

English 338: American Narratives: Film and Fiction

Spring 2012

Tuesday-Thursday, 11.50-1.05, Olin Science Center 107

Thursday 7 PM, Blaustein 210, screenings.

Instructor: Michaela Bronstein

Office Hours: 2.45 - 5 PM Thursdays, Blaustein 320

(Please e-mail to schedule meetings at any other time.)

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Once we sit down in a darkened theater, we only rarely get up and leave before the movie is over. By contrast, when we read a novel, we put it down when we reach our subway stop, when it's time for lunch, when we drift off to sleep. Yet novels, like film, are primarily works designed to be read in a particular sequence, and, like filmmakers, novelists work to manipulate our experience over the duration of their work. This is even more true when a story isn't being told the way we might expect it—when events appear out of order, when a narrator can't be trusted, when one story interrupts another.

This course uses film in order to discuss the ways modern American novelists use the form of their work to manipulate us as readers: to surprise us, or to make us curious, to delight us or to make us grieve. Whether to make a social point, to get an emotional response, or to make us think about the human condition, storytellers in both forms have developed an impressive arsenal of formal devices—from a carefully chosen word to an ingeniously framed shot—to shape our experience of their material. This course will examine how the differences in media create different problems and possibilities for storytelling—and how, even across wide differences in content, film and fiction find uses for some of the same narrative devices.

We will discuss the history of the novel as compared to film in twentieth-century America, and attend to how the replacement of the novel by film as a central form of cultural production has affected the ways authors imagine and create their readership.

Texts and Films:

Henry James, "The Turn of the Screw" (1898)

Vertigo (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1958)

Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905)

The Philadelphia Story (dir. George Cukor, 1940)

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925)

Do the Right Thing (dir. Spike Lee, 1989)

Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926)

Winter's Bone (dir. Debra Granik, 2010)

William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936)

Citizen Kane (dir. Orson Welles, 1941)

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (1955)

Annie Hall (dir. Woody Allen, 1977)

James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (1956)

The Night of the Hunter (dir. Charles Laughton, 1955)

Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1963)
The Godfather, Part II (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1974)
Joan Didion, “The White Album” (1979)
Scorpio Rising (dir. Kenneth Anger, 1964)
Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (2008)
The Conversation (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1974)

[For a transatlantic version of this class, I’d imagine including both British and global literature and cinema. Some changes would be simple, such as replacing *The Great Gatsby* with *Mrs. Dalloway* as a companion to *Do the Right Thing* (two works involving overlapping stories taking place over the same day with ever-increasing psychological tension). Others changes would be more complete, replacing pairings wholesale: I’d love to add a comparison of Conrad’s *Lord Jim* with Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*, or David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* with a modern multi-plot ensemble drama like *Pulp Fiction*. Eisenstein’s *Poteyemkin* would pair well with a later example of postcolonial experimental fiction using montage, such as Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood* or Brink’s *Act of Terror*.]

You are responsible for obtaining copies of the texts; the films will be on reserve at the library. You are required to bring copies of the texts to class; these should be editions identical to those available in the bookstore, though in some cases an alternate choice might be acceptable (ask me first). Several of the novels (e.g., Faulkner, Kesey), are long, dense, and have very few chapter breaks; in these cases it’s important that we are all literally on the same page for discussion.

Tuesday, January 24

Class Introduction

Weeks 1-2: The Experience of Ambiguity, or, Why We Believe in Ghost Stories

Thursday, January 26

Henry James, “The Turn of the Screw” (1898)
Screening: *Vertigo* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1958)

Tuesday, January 31

NO CLASS TODAY

Weeks 2-3: Social Rules

Thursday, February 2

Vertigo
The House of Mirth, Book I, 1-176
Screening: *The Philadelphia Story* (dir. George Cukor, 1940)

Tuesday, February 7

The Philadelphia Story

Thursday, February 9

House of Mirth, complete

Screening: *Do the Right Thing* (dir. Spike Lee, 1989)

Week 4: Building Tensions

Tuesday, February 14

Do the Right Thing

Thursday, February 16

The Great Gatsby, complete

Screening: *Winter's Bone* (dir. Debra Granik, 2010)

Week 5: When Everyone Except You Knows What's Going On

February 21

Winter's Bone

Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926)

February 23

Finish *The Sun Also Rises*

Screening: *Citizen Kane* (dir. Orson Welles, 1941)

Weeks 6 & 7: Putting Together the Past

Tuesday, February 28

Citizen Kane

Thursday, March 1

William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936),

Tuesday, March 6

Absalom

Thursday, March 8

Absalom, complete

[Spring Break — note: there are substantial novels ahead. Kesey in particular is lengthy and demanding. We will also be watching The Godfather, Part II in class; you may wish to arrange to see Part One if you have not already.]

Weeks 8 & 9: Metafiction and the Unreliable Narrator

Tuesday, March 27

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (1955)

Thursday, March 29

Lolita,

Screening: *Annie Hall* (dir. Woody Allen, 1977)

Tuesday, April 3

Annie Hall

Thursday, April 5

Lolita, complete

Screening: *The Night of the Hunter* (dir. Charles Laughton, 1955)

Week 10: Imagery and Metaphor

Tuesday, April 10

The Night of the Hunter

Thursday, April 12

James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (1956)

Screening: *The Godfather, Part II* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1974)

Weeks 11 - 13: Countercultural Traditionalism

Tuesday, April 17

The Godfather, Part II

Thursday, April 19

Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1963)

Tuesday, April 24

Sometimes a Great Notion

Thursday, April 26

Sometimes a Great Notion

Screening: *Scorpio Rising* (dir. Kenneth Anger, 1964)

Tuesday, May 1

Sometimes a Great Notion, complete.

Week 13: Not Exactly Fiction, Not Exactly Narrative

Thursday, May 3

Scorpio Rising

Joan Didion, "The White Album" (1979)

Screening: *The Conversation* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1974)

Week 14: One Moment, Many Repetitions

Tuesday, May 8

The Conversation

Thursday, May 10

Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (2008)

Screenings will occur Thursday evenings at 7 PM. I will take attendance at the screening; part of the point of the course is to think about film as an immersive experience (not as one window open on a laptop). Typically, Tuesday class will focus mostly on the film, and briefly introduce the book; Thursday will focus on the book and refer back to the film, although there will be some exceptions.

Prompt, prepared, and participatory attendance is required. It is your responsibility to read the listed works *before* the day they appear on the syllabus (for long novels stretched over two weeks, I'll let you know what the page numbers for each day will be). Absences or regular silence in class will affect your participation grade. Up to one absence in the semester, with advance notice, can be made up through writing a short response to the readings. Otherwise, absences will be taken out of your participation grade; cases of repeated absence (3 or more in the semester) will result in a lowering of the grade for the whole course.

There will be two 1500-word papers and one final paper, 2000-2500 words. For the first papers, you may choose to discuss only one novel or film; for final, you must discuss both forms together. All essays are due by e-mail at 5 PM on the listed due dates. I will accept the following formats: .pages, .doc, .docx, and .pdf. Late papers will drop a third of a letter grade (e.g., from A to A-) for each day late.

Paper due dates: February 27, April 16, May 14.

Grading: 25% 1st paper; 25% 2nd paper; 30% final paper; 20% participation and attendance