How does a story change when re-imagined for a new medium? Why are some film adaptations more successful than others? What is the screenwriter’s responsibility to the work being adapted and to its author? Should one always strive to be “true” to the source? How do screenwriters contend with elements of prose such as First Person Narrative, Point of View, Authorial Voice, and less restrictive handling of Time and Length?

We will examine novels, short stories, stage plays, non-fiction, comics/graphic novels—and the screenplays they inspired—from a screenwriter’s perspective as we consider various adaptation strategies. We will also analyze the writing choices behind what might be called a “faux adaptation”—an original screenplay written as if it were an adaptation.

Texts:

*The Orchid Thief*, Susan Orlean

*The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald

*Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare

*Carol*, Patricia Highsmith

*Oil*, Upton Sinclair

*Best of American Splendor*, Harvey Pekar

*Our Cancer Year*, Harvey Pekar & Joyce Brabner

*Three Uses of the Knife*, David Mamet

*Screenplay*, Syd Field

Additional instructor handouts
WEEK 1 (1/28)
Discussion: General introductions and goals for the class.
Screening: ADAPTATION.
Assignment: Read THE ORCHID THIEF for next week. Start your journal. Come up with 3 different ways to adapt this book.

WEEK 2 (2/04) ADAPTING NON-FICTION/JOURNALISM
Discussion: Overview of screenplay structure. What do we mean by “cinematic”? Methodology—how does a screenwriter evaluate the work to be adapted? Are there questions the screenwriter should always ask? Is Charlie Kaufman’s script faithful to Susan Orlean’s book? What does the movie suggest about the process of film adaptation? Does this project make $ense? Who is the audience?
Assignment: Read CAROL for next week AND read SCREENPLAY. Journal.
Optional end of term project #1: Compare the non-fiction book, Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game by Michael Lewis with the film—story by Stan Cherwin, screenplay by Steven Zaillian and Aaron Sorkin. (You might want to read up on the creative differences that led to Steven Soderbergh’s departure from the project…)
Optional end of term project #2: Compare The Social Network, scripted by Aaron Sorkin, to its source, The Accidental Billionaires: The Founding of Facebook, A Tale of Sex, Money, Genius and Betrayal by Ben Mitzrich.
Optional end of term project #3: Compare Solomon Northrup’s memoir, TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE to the screenplay by NYU alumnus, John Ridley. Do the issues concerning non-fiction adaptations apply to this project? Are there overlapping concerns particular to memoir? You might research the credits battle between Ridley and director, Steve McQueen. Was the story “all there on the page” (of the book), as McQueen claimed? What structural choices were made in the screenplay and why? How were cinematic elements such as music and location used to reveal story? You might consider whether the project fits into a genre, and if so, whether a European director placing non-American actors in key roles challenged genre expectations.

WEEK 3 (2/11) ADAPTING AN “UNDERGROUND” CLASSIC
Screening: CAROL
Assignment: Read the screenplay, CAROL, by NYU alumna, Phyllis Nagy for next week AND THREE USES OF THE KNIFE. Journal

WEEK 4 (2/18) HISTORY AND TIMING: WHY THIS STORY...NOW...?
Discussion: This project was in development for 18 years. How might a 1997 version of this story have differed from the film you screened last week? Consider how socio-political events might change what is crucial to the story; and on a more personal level, how the same screenwriter might understand the story differently when revisiting it almost two decades later. What were author Patricia Highsmith’s concerns in 1952 and how do they resonate today? How are these concerns reflected in the changes from page to screen? And on a more practical level, how did budget and location impact the script?
Assignment: Read THE GREAT GATSBY for next week. Journal.
Optional end of term project #4: Consider expanding your study of adaptation by examining a film in which the author of the screenplay and the underlying source material are the same person. Would
adapting one's own material arm the screenwriter with a deeper insight into the story? Would it make it more difficult to cut/shape the plot to serve the demands of a film? Emma Donoghue has addressed these questions in interviews about the differences between her novel, ROOM and her screenplay version. You might take a look at what she cut from the script and why...and/or consider how the bold storytelling strategy she adopted so successfully for her book needed to be rethought for the film—what do you make of the changes in point of view and the expansion of the mother's storyline in the movie? Note that Donoghue was pleased with both the screen version and her collaboration with director, Lenny Abrahamson.

Optional end of term project #5: GONE GIRL is another example of a novelist adapting her own work for the screen. How did Gillian Flynn adjust her storytelling strategy for the film? As with Donoghue's novel, Flynn initially created an unreliable narrator. Why would that choice be effective on the page/what adjustments were made for the screen? How did the story's tone change, for example?

WEEK 5 (2/25) ADAPTING A CLASSIC NOVEL
Assignment: Use this time to catch up on your reading, if needed, and to journal.

WEEK 6 (3/03) THE FAITHFUL ADAPTATION
Discussion: What is the "essence" of Fitzgerald's story? How would you describe its structure? Why do you think it was written in the first person? How is Nick's character central to the novel? How does Fitzgerald handle time? What is cinematic about this book? What is not? A brief history of the 1974 film—why was Truman Capote hired/ﬁred? Why did Academy-award winning screenwriter Robert Towne turn down the job? Why did Francis Ford Coppola take this adaptation assignment?
In-class exercise: We will begin a close reading of Julio Cortazar's short story, BLOWUP (LAS BABAS del DIABLO). Is there a movie there?
Assignment: Finish reading BLOWUP. Journal. DUE NEXT WEEK—A COPY OF YOUR JOURNAL PAGES SO FAR, WHICH WILL CONSTITUTE YOUR MID-TERM GRADE.
Optional end of term project #6: Read the memoir, JARHEAD and compare it to the screenplay and film it inspired. Is the author the logical "main character" in the movie? How does he function in the narrative—does dramatizing the experiences of the real Anthony Swofford present screenwriting challenges similar to those posed by the fictional Nick Carraway? And/or the real Solomon Northup?
Optional end of term project #7: Compare the short novel, ORDINARY PEOPLE by Judith Guest with the Academy Award-winning screenplay by Alvin Sargeant. Do you consider this a faithful adaptation? Why cut the final chapter? How does that cut affect the story? The impact of the film?
Optional end of term project #8: How does Baz Luhrmann's film fit into our study of adapting The Great Gatsby? Did he "break the curse" or further the opinion that "Gatsby" is unﬁmable? What do you think of screenwriting collaborators Luhrmann and Guy Pearce's attempts to integrate Nick more fully into the onscreen narrative? Was the film's choice of music and the relatively new technology of 3-D reflective of the novel's fascination with the Jazz Age's embrace of modernity? Or did you find those choices jarringly different from your conception of this classic? You might also take a look at Gatsby's role in the Hotel Plaza scene and consider whether there are grounds for those writing/acting choices within the novel.
WEEK 7 (3/10) THE LOOSE ADAPTATION
Screening: BLOWUP.
Discussion: Which is the more “faithful” adaptation—The Great Gatsby or Blowup?
Assignment: Read OIL! Why make a film from this novel today? Journal.

***SPRING BREAK***

WEEK 8 (3/24) ADAPTING A SPRAWLING NOVEL/ THE APPEAL OF A “MINOR CLASSIC”
Screening: THERE WILL BE BLOOD
Assignment: No assigned reading this week—unless you’re still reading Oil! Journal. Work on your end of term project.

WEEK 9 (3/31) “BASED ON” VS. “INSPIRED BY”
Assignment: Read ROMEO AND JULIET for next week. PLEASE BRING THE PLAY WITH YOU TO CLASS NEXT WEEK.
Optional end of term project #9: Read WHAT MAISIE KNEW by Henry James, another lesser-known book by a famous dead writer, and compare it to the contemporary adaptation released in 2013. Many of the topics we’ve touched on apply to the project. What do you think of the film...?

WEEK 10 (4/07) STAGE TO SCREEN/ RE-WORKING THE CANON
In-class exercise: Let’s start to stepsheet the play.
Discussion: Why is Shakespeare cinematic? Is Shakespeare indestructible?
Screening: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S ROMEO + JULIET
Assignment: Read AMERICAN SPLENDOR and OUR CANCER YEAR. How would you adapt this material? What are the essential qualities of Pekar’s work and how would you express them cinematically?
Optional end of term project #10: Read the Coen Brothers’s screenplay, O BROTHER WHERE ART THOU and compare it to Homer’s THE ODYSSEY. How is the adaptation different from/similar to Craig Pearce and Baz Luhrmann’s approach to Shakespeare?
Optional end of term project #11: Compare Spike Lee’s screenplay, CHI-RAQ to Lysistrata by Aristophanes. What is inherently cinematic in the source material? What choices does Lee make to further the cinematic impact on screen? How does Lee handle language and tone? The choice to set the film in contemporary Chicago has been debated—does the source material support such a choice? If not, does the meaning/impact of the play differ from the meaning/impact of the film? Does that matter? Inspire? Or...?

WEEK 11 (4/14) ADAPTING A GRAPHIC NOVEL
Screening: AMERICAN SPLENDOR
Optional end of term project #12: Wes Anderson’s appreciation for the written word is shown again in The Grand Budapest Hotel (story by Hugo Guiness & Anderson, screenplay by Anderson). The screenplay
is original—yet the two male lead roles, the 1930's mood of cultural refinement threatened by Nazi brutality, the frank sexuality—were inspired by the stories and the life of Austrian author, Stefan Zweig. Consider researching Zweig's life, reading his book The World of Yesterday (and optionally also reading The Post Office Girl and Beware of Pity). What can you discover by comparing Zweig's work to Anderson's film? Is this an approach to screenwriting that inspires?

**Optional end of term project #13:** Compare Bryan Lee O'Malley's graphic novel, SCOTT PILGRIM VS. THE WORLD to the screenplay by Edgar Wright & Michael Bacall. How does the simultaneous release of the SCOTT PILGRIM video game relate to the aesthetic and/or commercial considerations we've explored concerning film adaptations? When assessing source material's suitability as a story platform, do the same questions apply as when considering adapting material for the screen?

**WEEK 12 (4/21) Discussion:** Our conversation will address two topics tonight, the adaptation choices made in AMERICAN SPLENDOR...and your reactions to THE ROYAL TENENBAUMS.

**Guest speaker:** TBA. Be PREPARED TO ask good questions and get ready for truthful answers, when we welcome an Entertainment Lawyer who will talk you through rights acquisitions procedures.

**Assignment:** Google Bob Dylan or read a book about him. Aim for a sense of the breadth of his accomplishments rather than focusing on a single period of his life. You might also look at Dylan's book, TARANTULA or ask people of varied ages what Dylan means to them. The script for I'M NOT THERE (story by Todd Haynes, screenplay by Todd Haynes & Oren Moverman) was largely inspired by a Dylan biography which is, alas, out of print. Your goal should be to come to class with a sense of how much material and how many points of view were available to the screenwriter. (Blessing or curse?) How would YOU adapt this material? Who would be the audience? As always, journal.

**WEEK 13 (4/28) EXPLODING THE BIOPICT**

**Screening:** I'M NOT THERE

**Assignment:** Use this week to complete your journal, including your end of term project.

**WEEK 14 (5/05) BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME...FINAL THOUGHTS**

**Discussion:** How does I'M NOT THERE illustrate the challenges of the biopic? Do the fictional choices made by the screenwriters reveal a “truth” about their subject? How does the project exploit story-telling strategies unique to film? How do you write a story everybody already knows? Or a story many know well, and some in the audience know almost nothing about? Who is the audience? ...Take a moment to review the adaptation strategies that have emerged over the semester. What have you discovered?

**Journals are due at the end of class tonight.**

**GRADING:**

50% JOURNAL

40% CLASS PARTICIPATION

10% ATTENDANCE
YOUR JOURNAL should be at least 20 typed pages. It should chronicle your evolving thoughts, not merely restate discussions (though you may want to expand on ideas you agreed or disagreed with in class). Back up your points with specifics. The last 8 to 10 pages should analyze a film of your choice, not covered in class, and the underlying source material. YOU MUST GET YOUR TOPIC APPROVED. You may select a topic suggested above, but that is NOT required.

RULES: Turn off your phone. Thou shalt not text. Attend all screenings. Plagiarism in any form will result in a grade of F. Have fun viewing and discussing these films.