Better than the Book?

Film Adaptations of American Literary Classics

Lecturer: Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan L. Brandt
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Room and Time: SR 34 D2 · Wed., 15:15-16:45
First session: March 13, 2013
Course number: SE 512.252

Course description: What happens when a literary classic is turned into a motion picture? Can a film reflect the gist of a well-acclaimed novel, short story, drama, or comic book accurately? And, more importantly: Does it necessarily aspire to do so? The rift between literary and cinematic productions seems huge. Nevertheless, film adaptations often stress the proximity to the original and capitalize upon the ‘magic’ power of literary works. “Well over half of all commercial films have come from literary originals“ (D. Andrew). This course deals with the challenges that cinematic adaptations of literary texts face in terms of their compositional features, the cultural background of film and original, and the dynamics of reception. Books/films to be analyzed in class include Gone with the Wind (1936/39), Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955/58), Breakfast at Tiffany’s (1958/61), To Kill a Mockingbird (1960/62), and On the Road (1957/2012).

Methods: This is an interactive course. Participation in group discussions as well as contributions to the discussion forum on the Moodle course site will be part of the final grade. Each meeting will be held by ‘experts’ who organize the session by means of questions, games, illustrations, video clips, and group work. The most relevant facts will be conveyed in a short information block (or, alternatively, a ‘fact file’ on a handout).

Aims: The course aims at a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between literary works and their adaptations. We will focus on the structural mechanisms as well as the aesthetic patterns that lie at the heart of film versions of literature.

Assessment: Regular attendance; active in-class participation; presentation as part of an expert session with 2-page handout to be distributed in class; at least 8 elaborate entries in the discussion forum; and a final paper of ca. 15 pages.

Syllabus

Mar. 13 Introduction – Film Adaptations
Basic texts (recommended):

Mar. 20 Noir Aesthetics - The ‘Literary’ Dimension of Films
Main text (obligatory):
Graham Greene, The Third Man (1950).
Film version (required for experts):
The Third Man (dir. Carol Reed, 1949).

Mar. 27, Apr. 3 & 10 No class! (Easter Holiday)
Relax and enjoy!

Apr. 17 Gothic Fiction – Cinematic Adaptation and the Power of the Uncanny
Main text (obligatory):
Film adaptation (required for experts):
Sleepy Hollow (dir. Tim Burton, 1999).

Apr. 24 Long Live Romance – Kitsch and the Blockbuster
Main text (obligatory):
Margaret Mitchell, excerpts from Gone with the Wind (1936).
Film adaptation (required for experts):

1 texts for this course are available on Moodle: http://moodle.uni-graz.at/construct/index.php.
May 1  
**No class! (Day of Labor)**

*Relax and enjoy!*

May 8  
**Children’s Literature – The Many Faces of ‘The Wizard of Oz’**

Main text (obligatory):

Film adaptation (required for experts):

May 15  
**Theater to Screen – Melodrama and the Social Problem Film**

Main text (obligatory):
Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955).

Film adaptation (required for experts):

May 22  
**The Romantic Comedy – Escapism and Entertainment**

Main text (obligatory):
Truman Capote, “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” (1958).

Film version (required for experts):

May 29  
**Mastering Suspense – Crime Fiction and the ‘Hitchcock Touch’**

Main text (obligatory):
Cornell Woolrich, “It Had to Be Murder” (1942).

Film version (required for experts):

June 5  
**The Politics of Race – The Civil-Rights Movement and the ‘Other’**

Main text (obligatory):

Film adaptation (required for experts):

June 12  
**Against All Conventions – Metafiction and Narrative Experimentation**

Main text (obligatory):

Film version (required for experts):
*Adaptation* (dir. Spike Jonze, 2002).

June 19  
**Autobiography and Rebellion – American Counterculture in the Movies**

Main text (obligatory):

Film version (required for experts):

June 26  
**The Making of ‘Quality Television’ – Adapting ‘Chick Lit’ to the Small Screen**

Main text (obligatory):
Candace Bushnell, excerpt from *Sex and the City* (1997).

Adaptation (required for experts):
*Sex and the City*, first episode (written by Darren Star & dir. by Susan Seidelman, 1998).

July 3  
**Science Fiction – The Apocalypse in Literature and Film**

Main text (obligatory):

Film versions (required for experts):

*I Am Legend* (dir. Francis Lawrence, 2007).