

English 4620
Studies in Literature and Film
Fall 2025
MW 2:00-3:20

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office hours by appointment

Lit, Camera, Action: From Fiction to Film

This course is about the complex, fascinating relationship between American cinema and American literature (fiction, specifically). From its earliest years, Hollywood has gravitated toward American novels and short stories for source material, and the resulting adaptations include some of the most important movies in the history of cinema. But there's no direct connection between the quality of the movie and the quality (or fame) of the original narrative. Some of the best works in American literature have been turned into bad movies, while some great movies are based on works that are obscure, commercial failures, or just not very good.

Studying cinematic adaptations of literary texts raises a number of interesting questions: How have the filmmakers interpreted the source material, and for what apparent reasons? What are the respective roles of the screenwriters and directors when it comes to this process of interpretation? How "faithful" are they to the novel or story? If they've made major changes to the story, might there be good reasons for doing so, given the different medium in which the story is being told? What are the respective strengths and limitations of literature and film? Does moving from a language-based medium to an image-based medium necessarily involve change in the political, philosophical, cultural, and/or moral meanings of the narrative?

To investigate these issues, we'll read the following texts and watch the following movies:

Original Literary Work

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925)
Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1927)
James Cain, *Double Indemnity* (1936)
Mary Orr, "The Wisdom of Eve" (1946)
Philip K. Dick *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968)
Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947)
Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993)
Annie Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain" (1997)

Film Adaptation

The Great Gatsby (2013), dir. Baz Luhrmann
Passing (2021), dir. Rebecca Hall
Double Indemnity (1944), dir. Billy Wilder
All About Eve (1950), dir. Joseph Mankiewicz
Blade Runner (1982), dir. Ridley Scott
A Streetcar Named Desire (1951), dir. Elia Kazan
Smoke Signals (1998), dir. Chris Eyre
Brokeback Mountain (2005), dir. Ang Lee

Film Access:

Most of these films are available for free through the UNT library, and the links are available on our Canvas page. The exception is *Passing*, which is only available through Netflix. If you encounter any issues watching these movies outside of class, please let me know and we can figure out a solution.

Grade Distribution:

Compared to some literature courses, there won't be a huge amount of reading in this class, but there will be a greater number of written assignments and, of course, the films themselves. Fuller descriptions of the following assignments are available on our Canvas page.

Character Guidelines (3 pages) – 10%

Imagine that you are the director of a film adaptation of one of the texts, and one of your responsibilities is to draw up guidelines for an actor playing one of the major characters. Based on your reading of the text and your understanding of the written character, advise that actor on how they should portray the character on the screen.

Scene Analysis (3 pages) – 10%

Choose a single scene from one of the film adaptations and explain how it has taken the same scene from the original literary text and transformed it for the screen.

Film Review (4 pages) – 15%

Write an original review of one of the cinematic adaptations we are watching this semester. Consider the major issues involved in translating literature into film. This includes the “birds’-eye” view of such fundamental matters as the artistic vision of the movie and its handling of structure and theme, along with more granular details such as casting, music, dialogue, etc.

Adaptation Proposal (4 pages) – 15%

Imagine that you want to produce a film version of one of your favorite literary texts (possibly but not necessarily one that we have read this semester). Write up a 4-page “pitch” to a production company that explains what your interpretation of the work would accomplish, how it would work, and why it would be an important contribution to cinema.

Discussion Posts – 20%

Over the course of the semester, you'll be responsible for submitting 8 discussion posts through Canvas. These will be all about the cinematic adaptations of the literature.

Final Exam – 15%

The final exam will be comprehensive, covering the primary readings, the films, and the concepts discussed in class over the course of the semester.

Participation – 15%

This means not just attendance, but your proactive contribution to class discussions and activities. To get a good grade for participation, you should: 1) bring to each class period the book we're reading for that day; 2) try to answer questions that I pose to the class, even if you're just exploring an idea; and 3) work productively with your fellow students when I have you working together on something in class.

Structure and Rhythm of the Class:

Generally speaking, we will read and discuss a literary work first and then watch one of the film adaptations of it. As you'll see below, I suggest watching the film on your own over the

weekend following our main discussion of the book. On Sundays, you'll be responsible for submitting a discussion post based on a particular question about the film's interpretation of the material. Finally, you will each be part of a small group responsible for leading a class discussion of one of the films, focusing on a particular scene, theme, or problem.

Calendar:

Week 1:

Mon. Aug. 18	Introduction
Wed. Aug. 20	Issues in adaptation/translation discuss "Interpreting Films" handout

Week 2:

Mon. Aug. 25	read F. Scott Fitzgerald, <i>The Great Gatsby</i> , chs. 1-4
Wed. Aug. 27	read <i>The Great Gatsby</i> , chs. 5-6

[watch Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* (142 min.) over the weekend]

Week 3:

Sun. Aug. 31	[discussion post #1 due]
Mon. Sept. 1	Labor Day -- no class
Wed. Sept. 3	Group #1 leads discussion of film read <i>The Great Gatsby</i> , chs. 7-9

Week 4:

Mon. Sept. 8	read Nella Larsen, <i>Passing</i> , Part One (pp. 1-48)
Wed. Sept. 10	read <i>Passing</i> , Part Two (pp. 49-84)

[watch Rebecca Hall's *Passing* (98 min.) over the weekend]

Week 5:

Sun. Sept. 14	[discussion post #2 due]
Mon. Sept. 15	read <i>Passing</i> , Part Three (pp. 85-120)
Wed. Sept. 17	Group #2 leads discussion of film
Sat. Sept. 20	* either scene analysis or character guidelines due

Week 6:

Mon. Sept. 22	read James Cain, <i>Double Indemnity</i> , chs. 1-8 (pp. 1-70)
Wed. Sept. 24	read <i>Double Indemnity</i> , chs. 9-14 (pp. 71-115) [watch Billy Wilder's <i>Double Indemnity</i> (107 min.) over the weekend]

Week 7:

Sun. Sept. 28 [discussion post #3 due]
Mon. Sept. 29 Group #3 leads discussion of film
Wed. Oct. 1 read Mary Orr, "The Wisdom of Eve"

[watch Joseph Mankiewicz's *All About Eve* (138 min.) over the weekend]

Week 8:

Sun. Oct. 5 [discussion post #4 due]
Mon. Oct. 6 Group #4 leads discussion of film
Wed. Oct. 8 read *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, chs. 1-5 (pp. 1-57)

Sat. Oct. 11 * **both scene analysis and character guidelines due**

Week 9:

Mon. Oct. 13 read *Androids*, chs. 6-13 (pp. 58-141)
Wed. Oct. 15 read *Androids*, chs. 14-16 (pp. 142-179)

[watch *Blade Runner* (117 min.) over the weekend]

Week 10:

Sun. Oct. 19 [discussion post #5 due]
Mon. Oct. 20 read *Androids*, chs. 17-22 (pp. 180-224)
Wed. Oct. 22 Group #5 leads discussion

Week 11:

Mon. Oct. 27 read *A Streetcar Named Desire*, scenes 1-6 (pp. 1-116)
Wed. Oct. 29 read *Streetcar*, scenes 7-11, pp. 117-179

[watch *Streetcar* (124 min.) over the weekend]

Week 12:

Sun. Nov. 2 [discussion post #6 due]
Mon. Nov. 3 Group #6 leads discussion of film
Wed. Nov. 5 read Annie Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain"

[watch Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (134 min.) over the weekend]

Sat. Nov. 8 * **either film review or adaptation proposal due**

Week 13:

Sun. Nov. 9	[discussion post #7 due]
Mon. Nov. 10	Group #7 leads discussion of film
Wed. Nov. 12	read <i>The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven</i> , pp. 1-58

Week 14:

Mon. Nov. 17	read <i>The Lone Ranger and Tonto</i> , pp. 59-144
Wed. Nov. 19	read <i>The Lone Ranger and Tonto</i> , pp. 145-198

[watch *Smoke Signals* (89 min.) over the Thanksgiving break]

Week 15:

Mon. Nov. 24	Thanksgiving -- no class
Wed. Nov. 26	Thanksgiving -- no class

Week 16:

Sun. Nov. 30	[discussion post #8 due]
Mon. Dec. 1	read <i>The Lone Ranger and Tonto</i> , pp. 199-242
	Group #8 leads discussion of film
Wed. Dec. 3	Conclusion
Sat. Dec. 6	* <i>both</i> film review and adaptation proposal due

Final exam: Monday, Dec. 8, 1:30pm – 3:30pm

Course Policies

Attendance: Since this is a discussion-oriented class that depends on the active participation of all students, attendance is required. Over the course of the semester, you may take 3 absences for any reason. After that, your participation and/or semester grades may be reduced. If you accumulate 8 or more absences, I reserve the right to assign an F for your semester grade.

Communication: In communicating with the class as a whole, I'll use either Canvas or MyUNT, so be sure to check your UNT email address for announcements or other class information and documents. If you need to contact me with a question or personal issue regarding the course, please email me directly at finseth@unt.edu.

Electronic Devices: Please do not use smart-phones, iPads, or laptops in class. I want our focus to be on what we're reading, and on our conversation with each other. While taking notes in class is obviously important, this is best done by first reflecting on the ideas or issues that are being discussed, and later writing down whatever summaries, insights, or questions you may have.

Grades: For various reasons, I will not be using the Canvas grade-book. Instead, I will use an Excel spreadsheet to record all grade information and to calculate final grades. If you have any questions about your grades, therefore, don't check Canvas, but definitely feel free to ask me.

Strategies for Succeeding in this Class

Do all the reading. This sounds obvious, but it is the prerequisite for doing well in any class.

Keeping up with the assigned reading will not only give you a better sense how all the material fits together, but will enable you to be much more engaged in class. And if you make it a habit to read every day, you'll be amazed at how much you can get done.

Read actively. This means several things: thinking about the ideas you're encountering in the material; making connections to other works; and underlining important passages and/or making notes in the margins of your books. It also means that you should read the actual physical books, not digital versions (unless absolutely necessary). Emerging research shows that comprehension and retention decrease when we read something off a screen.

Study the material. Literary studies is a discipline that promotes critical thinking, ethical and social awareness, and a deeper understanding of how language and other forms of representation work. And a professional discipline requires *actual* discipline: effort, energy, attention, time. Studying the material, just as you would in a science class, will pay off not only in your performance in this class, but also in your long-term intellectual development.

Attend every class. The reason is not just to avoid grade penalties, but because there's a tremendous amount one learns simply by being physically present and absorbing everything that's being said (by me and by other students).

Take notes. It might seem easy to remember stuff at the time, but even 2 or 3 weeks is an eternity when it comes to remembering important ideas, or the details of a work, or specific terminology, or points of argument and analysis.

Start your written work early and always take the time to revise it. Nobody, including myself, produces their best work, or even good work, in a day or two. I recommend starting at least a week in advance, and recognizing that what you first produce is only a draft – one that will need significant reworking to bring out its potential.

UNT Policies

Academic Integrity: Academic dishonesty is defined in the UNT Policy on Student Standards for Academic Integrity. Any suspected case of Academic Dishonesty, including plagiarism, will be handled in accordance with University policy and procedures. You can find the policy and procedures at <https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-003>.

Please note: The only permissible use of generative AI writing tools in this class involves surface-level editing (e.g., spelling, syntax, grammar checking). The assignments for the course have been developed to help you grow as a writer and thinker without the use of these technologies. Your written work must be the product of your own ideas, your own self-expression, your own intellectual struggle. You are the author of your work and therefore take responsibility for it. In accordance with the UNT Honor Code, the unauthorized use of GenAI tools is prohibited.

Using GenAI content without proper credit or substituting your own work with GenAI undermines the learning process and violates UNT academic integrity policy. If you're unsure whether something is allowed, please seek clarification.

ADA Policy for Students with Disabilities: UNT makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Accommodation (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide a student with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding one's specific course needs. Students may request accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. For additional information see the ODA website (<https://disability.unt.edu/>).

Student Behavior in the Classroom: Student behavior that interferes with an instructor's ability to conduct a class or other students' opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated in any instructional forum at UNT. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom and the instructor may refer the student to the Dean of Students to consider whether the student's conduct violated the Code of Student Conduct. The University's expectations for student conduct apply to all instructional forums, including University and electronic classroom, labs, discussion groups, field trips, etc. Visit UNT's Code of Student Conduct (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/dean-of-students/conduct/index.html>) to learn more.