

Mount Saint Mary's Weekend College
Syllabus for English 124: Fiction to Film
Spring 2009

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Overview

Fiction like film is a narrative storytelling art form. Most of us have had the experience of reading a good book and then viewing the movie adaptation only to feel disappointed that either the movie was not as good as the book or vice versa. What are the narrative devices, techniques and formal properties used to tell a story that are peculiar to film but not found in literature such as camera angle, camera distance, editing, cross-cutting, montage, framing, camera movement, and camera angle? In terms of adaptation aspects, how well does the film portray or represent those storylines, themes and character in the novel? If the film digresses from the novel, what decisions were made and why? In this context, what are the aesthetic criteria used for generating an emotional response from the viewer? This course will take a critical approach to examining the narrative language utilized by fiction and film with the objective of developing a more critical eye for interpreting both mediums.

(A note about the selection criteria—or why I chose what I chose)

First and foremost I wanted to select fiction and film that would appeal to students across a broad spectrum of disciplines. I also wanted to dispute the argument that contemporary mainstream Hollywood cinema churns out popcorn movies, and thus is confined to the realm of generating superficial experience worthy only of entertainment. I believe it is possible to subject the same critical analysis to mainstream movies and achieve the same level of appreciation usually afforded the so-called high-brow art house films. At any rate, it is a worthy endeavor and besides it'll be a heck of a lot of fun trying to pull it off, and this enthusiasm (it is hoped) will be shared by the entire class.

Second, and equally if not more important than the first, I wanted to offer a diverse selection of authors and directors in order to lend an invaluable perspective to our critical study of novels and film. Two of the films are directed by women, one of them African American, and two male directors of Spanish and Mexican-American origin.

Third, in order to reduce the mere broad scope of this subject matter to something we can sink our teeth into within a six weekends, I decided to focus on American fiction and films (with the notable exception of "En el tiempo de las mariposas" by Julia Alvarez). Not to dismiss the incredibly rich domain of foreign films, but my fear would be not having enough time to give them the level of attention they deserve.

Course Specifics

A.) All students are required to read/view the assigned book/film prior to attending class. Please read the book before watching the film, as the key component of

this class is discussing the adaptation process with a critical eye on how author/screenwriter/director utilize the elements of language and grammar unique to each medium to express character, symbol and theme and the impact it has on narrative storytelling in general.

B.) Students will become 'film critics' and write five two-page movie reviews expressing their own subjective reaction to how each work of fiction was adapted to film, identifying one critical term and/or technique used in the film that worked or didn't work in their opinion, citing specific examples from the book and movie.

C.) For the final, students will write a two-page film review stating what they liked/disliked about one of the films we viewed in the course by applying some of the aesthetic and thematic issues discussed in class.

Course Policies

All students are required to attend all three classes on Saturday and Sunday. This means being in class at the prescribed time and participating in the discussions and writing assignments.

Paper format

All assignments including the final are to be composed in standard college essay form and double-spaced using standard font (Times New Roman) and 1-inch margins.

Note: In fairness to students who turn in assignments on time, a letter grade will be deducted for all late papers. Papers (including the Final) are due at the start of class on Sunday (10:10AM).

Student Rights and Responsibilities

Learning Disabilities: See Learning disability Statement in the MCMS catalog

Academic Freedom: See Student Handbook page 104

Academic Integrity/Plagiarism Statement: See pages 40, 41. Any student found guilty of plagiarism will receive a failing grade for the entire course.

Attendance guidelines may be found on page 38 of the MSMC catalog.

Absences and Attendance

Students are required to be in class at the appointed time. Any students not attending or missing class will receive an incomplete.

Grading

Your final grade for this class will be determined by the quality of your performance on the written assignments (50%); attendance and in-class participation (20%), and final paper (30%).

Required Books (in assigned order)

(Weekend 1)

Palahniuk, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996. (ISBN- 0-393-32734-5)

(Weekend 2)

Weisberger, Lauren. *The Devil Wears Prada*. First Anchor Books, 2003.
(ISBN- 978-0307275554)

(Weekend 3) (either the Spanish or English edition)

(Spanish edition) Alvarez, Julia. *En el tiempo de las mariposas*. Plume, 2005. (ISBN- 978-0452286863)

(English edition) Alvarez, Julia. *In the Time of Butterflies*. Plume, 1995.
(ISBN- 978-0452274426)

(Weekend 4)

Ellis, Brett Easton. *American Psycho*. New York: Vintage, 1996. (ISBN- 978-0679735779)

(Weekend 5)

Green, George Dawes. *The Caveman's Valentine*. New York: Warner Books, 1994.
(ISBN- 978-0446671514)

Course Calendar

Jan. 17-18

Fight Club (1999)

(novel by Chuck Palahniuk; directed by David Fincher)

Jan/Feb. 31-1

The Devil Wears Prada (2006)

(novel by Lauren Weisberger; film director David Frankel)

Feb. 21-22

In the Time of Butterflies (2000)

(novel by Julia Alvarez; film director Mariano Barroso)

March 14-15

American Psycho (2000) (novel by Brett Easton
Ellis/ film director Mary Harron)

March 28-29

The Caveman's Valentine (2001)

(novel by George Dawes Green; film director Kassi
Lemmons)

April 18-19

Sin City (2005) (graphic novels by Frank Miller; film
directors Frank Miller, Robert Rodriguez, Quentin
Tarantino)