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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2018 Volume III: Adaptation: Literature, Film and Society

Introduction

by Brigitte M. Peucker, Professor of Germanic Languages and Literature and of Film Studies

Cinematic adaptation translates a literary text—a text comprised of words—into a visual text—a text that tells a story in images. When a novel becomes a film, there's a change of medium. Although we're tempted to consider adaptation in terms of a film's fidelity to the literary text that is its source, what emerges in the translation from the literary to the cinematic is an *interpretation* of a source text. In our seminar we expanded the notion of adaptation beyond the text and image dichotomy by also considering the interpretation of historical figures by film. We focused on the medium of film and its techniques; we discussed what distinguishes literature from film and what they have in common. We also considered the displacement of the original work's time and place into a new time and place, asking both how the social world of the source text enters an adaptation but also in what ways the social world in which the film *is made* is reflected in it.

Whether a film is faithful to its source text is only one question among many when we analyze a film adaptation. Other questions include: Who is the intended audience of the film? Are there prior adaptations and how does the new adaptation take them into account? Does the adaptation bring other arts into play—such as painting or theater? What are the artistic and political concerns reflected in the film and how do they inflect it? And finally, we also asked whether the adaptation in some sense "saves" the source text, making it more accessible to a new audience in a new time or different culture.

From the beginning, the Fellows in the seminar had definite teaching goals and projects in mind. There was a preponderance of elementary school teachers in our group, and I will begin with their curriculum units, moving into the projects of the middle and high school teachers.

Joe Parrett, a kindergarten teacher, chose films by Disney, including *Frozen,* as vehicles for exploring changing concepts of the hero with his students. His class will explore a series of Disney films with respect to stages in the progress of the hero, including the departure, the initiation of the hero as he/she confronts obstacles, and his/her return home. **Carol Boynton** will also use *Frozen* in her second-grade classroom, emphasizing its loose adaptation of the Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale, *The Snow Queen*. Her students will discuss the fairy tale as a genre and how filmmakers create their own versions of classic tales. **Elizabeth Isaac** bases her unit on another Disney film, *Pocahontas*, which she will use in conjunction with a book by Leslie Gourse titled *Young Peace Maker.* She and her third-graders will discuss the presentation of Native American characters and their roles in society in literature and film.

LaKendra Butler also teaches third-graders. Her curriculum unit is based on the children's book *Black Panther: The Young Prince* by Ronald Smith, to be discussed alongside the recent blockbuster film *Black Panther*. She will use these texts to address questions concerning character development and identity as she

instills a love of reading in her students. **Irene Jones**'s unit focuses on reading development for her fourth-graders, using both text and film. Her students will be watching *Smoke Signals*, an adaptation of Sherman Alexie's short story to the film by Native American filmmaker Chris Eyre. **Jolene Smith,** a fifth-grade teacher, focusses on a 1920 story by Oliver La Farge, *Laughing Boy*, and its adaptation to film in 1934. She will use both versions of the story to discuss changing historical and cultural perspectives on Native American culture, as well as to improve the literacy of her students.

Lea Stenson, a fifth-grade teacher whose area is social studies, plans to use *Wonderstruck* in both book and film versions (by Brian Selznick and Todd Haynes, respectively) to teach her students about reading literature and film, but also about disabilities, hoping to teach empathy towards those who have them. And **Brandon Barr** will make use of the Helen Keller story as told in three different texts: in Keller's autobiography, in a play about her life, and in the film *The Miracle Worker*. His sixth-graders will read the texts, perform scenes from the play, and analyze the film in order to develop a full understanding of Keller.

Tara Waugh, who teaches AP English, developed a curriculum unit based on Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* in text and film, and J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, about which Salinger insisted there should never be a film version. The students will learn to analyze both literary texts and film using the vocabulary appropriate to each form, and make their own movie adaptations. **Barbara Prillaman's** curriculum unit draws on *The Walking Dead* in both comic book and the TV version in order to generate discussions about storytelling and analyzing the presentation of character in both forms. She will use these stories of a post-apocalyptic zombie society to ask questions about our own society. Finally, **Jennifer Mazzocco** uses Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*--another dystopian text--and the recent film version directed by Rahmin Babrani to teach her ninth-graders analytical skills, and to ask questions about whether the 2018 film version successfully adapts Bradbury's 1953 text to our time.

These units make an imaginative use of the adaptation of literary texts by films and are well worth reading, both for their overall topic and for the outstanding teaching strategies which they outline.

Brigitte Peucker

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