THE NEXUS OF LITERATURE AND FILM

Definition of a pseudo-intellectual: someone who always says, "The book was better than the movie."

A problem in most academic film courses is that they are often taught exactly like literature courses, with films examined as if they were merely another form of literature. But film is not literature. Literature is little black things called words appearing on somewhat larger white things called pages. Film is primarily visual. It is probably as close if not closer to painting as to literature. Apples and oranges would not sufficiently describe the difference between film and literature because apples and oranges are both fruit. To eternally say, "The book was better than the movie" is to reveal antiquarian snobbery towards newer art forms and to betray a certain ignorance of both literature and film.

Nevertheless, film and literature do influence and inform one another. And they do overlap and intersect. This course concerns itself with that place where they overlap and intersect. To reduce it to one word, this course is about issues in adaptation, usually literature to film but sometimes the other way around.

BOOKS (available in Douglass Bookstore)

Nathaniel Hawthorne  The Scarlet Letter
John Irving  My Movie Business
Joseph Conrad  Heart of Darkness
David Mamet  Oleana
William Shakespeare  Romeo and Juliet
Henry James  The Turn of the Screw
Anna Quindlen  One True Thing

ADDITIONAL READINGS

I have placed on electronic reserve all the other readings for this course. This saves you the xeroxing and permissions costs, which would have been considerable. These readings include everything from short essays through complete film scripts. As you look at the syllabus, any item to be read other than the seven works listed above is on electronic reserve. These readings are quite as important, in some cases more so, than the seven books to be purchased. Please go on line and print these works out for yourself as a packet and make sure they are with you when they are to come up in class. This goes for the books too.

To access the readings on electronic reserve, go on the web, access Rutgers, access the Rutgers libraries, access reserves and connect to it, then enter my name, Rockland, and go to our
course. Be careful: I am teaching another course this semester which also has a long electronic readings list. Be sure to print out the one for our seminar.

FILMS

A number of short films will be screened in class. Most films, however, will be seen before class in the new media room of the Douglass Library. These films will be placed on reserve for two weeks before their discussion date in class and you will watch them on video monitors (unless you prefer to rent them and see them privately). Virtually all of the feature films are also available for rental in video stores or from services such as Netflix. You may wish to watch the films with a friend from the seminar or even make something of a party out of seeing one or more of the films. In any case, I list below the ample hours of the media room. It is easy to see the films; the media room is open some 80 hours per week.

Films to be seen before class are indicated in the syllabus with an asterisk (*).

SYLLABUS

Tues. Jan. 19  FILM AND REALITY: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

read: Notes on David Holzman’s Diary

film: David Holzman’s Diary (no asterisk, therefore to be seen in class)

Tues. Jan. 26  FILM TO LITERATURE: WHEN THE INFLUENCE GOES THE OTHER WAY

read: script from Four Days on Big City Waters by Charles Woolfolk and Michael Rockland; Up the Creek to Manhattan in New Jersey Monthly and "Up the Creek to Manhattan" from Snowshoeing Through Sewers by Michael Rockland

film: Three Days on Big City Waters (again, no asterisk, so to be seen in class).

Tues. Feb.2  THE NEXUS OF FILM AND LITERATURE: POINT OF VIEW

film: *The Lady in the Lake* (partial screening in class)

Tues. Feb. 9   **NOVEL TO FILM I**

read: *My Movie Business: A Memoir*, by John Irving

film: *The Cider House Rules* (*) (reminder: asterisk means to be seen outside of class.)

Tues. Feb/ 16  **NOVEL TO FILM II**

read: *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne

film: (*) *The Scarlet Letter*

NOTE: Those who have not read *The Scarlet Letter* before are to see the movie first, read the novel afterwards; those who have read the novel before are to read it again and then see this particular version of the movie (the contemporary, Demi Moore/Gary Oldman version only).

Tues. Feb. 23  **SHORT STORIES TO FILM**

read: "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," by Ambrose Bierce; "The Swimmer," by John Cheever

films: a short story to a short film: *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (*) and a short story to a feature film: *The Swimmer* (*)

Tues. March 2  **NOVEL TO FILM III:**

read: excerpt from *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck (chapters 28-30)

film: *The Grapes of Wrath* (*) and in class part of a filmed version of the play

Tues. March 9  **NOVELA TO FILM: AFRICA IN VIET NAM**

read: Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

films: *Apocalypse Now* (*) and *Hearts of Darkness* (*)

Tues. March 23  **PLAY TO FILM**

read: *Oleanna* by David Mamet/ film: *Oleanna* (*)

Tues. March 30 **SHAKESPEARE TO BROADWAY MUSICAL TO FILM**
Read: *Romeo and Juliet*, by William Shakespeare

film: *West Side Story* (*)

**Tues. April 6  ADAPTATION AND ITS PERILS**


Film *Adaptation* (*)

Note: see course requirements for special assignment for this session or, in the alternative, for the November 18th seminar

**Tues. April 13  FROM FILM SCRIPT TO FILM**

read: the film script of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* by Harold Pinter, including the foreword by John Fowles; excerpt from *Point of View in Fiction and Film: Focus on John Fowles* by Charles Garard; "The French Lieutenant's Woman," from *Filming Literature: The Art of Screen Adaptation*, by Neil Sinyard; and  *Translating Fowles into Film*, by Leslie Gants.

film *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (*)

Note: see course requirements for special assignment for this seminar or, in the alternative, for the November 11th seminar.

**Tues. April 20  FROM NOVEL TO FILM SCRIPT TO FILM**


film: *One True Thing* (*) and footage from the making of the film (the latter in class)
Note: We will hold this session at my home in Morristown, the principal set for *One True Thing*. It will probably be a potluck supper. We'll discuss logistics for this session when we meet, including carpools, time convenient for everyone, etc.

Tues. April 27

HOW DOES ONE FILM AMBIGUITY?

read: *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James

Note: See course requirements for special assignment due this day. for everyone.

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GROUND RULES

ATTENDANCE. Unlike many lecture courses, attendance is required for all sessions of the seminar. A seminar is a learning community. We cannot do without the presence of a single member of the community at every session. Unexcused absences will be reflected in your course grade. If you are ill or have a very important reason for missing any session of the seminar, you must reach me by phone or e-mail no later than one hour prior to a seminar meeting. If you do not reach me by one hour before a seminar meeting it will count as an absence. And please always be on time.

A large part of your grade will be based on class participation. Be sure you have read **everything** assigned before each class and be sure to have seen each film that is on reserve before each class. If you are unprepared for the seminar, trust me: I'll know.

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS. There will be no examinations given in this seminar—unless I feel that some of you are not doing your work. Should that occur I may consider a final exam. Hopefully, as in the past, that will not be necessary. Thus, your seven written assignments are crucial to your grade. Everyone is responsible for writing five short papers over the course of the seminar. These short papers are due on Mondays, the day before seminar meetings, at any time but no later than 8 p.m. This is so I can read and grade them no later than our seminar meetings on Tuesdays. You may **not** send me your papers by e-mail attachment. Printed out papers are to be placed in the manila envelope provided for this purpose on the bulletin board outside the American Studies office. You will decide which weeks you choose to write, beginning with week III, but do not put off writing papers and later find yourself in trouble. In addition to the copy of your short paper placed in the manila envelope, you are to bring three other copies and pass them around no later than the beginning of the seminar. The first thing we will do at each session beginning with week III is read and discuss the papers of those who have written for that week.
Papers may be one page long but may not be longer than two pages, double spaced. If your paper on a particular occasion is longer than two pages, edit it down to where it is only two pages long. No cover sheets, please. Just your title and your name on top of the first page. Think of these papers as the length of a newspaper editorial. Also, give your papers a title representative of the argument you advance. And I do want you to have an argument or, at least, a thesis or strong point of view.

Papers for a particular week should deal in the main with the readings and films for that week, but they may also pick up threads from previous weeks' conversations and materials and elaborate on them in connection with the materials for the current week.

I will be grading these papers +, , and -, standing for excellent, satisfactory, and unsatisfactory respectively.

You will have two other special writing assignments. In the first case, you are to choose whether to do the assignment for the April 6th or April 13th seminar, focusing on Adaptation or The French Lieutenant’s Woman. If you do both, one can count as one of the five short papers. For April 6th I would like you to present an alternative to Kaufmann’s way of dealing with Susan Orleans’ New Yorker non-fiction story; or, for April 13th an alternative to Pinter’s way of dealing with the double ending of John Fowles’ The French Lieutenant’s Woman. As for length, 5-6 pages. What you are, in effect, doing is providing a film treatment—how you would make the film as opposed to how Kaufman in one case and Pinter in the other case suggested doing so. As with your short papers, these projects will be placed in the manila envelope on Mondays by 8 p.m. in time for me to read and grade prior to the seminar, and two extra copies will be sufficient to bring to class.

Everyone will do the second special assignment, due for the last meeting of the seminar. The reading assignment for that date is Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw. There have been several attempts to make a film of The Turn of the Screw but they have been failures. The difficulty is in handling point of view. The story is told by the governess, so one may read it and 1) accept her version of events or 2) find her deranged and culpable or 3) you will simply not be able to determine what is the truth. In this novela Henry James is a master of ambiguity. But how does one film ambiguity?

Your assignment is to create a film treatment of The Turn of the Screw in which you decide how to go about making a film of it which somehow captures its ambiguity. Your treatment will have to wrestle with the issue of point of view. Of course, in a film, the camera has the final word in point of view), so I would like you to suggest camera angles for crucial scenes—plus lighting, set decoration and design, casting, possible voiceovers, music, etc. In short, imagine yourself the auteur or director of the film and imagine your reader as a producer considering the viability of your film proposal artistically and commercially.
As with the special assignments of April 6th and 13th, the suggested length is 5-6 pages. Hand in an original on Monday, April 26th only one extra copy brought to class on April 27th will be sufficient.

What this Course Attempts to Accomplish

A liberal arts major such as American Studies should send its students out into the world with three key skills: the ability to write succinctly and with a manifest purpose; to ability to speak without hesitation in an articulate and, if possible, charming manner, persuasive without being obnoxious about it; the ability to read and think critically. All of your courses try to do this. In the senior seminar these skills are tested at every session because of the close intimacy of the course. And they are the skills one needs for success in the world, regardless of profession chosen. In some ways, the subject matter is immaterial for achieving the above named skills, though I hope you will find our subject matter of particular interest and, therefore, will work harder to succeed. One should not think of the senior seminar as being like any other course. It is a capstone to your undergraduate years and should be thought of as a, if not the, special course.

I should add that our special interest is the intersection of film and literature—in short the issue of adaptation. Usually, this is from literature to film, though in Week II we will look at an example in my own work of adaptation from film to literature. In Week III of the course we will look at many varieties of the theory of adaptation which we will apply in the ensuing weeks. Adaptation is a form of “translation”—in this case translation from one medium to another. There is a book I favor titled in Spanish El Delito de Traducir (The Crime of Translation). Of course, translation is not a crime as such. What is being suggested is that, when we translate, the new work is really that of the translator not the original creative artist. Thus one finds readers invested in a particular book invariably denouncing the work when translated to film and saying “the book was better than the movie.” Well it may have been better as a book than the movie is as a movie, but it may not be at all. Indeed, some of the best movies are made from poor books precisely because it is difficult if not impossible to translate an author’s style in words to the visuals of a film.

This course is especially relevant to students interested in being writers or filmmakers or both, but it is also relevant to any student who loves literature and loves film and is attracted to that place where they meet. There is also a theory underlying the course: that yesterday’s “trash” is often tomorrow’s art. Until movies came along early in the Twentieth Century the novel was not taken seriously for the most part in English or Literature courses. It was seen as “mere entertainment.” Movies made novels “respectable.” Closer to our own time, television, the new “trash,” made movies “respectable.” The movies of my youth, not taken seriously at the time, are now the subject of film festivals and treated as high art. The internet and such seemingly frivolous new technologies as Facebook and Twitter will eventually make television “respectable” too.