The adaptor is much like the sculptor Michelangelo, who, when asked how he was able to carve such a beautiful angel, replied, 'The angel is caught inside the stone. I simply carve out everything that isn’t the angel.' The adaptor is sculpting out everything that isn’t drama, so the intrinsic drama contained within another medium remains.

--Linda Seger

The Art of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film

Not all movie magic springs from original screenplays, like Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* or Wes Anderson’s *Moonrise Kingdom*, Pixar’s animated flick, *WALL-E*, or even Edgar Wright’s *Baby Driver*. In fact, some of Hollywood’s greatest successes are adaptations: *It Happened One Night*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Gone With the Wind*, *Casablanca*, *Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Godfather*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, the *Harry Potter* series, *The Hunger Games* franchise, *Beauty and the Beast*, or any of the superhero films. These are films based on short stories, novels, and plays, fairytales, and comic books. But screenwriters can also adapt material from true-life stories, from historical events and figures, and perhaps these are the most difficult adaptations because they force filmmakers to ask hard questions and make tough decisions. How faithful should the film version stay to the historical event? What, if any, moral obligations does the filmmaker have to portray an historical figure or event with accuracy? How accurate are the historical sources? How historically accurate is Mel Gibson’s *Braveheart*, for example, which is based on the life of William Wallace, or Shekhar Kapur’s *Elizabeth* and *The Golden Age*, both based on the life and times of Elizabeth I, Queen of England? How does Oliver Stone portray the assassination of John F. Kennedy in *JFK*? How does Tom Hooper depict King George VI of England, a role that won a Best Actor Oscar for Colin Firth? In *Sully*, how does Clint Eastwood render Chesley Sullenberger, the American pilot who became a national hero after landing his damaged plane on the Hudson River, saving all passengers and crew members? How do filmmakers blur the lines between fact and fiction? Christopher Nolan’s *Dunkirk* is an historical event, but how much of the film is based on fact and how much is fiction? A single life is made up of many stories. Which of those stories make good drama? What goes, what stays, and what changes? The adaptation process is fraught with challenges.

This course, taken in conjunction with *History 233*, will focus on the film adaptations of ancient Rome. We will look at some of the major film texts on the subject and explore how filmmakers have adapted the historical events, culture, and major historical figures of Rome. The course, then, will cover techniques for adapting material for the screen. Central to this process is our understanding of the film text; therefore, the first half of the course will be a study of the basic language systems that make up this complex text: photography, mise en scène, movement, editing, sound, acting, sets and costumes, narrative structure, and ideology. The second half of the semester, we will combine our courses and watch the film adaptations of Roman history, applying the techniques and principles we learned in the first part of the course to our analyses of the film texts. We will also be reading *The Hunger Games*, with its rich references and allusions to ancient Rome, and we’ll watch the film to see the extent to which it retains those same images and themes.

Our discussions will include the following issues:

- **Narrative.** Who is telling the story? Who is writing the history? How is the story shaped to reflect a thematic point? What does the chronicler choose to present? What’s missing or what’s rejected as
unimportant to the story? How objective is the historical source? What is the difference between the described action of history versus the enacted action of cinema?

• **Audience.** How does the reader/spectator absorb the ideas of the work? In what sense is the reader/spectator a co-creator of meaning?

• **Mise en Scène.** What is the style of the adaptation? How does the adaptor handle time, space, and language? How are the various elements arranged in the frame? What is the significance of the moveable camera and editing? What is lost or gained in the adaptation?

• **Character.** How is character created in each medium? Is the narrator a character? How does this affect the story? How does the star system of film affect the character? What does the actor contribute to building a character? What’s the function of action and dialogue? What’s the difference between the described historical figure and the enacted character of cinema? What objective correlates help visualize the character?

• **Genre and Myth.** How do traditional forms modify the artist’s originality? What is the function of traditional narrative patterns of writing history and historical figures in national culture? How have they been translated to the screen?

• **Writer.** How do the writers of history and film differ? How do we read a screenplay? How do we read the historical text?

• **Context of Production.** Where and when was the work created? Why was it created? Whom was it created for? Does the work affirm or criticize ( overtly or covertly) the prevailing values of its context?

• **Ideology.** How explicit are the values of the story? How do they reflect the values of the historical work? Which character or characters exemplify these values? What values are rejected as inferior or irrelevant? How are class, race, and gender treated? **How is the writer/director using ancient Rome as social criticism to address modern issues?** This question is central to our discussions.

• **Enactment.** What is the importance of actors and actions in film? What is their overall representation of the historical figures and actions? What is the function of setting, décor, costumes and makeup? How do they become extensions of the characters?

**Projects**

After each film viewing, students will volunteer to lead the discussion by forming panels, or teams, i.e. Team Spartacus, Team Cleopatra, etc. We will provide a list of discussion questions for each film, and the team may add its own. For ENG112/FS212 this assignment falls under the quizzes/in-class work/presentations/discussion category, all of which comprise 20% of your grade for the ENG112/FS212 portion of the cluster. See the companion syllabus for HIS 233 for a statement about how these items will be handled for that course. **Remember that the weight given to any graded item may NOT be the same for both courses.**

For your comparative analysis paper, you will choose a film about ancient Rome or an historical figure from the period and analyze the film adaptation. What decisions did the filmmaker have to make in order to transfer the material to the screen? How faithful is the film version to the historical event/person? You will explore these and other questions as you research your subject. Your paper will be approximately **five to seven pages.** This is a **combined** assignment for both of the courses in the cluster, but will be graded separately by each instructor, according to rubrics published in separate documents for both of the courses.
For the scene analysis, you will work in your teams, choosing a three-minute clip from the film you discussed. Your analysis of this clip will synthesize four to five of the 11 language systems of film, as well as the film’s historical implications. Your written analysis will be approximately ten pages. This also is a combined assignment for both of the courses in the cluster.

Each team will present a condensed version of its paper for the Final exam. This will be graded by both instructors of the cluster.

**Required Texts**

Selected readings and lectures posted on D2L


**Assignments and Grading**

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**Grading Scale**

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Percentages that result in a fractional value of .51 or higher are rounded up to the next whole number; for example, 59.51 – 59.99 would be a 60, which is a D-, not an F.

**Note:** All quizzes and the midterms are specific to each course. Papers will be due during the last seven weeks of the semester on the dates specified. Details about the topics and grading criteria for these papers will be given in separate documents.

**General Guidelines and Policies**

Come to class prepared and ready to participate. Stay on top of your assignments. Your contributions are vital to the success of this class; therefore, I will lower your grade one letter for each absence after your second. If you have an emergency situation, you should notify me. I don’t accept “sick in room” excuses.

Grammatical errors will significantly lower your grade on any assignment. Any work filled with grammatical and technical errors cannot receive above a C.

Late work will receive a lower grade. No make-ups on quizzes and exams unless you have a serious, emergency situation.

Turning in someone else’s work—whether it is from a published text or a roommate’s homework—as your own constitutes plagiarism and will be punished according to the rules laid out in the Student Handbook. I report all instances of plagiarism to the Dean of the College.
Please be aware that I do not accept Internet sources like Wikipedia or SparkNotes, or any other questionable or non-credible sites.

Turn off all cell phones and put them away before you come into class. If you are texting, I will count you absent—because you’re not really engaged in the class, are you? You might as well be somewhere else. No laptops in class either.

Anyone who falls asleep in class will be counted absent—because you’re really not here, are you?

Purge the word “like” from your vocabulary, unless, of course, you use it correctly. Saying “like” every other word is distracting and inappropriate for college-level discussion. I will take off points if you use this word incorrectly.

As for grading, you get what you earn. I don’t hand out A’s at the door. I don’t “round up.” I don’t negotiate grades. There are no extra credit points. I do not post grades on D2L.

Class Schedule and Reading List
Note: This schedule is subject to change, depending on our progress in class. I will announce reading assignments, which will be posted to you D2L page, in class. I will also post my lectures on D2L after class so that you can use them to study for quizzes.

**Aug 29/31**
Introduction to the course: The Adaptation
Lecture/Class Discussion

**Sep 5/7**
Story and Writing
Lecture/Class Discussion

**Sep 12/14**
Photography and Mise en Scène
Lecture/Class Discussion

**Sep 19/21**
Movement and Editing
Lecture/Class Discussion

**Sep 26/28**
Sound and Acting
Lecture/Class Discussion

**Oct 3/5**
Drama and Ideology
Lecture/Discussion

**Oct 10/12**
Synthesis
Midterm Review
Next Tuesday: Midterm Exam
ENG 112/FS 212: 11:00 – 12:30
English 112/FS 212 Syllabus/Page 5

Oct 17/19  Tuesday, October 17: ENG/FILM Midterm
           Thursday, October 19: History Midterm

Oct 21 – 24  Midbreak
              Assignment: Read The Hunger Games

Note: From this point on, the cluster will operate as a single class (9:20 a.m. – 12:30 p.m., with breaks)

Oct 26  The Hunger Games (novel)
         Discussion
         Introduction to Spartacus

The following schedule of films is not carved on a stone tablet. Instead, these are suggested films. We may want to make some substitutions.

Oct 31/Nov 2  Spartacus (3 hours and 4 minutes)
               Discussion of Spartacus
               Introduction to Cleopatra
               Begin Cleopatra, if time (4 hours and 3 minutes)

Nov 7/9  Finish Cleopatra
         Discussion of Cleopatra
         Comparative Analysis Paper Due on Nov 7th

Nov 14/16  Introduction to Ben Hur
           Begin Ben Hur (3 hours and 32 minutes)
           Discussion of Ben Hur
           Introduction to Monty Python and The Life of Bryan

Nov 21  The Life of Bryan (1 hour and 33 minutes)
        Discussion of The Life of Bryan

Nov 22 – 26  Thanksgiving Break

Nov 28/30  Gladiator (2 hours and 34 minutes) and Discussion

Dec 5/7  The Hunger Games (film, 2 hours and 22 minutes)
        Discussion
        Scene Analysis Paper Due Dec 5th

Dec 8  Last Day of Class

Dec 11/12/13/14  Final Period