

Better than the Book?

Film Adaptations of American Literary Classics

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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):

Dudley Andrew, “Adaptation” [1984], in: *Film Theory and Criticism* (eds. L. Braudy and M. Cohen), 2004.

Thomas Leitch, “Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads,” in: *Adaptation 1.1* (2008).¹

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, **No class! (Easter Holiday)**

Apr. 3 & 10

Relax and enjoy!

Apr. 17 **Gothic Fiction – Cinematic Adaptation and the Power of the Uncanny**

Main text (obligatory):

Washington Irving, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (1820).

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>.

Gone with the Wind (dir. Victor Fleming, 1939).

- 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):
L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900).
Film adaptation (required for experts):
The Wizard of Oz (dir. Victor Fleming, 1939).
- 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):
Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (dir. Richard Brooks, 1958).
- May 22** **The Romantic Comedy – Escapism and Entertainment**
Main text (obligatory):
Truman Capote, "Breakfast at Tiffany's" (1958).
Film version (required for experts):
Breakfast at Tiffany's (dir. Blake Edwards, 1961).
- 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):
Rear Window (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1954).
- June 5** **The Politics of Race – The Civil-Rights Movement and the 'Other'**
Main text (obligatory):
Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Read selectively!
Film adaptation (required for experts):
To Kill a Mockingbird (dir. Robert Mulligan, 1962).
- June 12** **Against All Conventions – Metafiction and Narrative Experimentation**
Main text (obligatory):
Devin Harner, "Adaptation, *The Orchid Thief*, and the Subversion of Hollywood Conventions" (2010).
Film version (required for experts):
Adaptation (dir. Spike Jonze, 2002).
- June 19** **Autobiography and Rebellion – American Counterculture in the Movies**
Main text (obligatory):
Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957). Read selectively!
Film version (required for experts):
On the Road (dir. Walter Salles, 2012).
- 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):
Richard Matheson, excerpts from *I Am Legend* (1959).
Film versions (required for experts):
The Omega Man (dir. Boris Sagal, 1971).
I Am Legend (dir. Francis Lawrence, 2007).