

LITERATURE AT THE MOVIES CC Alumni Reading Group Syllabus

You can't be a movie lover without having to answer the following question at some point: "Is it as good as the book?" Sometimes you answer yes and (probably more often) you answer no. But behind what seems like a simple judgment call based on personal taste stands a complicated relationship between film and literature, and an even more profound relationship between artistic representation and the human experience. Determining what makes a book better than a movie, or vice versa, after all, often involves deciding which "speaks" to us most powerfully, which reminds us most vividly of what it means to be human, which inspires deeper laughter, horror, passion, excitement, sympathy, yearning, or thought. But what is that underlying reality that allows great books or movies to speak at all, and what allows us to hear what they have to say? Hidden somewhere behind a seemingly simple, pop-culture question about our preference for a book or a movie, is life.

The guided discussions in this packet will draw in part on recent scholarly interest in film adaptations, and will encourage us to examine the formal differences between film and literature and the challenges of adapting literature to the big screen. More importantly, it will ask us to consider film and literature from an interdisciplinary perspective in order to explore how they can work together to make more powerful claims about art, life, and storytelling than they could manage in isolation. All of the books and movies are fairly well known, and you'll probably have seen and read some of them before: Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1961 and inspired an award-winning film adaptation; Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a turn-of-the-20th-century classic that yielded one of the most revered war movies of all time, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, eighty years after Conrad's novel was originally published; *Capote*, which traces the genesis of a seminal work of creative nonfiction, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, was nominated for the Academy Award for best picture in 2006. In other words, all these texts are all pretty good on their own. But the following discussions are also designed to get us to consider how these works of film and literary art can say more together than they can separately—tell deeper truths, provoke more potent responses, and, hopefully, inspire more vibrant conversations.

Although some of the texts are bound together by adaptation, all of them ask a set of big questions that will likely crop up in many conversations. These include:

- What is the relationship of literary and cinematic storytelling to history?
- How do films and movies help us understand ourselves and our neighbors?
- How do we as audiences (real and imagined) shape the books and movies we consume?
- What are the moral responsibilities in telling a cinematic or literary story, if any?
- How does creative art deal with destructive violence, both sanctioned and unsanctioned?
- Can great art seek a clear political objective and still be great art?

For each meeting, I'll outline a few potentially fruitful approaches, some guiding questions, and some additional optional texts that may be of interest to some (many of these will be available online). These suggestions will start with a single text but will build from week to week, and you will also find that these texts engage with each other in numerous ways that I haven't identified. Ideally, by the second week, your own questions and insights will be shaping what I hope will be an enriching and personalized experience of literature and film.

**PREVIEW OF COMING ATTRACTIONS:
The Theory of Adaptation and The “Spirit” of Literature**

Harper Lee’s novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published in 1960, won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1961, and was quickly adapted into a major Hollywood film. In some ways, its initial popular success was surprising. The book raised the issue of race relations and the injustice of Jim Crow at a time when those topics were highly controversial, and Lee described the town of Maycomb in a way that suggested a much beloved Southern culture could also be to blame for racial prejudice and violence. The shift to the silver screen was also surprising because certain formal elements of the narrative didn’t necessarily lend themselves to Hollywood conventions. The plot was complex, involving several seemingly unrelated subplots. In the novel’s center, holding all these strands together, stood Scout and her singular perspective, a voice and a point of view of which readers were always aware. Emerging from a young girl in the process of growing up, Scout’s voice posed as large a challenge to Hollywood’s appropriation as the novel’s political content, and as always there were many other aspects of the literary narrative that simply could not make the transition to the truncated yet wall-to-wall version of the story that film audiences would eventually see. So how did the filmmakers decide what to show?

One possible answer to this question may seem a bit “old school” but is actually based on some cutting-edge work by scholars of film adaptation. Historically, adaptation studies have been rooted in comparisons and contrasts between film and literature. Often this work can devolve into arguments about the relative merits of the genres partly because film buffs have long been interested in securing the credentials of film as serious art, they tend to resist the power of the same literary connection that makes a film an adaptation in the first place. Rather than a cinematic iteration of a prior literary text, adaptations are often analyzed as fresh performances geared mostly to the present in which they are displayed.

As the film scholar Colin MacCabe observes, studies that take this approach have two major flaws: first, they overlook the peculiarities of an adaptive art form “that preserves identity [with a literary source] at the same moments that it multiplies it”; second, “they ignore how audiences [and filmmakers] talk about film adaptations” as deeply connected and potentially complementary texts. The fans and creators of adaptations tend to assume that some basic reality or truth lies behind the original literary work, a “spirit” that can potentially survive to live again on the screen. Most filmmakers and moviegoers believe that a brilliant adaptation can convey something of the “spirit” of a great book, despite any number of necessary adjustments to literary form.¹ This reading/viewing discussion group will focus on getting at that “spirit.” Your first discussion will explore the sorts of truths that might constitute the spirit of one of the most popular novels of the twentieth century. Your second will try to discern whether that spirit lives on in the novel’s cinematic adaptation. In the last three sessions that same spirit will be permitted to commune and clash with some others, as you discuss a second literary text, its audacious cinematic adaptation, and finally a film that goes looking for the good and evil spirits lurking behind the creation of great literature.

NOTE: As a warm up to your first meeting, you might each reflect on a film you loved more than the book on which it was based (good movies actually get made from bad books fairly often), an instance of a film adaptation that you think failed to communicate the basic truth of a book (also all too common, sadly), and perhaps a rare instance where both the book and the film succeeded. If you like you can share your picks with others in the group before you meet (via email, Facebook, group text, etc.) You may be surprised to find that you loved a book or movie that one of your old friends hated, but sharing your choices will give the group a sense of your collective standards for good art, and also give you a relaxed way to begin your first conversation.

¹ *True to the Spirit: Film Adaptation and the Question of Fidelity*, ed. Colin MacCabe, et al (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7.

FIRST DISCUSSION: A DIFFERENT SORT OF “CHILDREN’S STORY”

Read Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Richard Russo, the contemporary novelist (and with Harper Lee, a Pulitzer Prize winner), recalled in a recent interview that the first time he read *To Kill a Mockingbird* he failed to finish it. He stopped short not because he didn’t think the novel was any good, but rather because the nuns who taught in his school had assigned it as an American classic.² Russo was not alone in being forced to read the book because it was deemed good for him; *Mockingbird* has been a mainstay of high school reading lists for decades. Indeed, some of us may have had to get past a few negative childhood associations in returning to the book as adults. In coming back to the narrative as somewhat more sophisticated readers, we may find ourselves as surprised as Russo at how audaciously Lee’s writing evokes what we may have forgotten about our childhoods, especially how children construct their own worlds based on very different perceptions and values than the ones adults accept. We may also be struck by how much Scout and her peers learn about early twentieth-century Southern society over the course of the narrative, and at the subtlety with which the father-daughter relationship between Scout and Atticus develops, as the adult narrator recalls her slow-dawning realization of her father’s moral character.

It may be useful to break up your first discussion into separate parts based on the outcomes of Lee’s decision to center the story on Scout’s “childish” point of view. Thinking about that point of view will be important when we consider the novel’s relationship to the film next week, but it will also put Lee’s novel in conversation with several different strains of classic American literature that employ a similar focus on narrators who are still in the process of growing up.

I: *Where the Wild Things Are*

First, you might discuss the novel’s depiction of the children’s world as filtered through their peculiar imaginations, reflecting on some of the following questions.

- What aspects of Lee’s vision of childhood seemed authentic to you? Were there particular elements of your own childhood that this book helped you remember? Take a closer look at a particular episode or event in the plot that struck at least some of you as an especially true or vivid image of childhood.
- Do some Scout’s relationships with the people she is closest to—Jem, Atticus, Dill, and Calpurnia—strike you more adult than childlike? Is her “engagement” to Dill merely comical or is there more to it? Can a childhood commitment be serious as well?
- Children are good at asking “why,” and there are a lot of whys worth asking in this story, which could surround any number topics and characters. Consider Arthur “Boo” Radley as an obvious example. Why do you think the children want to “make Boo Radley come out”? Why do you think they are so intent on “playing” the Radleys? Why do you think Boo leaves them gifts in the tree? Why do you think Boo Radley was locked up? Why does the story seem to begin and end with Boo? What are your “whys” for Harper Lee?

² You can find Russo’s short interview online at <http://video.pbs.org/video/2208192676/>.

FIRST DISCUSSION: A DIFFERENT SORT OF “CHILDREN’S STORY”

Continued

II: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

You might also discuss Scout’s reluctantly undertaken education into the norms of an imperfect adult society, and any of the following questions.

- Boo isn’t the only “mystery” of Maycomb hidden from Scout in the early parts of the book. What other important mysteries of adult society eventually “come out” to reveal themselves to Scout? Are there mysteries that are hidden from the reader for a time, only to emerge later? Even though she seems to be simply telling her story, did Scout still seem mysterious to any of you? Did you feel there were any significant mysteries that remained hidden to either Scout or the reader at the novel’s conclusion?
- How is the town of Maycomb and its immediate environs organized socially? Beyond simply “black and white,” can you remember other important social groupings that Scout is eventually exposed to? How many of these groupings are familiar from your own childhoods? How many of them still seem relevant? What does it mean for Scout to learn to become a lady? What is gained? What is lost?
- Could Scout’s story have been told in New York or Los Angeles? Could Scout, or perhaps more importantly, Atticus, have existed outside of the American South? Do you think the book’s characters, as children, are more or less able to recognize the evils of the particular society into which they’ve been born?

III: *The Great Gatsby*

Even though we’re bound by Scout’s point of view, it’s hard not to fixate on her father. Like Jay Gatsby, Atticus stands as a kind of enigmatic gravitational center of the novel, drawing us through the curious fascination of a young narrator. What do you make of Atticus, and any of the following questions?

- How does Atticus compare to other parental figures in the novel? Do you think Atticus is too detached from his children? Why do you think he lets them “run wild,” as Aunt Alexandra describes his parenting style several times?
- What events or epiphanies change Scout’s view of her father over the course of the novel? Is there a particular point in the novel where you feel Scout finally understands something fundamental about her father? Or do you think that her understanding only really arrives in retrospect, through the voice of the adult narrator looking back on her childhood? What actions or elements of his character does Scout misunderstand as a child that she might understand or appreciate later?
- Jan Radway, a literary critic who loved the book as a young person, found she was more critical as an adult of what she now sees as Atticus’s preferential treatment of Jem, with whom he sits at the end of the novel, a symbol of paternal devotion but also gendered solidarity. Do you find this reading of the novel credible? Do you think Scout is or feels neglected?

Looking forward to the film:

- Take a group poll to see if Gregory Peck (who played Atticus Finch in the film) intruded on any of your reading experiences. If he did, you might want to think about why film depictions so often crowd out literary descriptions in our imaginations.
- Are we wise to conflate Harper Lee with Scout? Does Dill’s status as a Truman Capote character change anything about how we might interpret his character?
- If Atticus had refused to defend Tom Robinson, would we be right to see him as immoral, and if so, does the rest of the town stand guilty of Tom’s killing? If Atticus seems to be the main hero of this story, what is it that makes him heroic? Are there other heroes worth considering?

SECOND DISCUSSION: WHERE FILM AND NOVEL MEET

Watch *To Kill a Mockingbird*. If you have time, also read the film critic Roger Ebert's short essay "How to Read a Film." You can google it or find it at: http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2008/08/how_to_read_a_movie.html

This novel/film pairing allows us to see what's involved in crafting a fairly "straight" adaptation. It presents a clear contrast to the next pairing of *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*, for which the setting, character, plot, and politics of the literary and cinematic renderings (as well as the time of their creation) will seem much further apart. Nevertheless, although the cinematic adaptation of the *Mockingbird* narrative seems quite straightforward, filmmakers always have to make significant additions and subtractions to their sources, and the story they tell always changes as a result. Even when many elements of an adaptation seem very closely related to the source, they are never quite the same. So before you tackle any close reading of film sequences, you might want to discuss some more general questions about what happened to the narrative when we moved from the novel to the film.

Tough Choices

Did you especially enjoy or especially resent the film in part because of how you felt about the novel? Were there any obvious changes in the film version that struck you as worth discussing? Were there episodes or characters from the novel that you wish had been included? If so, keep track of some of the omissions you found most vexing or interesting.

Underlying Truths

If you have a list of elements you might have liked to see saved from the novel, see if you can help each other see ways in which the film version might have tried to maintain a connection to the missing element through other means. For example, Atticus' siblings are missing from the film version, but the element of his character that made him refuse his sister's advice on childrearing in the book might survive in other places in the movie. Are other "missing" elements you noted actually present in some other form?

The Form of Film

What does the capacity to "see" and "hear" the story make possible for you as a viewer that was unavailable to you as a reader? What does the form of film make less possible or likely? Does seeing the characters on film make their race, age, and gender more significant than it was in the book? Does it change the way you relate to any of the characters to see them on screen and to hear their voices? One of the themes of the film is expressed in Atticus' statement to Scout that "you never understand a person until you consider things from his point of view. . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it. Is it easier or harder for us to empathize in purely textual narratives than when we can "see" a racial or gendered difference? How does the choice to shoot in black and white affect the story? (As fans of *The Wizard of Oz* will recall, Technicolor had been around since the 1930s.)

Third-Person Scout?

We spent some time last week discussing Scout's unique point of view as central to the novel. Despite the occasional voiceover, we've now lost much of the personal focus of a novel written in the first-person. But does the film manage to hold on to that point of view? In what sense is this still Scout's story and in what sense does the film encourage us to adopt other perspectives and points of focus? Does Atticus's heroism look different because we're literally seeing it in action, rather than through Scout's eyes (and the novel's words)?

SECOND DISCUSSION: WHERE FILM AND NOVEL MEET

“Close Reading” Exercise and Discussion

Using a DVD player you can rescreen the following suggested sequences, each of which accentuates the aspects of the *Mockingbird* narrative you may have focused on last week: Lee’s vivid description of the unique world of childhood; the novel’s critical attitude toward the rules of that govern adult life into which Scout and her peers are being introduced; and the way Scout’s perspective shaped the reader’s understanding of Atticus’s character. By “close reading” sequences in the film that follow similar lines, we’ll better see how the filmmakers use their own techniques to try to mirror the strength of the novel. Roger Ebert’s blog post, “How to Read a Film” describes his “shot at a time technique.” If you’ve never tried the method I think you’ll find it’s actually pretty fun. You’ll be surprised at how many details your group will notice working together that you didn’t recognize the first time through the film on your own, and you may want to try out Ebert’s method on other scenes (or the whole film if you’re feeling really ambitious!) For at least the first sequence mentioned below, though, I would suggest that you divide the tasks of close viewing. We’re all such literate viewers of movies that we’re usually unaware of *how* they create meaning for us through a number of intricate steps; most of us aren’t accustomed to stepping back to think about the process we go through almost unconsciously in order to understand the story as it plays out on screen. There are obviously lots of techniques that go into making films and a technical vocabulary for analyzing them, but for now just look for a few basic elements.³ Watch the scene all the way through once having one or two members of the group take note of the following:

- 1) How each shot is initially framed;
- 2) How camera positions create different points of view;
- 3) How different shots are juxtaposed and what sorts of cuts and transitions bridge the gap between;
- 4) How sound—spoken dialogue, sound effects, and music—becomes significant in the story;
- 5) How body language functions in the sequence, how characters are positioned in relationship to each other initially, and how that relationship changes in significant ways as characters move (this job might be best left to someone who read Ebert’s description of “intrinsic weighting” especially carefully).

After you’ve watched a sequence once while keeping track of these elements of the film narrative, you might try watching all three using Ebert’s “democracy in the dark” method, whereby anyone in the group can call a halt at any point to make an observation about what they see and hear.

Sequence 1) The Children’s Room: At approximately the 13 and a half-minute mark, this short sequence opens with a shot through lace curtains on the window into the children’s room. It closes approximately three minutes later when the Judge arrives to ask Atticus to defend Tom Robinson.

Sequence 2) The Night before the Trial: Runs eight minutes beginning at approximately the 59 minute mark, where Jem sees Sheriff Tate driving Tom Robinson to the Maycomb jail.

Sequence 3) Tom’s Truth: The climactic nine-minute trial sequence in which Tom testifies starts at approximately the 1 hour and 22 minute mark.

³ Even the most basic descriptions and glossaries of film technique tend to turn into swamps that require more dedication than this reading group assumes. Understanding the importance of point of view, recognizing the shot-and-cut as a kind of basic unit of film language, and sharpening your ear for significant sound should produce some rich insights. Note: you can see some criticism in action in Ebert’s mostly negative review of *Mockingbird* using a keyword search at Rottentomatoes.com or at the Chicago *Sun-Times* website. It might be worth some discussion time as well.

THIRD DISCUSSION: THE HORROR OF CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*

Read Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* feels like a strangely fluid book, partly because it is one of the last great works of nineteenth-century literature. Today we call it a novella, which might just mean it's not quite long enough to fit our standard for novels, but that it seems too sprawling to be a short story. Originally, though, it was something else entirely: a serialized work of fiction, spread between three issues of a monthly magazine, which Conrad later tied together and grouped with two other related pieces in a single published volume. It's notoriously difficult to recover the "original" meaning of this kind of work. Many of the first "readers" of magazine stories may have actually been listeners, for instance, and if you have a chance it can be quite an experience to read Conrad aloud. As a magazine publication it was closely linked to the popular culture and, as one of Conrad's early works, reflects his personal history as an adventurer and popular interest in what was sometimes called "sea writing." Today *Darkness* most often appears as a timeless work of genius standing elevated among the pantheon of literary greats. Then, it was part of the texture of late 19th-century life, broken into digestible pieces and ensconced on the cheaply printed page under a particular date for a particular kind of audience.

It may be worth recalling that structural flexibility was built into the text that only now can be called a classic "book," because in the next discussion Conrad's story will appear modified again as the source text for a great Vietnam War film. But it's also worth recalling that many similarly organized nineteenth-century works, even by authors who were highly regarded in their day, have been mostly forgotten now. Partly they vanish because they don't translate to twentieth-century conventions and expectations, but they also may disappear because they didn't have much of lasting importance to say. *Heart of Darkness* tries to say something, but it also resists the impulse to provide a "message." This is partly based on Conrad's notion that art did something different than science or philosophy, that an artist speaks to our capacity for delight, for wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts; to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.

That's a tall order, and whether Conrad achieves his own artistic goals here remains an open question. Yet there is certainly something about *Heart of Darkness* that has kept it around to haunt us, like Marlow, with "the horror." Just what that something is may become clearer if we put it in conversation with the other literary and cinematic texts from this reading group; you can do so with any of the following lines of questions that seem worth pursuing, or better yet, use your own.

A Big Question to Return to before the End

What is the darkness? Is it evil? Where is its heart?

Maycomb, the Thames, and the Congo

We begin the story of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in Maycomb, "a tired old town." We never really leave it, and we soon discover that all the characters are intimately bound to their setting in complicated ways. Why do you think Conrad begins his story on the Thames? In what ways can his travel narrative be relevant to such a setting? Does it strike you as a particularly British story?

THIRD DISCUSSION: THE HORROR OF CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*

Continued

True Storytellers

Darkness is a frame narrative, a story told by Marlow within the larger fiction crafted by Conrad, who had gone into the Congo on a fresh-water steamer almost a decade before Marlow's tale was published.

Why do you think Marlow decides to tell his "fresh-water sailor" story to these listeners at this moment, so many years after it happened? Scout's story also contains numerous references that can be traced to Harper Lee's childhood. In what other ways does Marlow resemble Scout as a storyteller? What is the source of his fascination with Kurtz, which is born on riverboat, hatched in the jungle, and confirmed by the rest of his life? What links the two characters? In what sense are they, as Marlow suggests in the last section of the book, "friends"? What might their connection imply about Conrad as an artist and a man?

Atticus Kurtz

One of the lessons Atticus teaches Scout in both the book and the film is to walk around in someone else's skin: in other words, to empathize with those she might otherwise dismiss as mean or stupid or dangerous. If this is good moral advice, does that mean Marlow should feel empathy for Kurtz? Or do you think this kind of association could sometimes be morally damaging as well as beneficial? Do you notice any resemblances between Kurtz and Atticus—or at least Marlow's vision of him and Scout's vision of her father? What seems to have been admirable about both central characters to secondary characters in the books—Miss Maudie in *Mockingbird* or the Russian "harlequin" in *Darkness*, for instance? How do you interpret Marlow's own insistence that—even after all the terrible things he's done—Kurtz was "a remarkable man" and that his last "summing-up. . . was an affirmation, a moral victory"? Do you think the two stories have different visions of what makes for morality? If so, which story gives us a more honest depiction of human goodness? If not, what's the basis of their agreement?

The Blackness and the Darkness

In what ways does race function similarly in both stories? In what ways does racial blackness resonate differently in Conrad's story than in Lee's? Can we connect to any of the black characters in Conrad's story as humans with skins we could walk around in, or are we automatically alienated from them? Consider a few specific depictions of black characters—do they reinforce or challenge prejudice? Also consider how Africans are viewed by those whites Marlow describes. What sort of English words—adjectives and nouns especially—are used to characterize the native people? Is the way we "see" race in this book as powerful as how we "saw" it represented in the film from last week?

Looking Forward to the Film

Conrad thought the writer's job was "by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, above all, to make you *see*. That—and no more, and it is everything." Can this definition of writing survive the age of cinema? Should all good writers become screenwriters, the better to make us see? What sort of seeing might be lost if they did?

"Talk" is a theme in this story, which is really an extended bout of Marlow talking to his friends. Kurtz, we discover, is a talker as well as a writer, prone to all-nighters with wandering Russians. What's the difference between this sort of "talking" and other ways of communicating? Is this story any different because it's supposedly based on talking? We don't actually "hear" much from Kurtz. Do you think his sort of "talk" could be translated to writing (or film), and if so, would it make any sense?

FOURTH DISCUSSION: APOCALYPSE THEN AND NOW

Watch *Apocalypse Now* (1979)⁴

If you have time, watch *Hearts of Darkness* (1991), the fascinating documentary account of the challenges involved in the film's creation, available on Netflix. For subscribers to *Harper's Magazine*, I would also recommend Lawrence Weschler's reflection on the pitfalls of making anti-war films, "Valkyries over Iraq," available at <http://harpers.org/archive/2005/11/valkyries-over-iraq/>

Heart of Darkness was a strange masterpiece that underwent several formal reorganizations. *Apocalypse Now* has an even more vexed production history, one that began when Francis Ford Coppola left to begin filming in 1976 and, in one of the great instances of art imitating life, was nearly lost in the jungle. One of Coppola's biggest stars (Marlon Brando) showed up overweight and marginally coherent, in order to mumble and collect a multimillion-dollar payday. Coppola's original leading man (Harvey Keitel) had to be fired after a month. His replacement (Martin Sheen) spent much of the shoot drunk and then suffered a heart attack, although on the plus side Sheen didn't need to be coached for the drunken hotel room scene at the beginning of the film. Meanwhile a typhoon destroyed sets, the weather stopped filming at several points, and the helicopters Coppola had secured for an action sequence went off to fight actual communists rather than extras. Numerous false starts, firings, rewrites, and miles of cut footage marred the long editing process as well. It's no wonder, then, that many now blame the film for the demise of its famous director (who nevertheless returned to it yet again for a complete reedit and rerelease in 2001). Somehow, though, the movie that emerged from this mess in 1979 turned out to be its own kind of classic—bloated, erratic, but somehow also profoundly compelling. It won the Palm d'Or at the Cannes film festival, where Coppola notoriously proclaimed: "My film is not about Vietnam. My film is Vietnam. It is what it was really like."⁵

This seems like a strange claim for lots of reasons, especially since the film's script was based on nineteenth-century story about European merchants in Africa rather than American soldiers in Southeast Asia. If this war film captures anything essential about the Vietnam conflict, what does that have to do with what Conrad captured in his story? Why adapt art, when what you're proposing to portray is history? That's the big question up for consideration today, but there are others as well. As usual, take what you can use from the following lines of questions, but go wherever your response to the film and your previous discussions take you.

The Vietnam War as The Ivory Trade

Even though this is hardly a direct adaptation of Conrad's narrative, transferring some of the basic elements of *Heart of Darkness* to Vietnam cries out for discussion. How much sense does the change in setting make to you, and how far can you productively stretch the analogy before it snaps? For instance, does one have to assume the Vietnam War was a colonial endeavor in order for the adaptation to work?

FOURTH DISCUSSION: APOCALYPSE THEN AND NOW

⁴ I would recommend watching a DVD print that closely corresponds to the early version of the film, *Apocalypse Now*, which is considerably shorter and somewhat easier to secure than the recent update. You can always watch *Apocalypse Now Redux* (2001) after you've had a chance to recover from the original 153 minutes of harrowing cinematic storytelling.

⁵ See Stewart O'Nan, "The First Wave of Films," in *The Vietnam Reader* (New York: Anchor, 1998), 271.

Continued

Soldiers as Merchants, Merchants as Soldiers

We might also reflect on the film's analogy to *Heart of Darkness* in terms of the minor characters. In what sense are the military brass and CIA officials (note Harrison Ford in one of his underappreciated cameos) at the beginning of the film like the people who are interested in going after Conrad's Kurtz? Are the ordinary soldiers in the film in some sense versions of Conrad's pilgrims? Within the confines of these stories, are the natives in Vietnam/Cambodia essentially identical to Conrad's Africans, and if so, what does that tell us about what a word like "native" might mean?

Colonel Kurtz

Why is Willard fascinated with Colonel Kurtz, the man he has been assigned to kill? In what ways does Colonel Kurtz resemble Conrad's version of the character? Do you take the idealism of either Kurtz character seriously? If so, how do those described ideals relate to the real brutalities the characters enact, their cruel visions of extermination and the harsh "symbolism" of heads on stakes? Why can't Willard and Kurtz seem to have a long "heart to heart" conversation on camera? Why do you think both remain so enigmatic? Is Marlon Brando's "horror" the same as the one Marlow hears articulated by Kurtz?

Close Reading

You might want to look at particular scenes and sequences of your own choosing, but two famous sequences in the film that might be worth some close reading are Kilgore's aerial attack on the village, and the very confusing attack on Colonel Kurtz at the end of the film. Before your close reading, you might reflect a bit on your emotional responses to your original viewing of these scenes. Did everyone respond with "horror" to the violence of the attacks, or did they also become a kind of action sequence akin to those in our favorite frivolous summer blockbusters? To the extent that audiences find this footage exhilarating, can an antiwar film also become an unintentional glorification of war's violence?

Reverse Engineering

Are there aspects of Conrad's story that you feel you understand better after watching *Apocalypse Now*? Does the different kind of violence applied in the literary narrative strike you as easier to recognize and account for after seeing the story interpreted through the lens of a full-scale war?

Looking Forward: John, Chapter I

At the end of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow describes "the Intended" bride of Kurtz in language that seems a kind of twisted echo of the biblical witness of John 1:5, "the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (KJV). Conrad's passage reads: ". . . bowing my head before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness, in the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her—from which I could not even defend myself." Given the darkness of the vision of humanity that we get in these narratives, is there any saving grace in these stories? Should Willard have spared Colonel Kurtz? Should Marlow have told the world—and the woman who thought she knew him—about what Kurtz had done? Do we have a responsibility to tell the truth, and to treat the truth seriously, even when it's horrible?

FIFTH DISCUSSION: TO WRITE AND/OR TO RIGHT

Watch *Capote*

Capote may seem like an odd place to conclude this extended discussion. As a historical picture it draws on historical sources, but it's the only film we're watching that's not a significant adaptation of fiction. While a critical success, the film is certainly not old enough to be considered a classic. Nevertheless, it pulls together threads of previous texts and discussions in ways that few other films could. For instance, we've actually seen fictional versions of the authors at the heart of this story in our first unit; Dill and Scout can be interpreted as fictionalized representations of Truman Capote and his real-life friend, Nelle Harper Lee. *Mockingbird* will actually be published partly through the film, and Truman and Nelle will go to a screening near the end, but to think of these characters as grown children we have "known" may change the way we understand their actions (and their failures to act). Like our previous "crime stories," *Capote* relates directly to what violence tells us about ourselves and makes us wonder about how creative figures can respond to violence's most senseless expressions. Perhaps more than any of our stories, *Capote's* account of the birth of the "nonfiction novel" makes us think again about our responsibility for telling stories that are true, morally as well as historically. It makes us think about the connections between writing and life, and how those connections are often based on prior connections between authors and the people they write about. Finally it asks perhaps the key moral question for the course, about empathy and its potential limits.

All of these are somewhat familiar questions to you by now, but as always you will have questions of your own to pursue, and since this is the last day of discussion you may want to put all these pieces together in your own way. Perhaps you'll want to engage in some extended close reading of the film, or take up one of the connections suggested above through an extended interdisciplinary conversation. The last page of this syllabus is left mostly blank as a symbolic opening for those discussions, whatever they may involve. Below I've simply included several key or cryptic lines from the film as memory aids to scenes you might want to screen and to questions raised in previous discussions (especially the "looking forward" sections). I think you'll find that these short lines raise complex issues that can be applied to multiple characters and plotlines in the film and throughout the course. I will leave it to you to follow them where they lead and to draw your own conclusions. If discussing film and literature together in a conversation teaches us anything, after all, it is that we carry the truth of art within ourselves, and that those are the truths that art helps us share. As Conrad said, somewhere behind our artistic productions and our talk lies "the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts." I hope that conviction will be stronger after these conversations.⁶

⁶ Post-script: just before the last draft of this went online, news of the school shootings in Connecticut broke. It seems that this last discussion especially—on a film about a book written as a response to similar news—might also serve as a way to respond to that kind of horror, and that whatever good that discussion does will have at least as much to do with the truths held within the audience as whatever truth the film contains.

FIFTH DISCUSSION: TO WRITE AND/OR TO RIGHT**Capote Continued**

"I am honest about what I write about."

"He grabbed my hand and he said to me, 'talk.'"

"These are good people."

"I'm inventing an entirely new kind of writing."

"I need to hear their stories."

"It's ok. It's Truman, it's your friend."

"When I think about how good my book could be, I can hardly breathe."

"It's as if Perry and I grew up in the same house."

"This book is going to change everything."

"You pretend to be my friend."

"There must be something wrong with us to do what we did."

"All I want to do is write the end."

"How'd you like the movie, Truman?"

"Adios, Amigos."

"The fact is you didn't want to."