image, and history float like cherry moons. It's Prince's final reversal on the Fitzgerald dilemma: "to be borne back ceaselessly into the past" not as nostalgia trap or defeat, but as a postmodernist call to arms.