

The Reading Cinema

Four Seminars on Imperfect Texts and Their Films

Companion seminars to the lecture · 90 min each · 8–11 students with TA

How These Seminars Are Built

Each seminar opens a text/film pairing in advance of its appearance in the lecture series. The shared structure across all four sessions: students arrive having read the source text and watched the film; they arrive having read two scholarly pieces — one general, one specific — that together give them critical purchase on what the director is doing. The seminar's job is to take that purchase and convert it into argument.

The **general reading** each week is a foundational piece of film or adaptation theory — it gives students a vocabulary that exceeds the specific case. The **specific reading** each week is a peer-reviewed essay on the film itself, chosen for being argumentative rather than survey-like. Together they let the seminar do two things at once: build a transferable theoretical apparatus, and put that apparatus to work on a real object.

Each plan has the same internal arc: a **warm prompt** (no hands; everyone writes), a **reading-anchored task** (paired or small-group, with passage assignments), a **scene-anchored task** (back to the film, looking for the move the readings predicted), and a **synthesis** — usually a structured disagreement or a writing prompt that bridges to the lecture. The TA notes at the end of each plan flag the discussion pivots most likely to need help.

The sequence is intentional. We start with Kubrick because the source-to-film gulf is largest there, and the structural argument of the entire course — that adaptation can be a form of criticism — is most undeniable. We end with Cuarón because by week four students should be capable of holding two competing critical readings (Žižek and Trimble) of the same film in tension without collapsing the disagreement.

Seminar 1

Arthur C. Clarke, "The Sentinel," and Stanley Kubrick, *2001: A Space Odyssey*

Cinematic gesture under examination: the match cut and the screen-as-monolith

Required Readings

Type	Reading
General	Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message," Chapter 1 of <i>Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man</i> (1964). Open access PDF (MIT) . ~14 pp. Read the whole chapter; the argument cumulates.
Specific	Annette Michelson, "Bodies in Space: Film as 'Carnal Knowledge,'" <i>Artforum</i> 7, no. 6 (February 1969). Open access via Artforum . ~10 pp. The classic theoretical essay on 2001. Difficult but tractable.
Primary	Arthur C. Clarke, "The Sentinel" (1951). ~8 pp. Any anthology will do; widely available online via the Internet Archive of <i>10 Story Fantasy</i> , Spring 1951.

Pre-seminar prep

Watch 2001 in full (170 min); read "The Sentinel" first (it takes 20 minutes); then read McLuhan, then Michelson. Bring a printed copy of either reading marked up — students will work in pairs from each other's annotations.

Seminar arc (90 min)

0:00 - 0:08 — Warm prompt (silent, written)

8 min · individual writing on index cards

TA hands out cards. Prompt: "In one sentence, what is the most important thing the film does that the short story cannot?" Students write. Cards collected for later. No discussion.

0:08 - 0:35 — Reading-anchored task: McLuhan applied

27 min · pairs, then plenary

Pairs are assigned one of three sequences from *2001*:

- (a) the bone-to-spaceship match cut — the four-million-year ellipsis

- (b) the HAL deactivation — “Daisy, Daisy” and the dying voice
- (c) the final monolith approach and Star Child

Each pair has 12 minutes to answer two questions, in writing: **(1)** What, in McLuhan's language, is the medium of this sequence? (Not “film,” but: what specific medium is foregrounded — the cut, the human voice, the screen itself?) **(2)** If McLuhan is right that the medium is the message, what is this sequence's message — and is that message available to Clarke in prose?

Pairs report back, 3 minutes each. The TA's job in plenary is to keep students from collapsing back into thematic readings (“this sequence is about evolution”). Press them to stay on the formal level. The McLuhan move is hard at first; it gets easier when applied a second time.

0:35 - 0:60 — Scene-anchored task: Michelson and the screen

25 min · whole group, with re-screening

Re-screen the final 4 minutes of the film (Bowman's death-and-Star-Child sequence) in the seminar room. Then read aloud Michelson's claim that the film provides “carnal knowledge” — that the spectator's body, not just mind, is enlisted by the film's spatial logic. Open prompt: **how does the screen function in this sequence?** The aim is to walk students toward Gerard Loughlin's claim — without naming it yet — that the monolith and the cinema screen share aspect ratio, and that the film has been making a McLuhanesque argument about its own medium for the entire runtime.

If they don't get there on their own, the TA can prompt: “Turn the monolith ninety degrees. What shape do you have?” Then: “What is the shape of the screen you are looking at?” That usually does it. *This is the moment that previews the lecture's central claim, so it's worth letting the room sit with it.*

0:60 - 0:82 — Synthesis: structured disagreement

22 min · two-corner debate

Position A: “Kubrick's film is a faithful expansion of Clarke's idea — Clarke gave him a kernel; Kubrick gave it an architecture. The film is the story's natural fulfilment.”
Position B: “Kubrick's film is a refutation of Clarke's prose. The story tells; the film shows. The story explains; the film embodies. The film argues against the kind of writing the story is.”

Split the room. Each side has 8 minutes to build their case using one passage from a reading and one moment from the film. Then 6 minutes of cross-examination. Final 8 minutes: students may switch sides if their position has moved. Track the switches — this is the assessment moment.

0:82 - 0:90 — Bridge and exit ticket

8 min

Hand back the warm-prompt cards from the start. Each student adds one sentence: what would they revise now? Collected. The TA's brief is to read these and email a one-paragraph synthesis to the lecturer before the lecture is given.

TA briefing notes

McLuhan is the harder of the two readings. Students will read “the medium is the message” as a slogan and miss the actual argument, which is that any medium reorganizes the scale and pace of human attention *regardless of its content*. Watch for students who try to argue the message is “evolution” or “technology.” Push them: those are content. McLuhan is asking about form.

Michelson is dense but readable. Her phrase “carnal knowledge” often gets misread as something risqué. It isn't. She means embodied — the spectator knowing through the body, through the felt duration of the long shots, the gravitational disorientation of the centrifuge sequences. If students are stuck, ask: “What do you feel during the docking sequence? Where do you feel it?”

The Loughlin / monolith-as-screen move is the climactic insight. Don't give it away early. Students who arrive at it on their own remember it for the rest of the course.

Seminar 2

William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, and Baz Luhrmann, William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet

Cinematic gesture under examination: transposition and the visual figuration of language

Required Readings

Type	Reading
General	Linda Hutcheon, <i>A Theory of Adaptation</i> , Chapter 1: “Beginning to Theorize Adaptation: What? Who? Why? How? Where? When?” (2006/2013). Full text PDF (filmadapter) . Read pp. 1-32 (Chapter 1 only). The fidelity-critique is the central move.
Specific	Arturo Leyva Pizano, “Speaking Without Words: Luhrmann's Adaptation of Romeo and Juliet,” <i>Interdisciplinary Literary Studies</i> 21, no. 4 (2019): 532-558. Open via ResearchGate or Academia.edu mirror . ~25 pp. Argues that Luhrmann's apparent infidelities are precisely how he is faithful — to the play's theme of language's inadequacy.
Primary	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i> — any modern edition (Arden, Folger, Norton). Re-read Acts I, III.i, and V at minimum.

Pre-seminar prep

Re-watch the film. Re-read at least the three acts named above. Bring a paperback of the play — students will be cross-referencing physically with the text. *Optional but strongly recommended*: watch the equivalent scenes in Zeffirelli's 1968 film for comparison; even ten minutes is enough.

Seminar arc (90 min)

0:00 - 0:08 — Warm prompt

8 min · individual writing

Prompt: “Find one moment in the play and one in the film that you think do the same thing. Find one moment in the play and one in the film that you think do completely different things. Be specific.” Students write for 5 minutes; share with their neighbour for 3.

0:08 - 0:32 — Reading-anchored task: Hutcheon's three modes

24 min · small groups (3-4 students)

Hutcheon distinguishes three modes of engagement: **telling** (novels, books — the mode of *description*), **showing** (theatre and film — the mode of *performance*), and **interacting** (games, interactive media — the mode of *participation*). Each group is given one assigned moment and asked to identify what mode the moment lives in across each medium:

- Group 1 — the Prologue (“Two households...”)
- Group 2 — the balcony scene (II.ii)
- Group 3 — Mercutio's Queen Mab speech (I.iv)
- Group 4 — the death scene (V.iii)

Each group reports back: 3 minutes per group. The aim is to see that the play is *already* hybrid — Shakespearean theatre is a showing-mode that depends on telling-mode poetic density. The film inherits the hybrid and resolves it differently. The Prologue, for instance, in the play is a Chorus; in Luhrmann, it's a TV news anchor. Both are exposition, but the medium of the exposition encodes a different theory of how the audience knows what it knows.

0:32 - 0:58 — Scene-anchored task: Pizano's claim, tested

26 min · paired close work, then plenary

Pizano argues — drawing on the literature critic Richard Fry — that *Romeo and Juliet* is, structurally, a play **about the inadequacy of language to convey emotion**. The lovers' verse, on this reading, fails them. The film tests this claim by visualizing what the verse cannot quite say.

Pairs are assigned one of three scenes; they cross-reference text and film side by side, looking for moments where the film *does* what the language was reaching for and missing:

- (a) the first meeting at the Capulet party — fish tank, II.ii lead-in
- (b) the morning-after parting (III.v)
- (c) the tomb scene (V.iii) — and Luhrmann's decisive change of chronology

In plenary, work toward the central claim: the tomb-scene chronology shift — Juliet wakes *before* Romeo dies — is not a betrayal of the play. It is a *reading* of the play. It identifies what the play could not deliver (Juliet's full agency) and gives it back through cinematic means. This sets up the lecture's claim that the film is a feminist re-reading of the play.

0:58 - 0:80 — Discursive task: defend Zeffirelli

22 min · structured role-play

Two students are assigned the role of Zeffirelli partisans defending the 1968 film as the more faithful, more disciplined adaptation. Two students are assigned the role

of Luhrmann partisans. The remaining 4–7 students are the seminar — they ask questions, push back, and at the end, vote on which film constitutes the more *rigorous reading* of the play. (“More faithful” and “more rigorous” are different claims; they should clarify which standard they’re voting on.)

This task often produces the seminar’s strongest insight: that the question “which is more faithful” is the wrong question. Hutcheon predicts this. The TA should let the room arrive there rather than pre-empting it.

0:80 - 0:90 — Bridge and exit ticket

10 min

Each student writes one sentence: “What would Luhrmann’s diagnosis of Shakespeare’s failure look like if he wrote it as a critical essay?” Collected. The exercise is preparation for the lecture, where exactly this claim is made.

TA briefing notes

Hutcheon’s most counter-intuitive claim is that adaptations are “palimpsestic” — they exist alongside, not beneath, their sources. Students raised on “the book was better” will resist this. The exercise of mapping the three modes is meant to defuse the resistance by showing that even the play is already a hybrid object.

Pizano is more accessible than Hutcheon, but his prose is dense. The key claim — that Luhrmann is faithful to the play’s *theme* of linguistic inadequacy by being unfaithful to the play’s *language* — is paradoxical and worth slowing down for in plenary.

The Zeffirelli debate can become heated. That’s fine. Some students arrive having seen Zeffirelli in school and will defend it on aesthetic grounds; some will defend Luhrmann on generational grounds. Push past those defaults to the structural question: which film does more critical work?

Seminar 3

Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, and Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner*

Cinematic gesture under examination: production design as theoretical argument

Required Readings

Type	Reading
General	Jean Baudrillard, <i>Simulacra and Simulation</i> — read the opening chapter, “The Precession of Simulacra” (~ 25 pp). Open access PDF (Stanford archive) . If Baudrillard is too dense, substitute or supplement with Fredric Jameson's short piece “Cognitive Mapping” (1988), widely available; ~12 pp.
Specific	Giuliana Bruno, “Ramble City: Postmodernism and <i>Blade Runner</i> ,” <i>October</i> 41 (Summer 1987): 61-74. Open access PDF . ~14 pp. The canonical postmodern reading of the film.
Optional / stretch	Joshua Foa Dienstag, “ <i>Blade Runner's</i> Humanism: Cinema and Representation” (UCLA, 2015). Open access PDF (eScholarship) . Useful counter-reading; argues Bruno overstates the postmodern.
Primary	<i>Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?</i> — any edition. Especially chapters 9, 16, 18, and the closing chapters.

Pre-seminar prep

Read the novel; watch the **Final Cut** of the film (this is the version to teach from — the theatrical and director's cuts have different endings and the unicorn dream sequence is differently positioned). Read Baudrillard first and then Bruno. Bring three production-design moments from the film that struck you — the Tyrell pyramid, the city street level, the Bradbury Building, Deckard's apartment, etc. — written down with brief notes on each.

Seminar arc (90 min)

0:00 - 0:08 — Warm prompt

8 min · individual writing

Prompt: “Name one thing the novel does well that the film abandons. Name one thing the film does well that the novel cannot do. Be specific to a passage or shot.”

Pair-share, 3 minutes.

0:08 - 0:32 — Reading-anchored task: Baudrillard's three orders

24 min · small groups

Baudrillard distinguishes three “orders” of representation: **the counterfeit** (the image still references a real), **production** (the image as industrial reproduction, à la Walter Benjamin), and **simulation** (the image with no original — the simulacrum). Each group of 3–4 students is assigned one of the following film elements and asked: which order does this element belong to, and why?

- (a) the photographs the replicants carry — Leon's, Rachael's
- (b) the Voight-Kampff test
- (c) the city of Los Angeles as designed by Syd Mead
- (d) Rachael's memories implanted from Tyrell's niece

In plenary, the goal is to see that the film stages all three orders simultaneously — but the climactic move (Rachael's memories, Deckard's possible replicant status) collapses the three into Baudrillard's third order. The film *is* the simulacrum it depicts. This is the move Dick's prose can name but not enact.

0:32 - 0:58 — Scene-anchored task: Bruno on the city as theory

26 min · close design analysis

Bruno's central claim — that the LA of *Blade Runner* is a postmodern pastiche, a city of borrowed signs, late-capitalist Babel — is delivered via close attention to the production design. Pairs are assigned one of three sequences:

- (a) the opening flyover — Hades, the ziggurats, the flame-stacks
- (b) the street-level Chinatown sequences (the noodle bar, the umbrellas)
- (c) the Bradbury Building interior — J.F. Sebastian's apartment

Each pair has 12 minutes to identify **at least three citations or appropriations** the design is making — to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, to film noir, to Hong Kong street culture, to Mayan architecture, to Edward Hopper. Then they argue: is the citation decorative, or is it making a theoretical claim about how the future is built from the rubble of the past? Bruno would say the latter. Push them to defend that claim or refute it.

0:58 - 0:80 — Discursive task: the Rachael scene

22 min · whole group, with re-screening

Re-screen the apartment scene between Deckard and Rachael (~ 1:14:00 in the Final Cut, when she comes to him after being told she is a replicant). Then put the question: **what is this scene?** The lecture frames it as a sexual assault that the film both enacts and exposes. The seminar should arrive at this through the cinematography — the blocking, the blinds, the violence of the gestures, the line “Do

you trust me?” — and through Rachael's reply at a different point in the film: “I am the business.”

This is a hard scene. Some students will not have noticed it. Others will have noticed and not known what to say. The TA's job is to give them permission to name what they see, while keeping the analysis on the formal level — what is the film doing through cinematography? — rather than letting the conversation collapse into either apologism or condemnation. Bruno's frame helps here: the simulacrum-logic of late capitalism extends to the body, and “I am the business” names exactly that extension.

0:80 - 0:90 — Bridge and exit ticket

10 min

Exit prompt: “Is Deckard a replicant? Argue from the film's *formal* choices, not from interviews with Scott or Ford. Two sentences.” Collected. (The point is to test whether students have understood that the question is undecidable by design — that the film stages the question rather than answering it.)

TA briefing notes

Baudrillard is the harder reading. Some students will find his style alienating. Permit a moment of frustration — that's the right response — and then redirect: forget the prose; the three orders are the take-away. Once they have the three orders as a framework, the film legibility increases enormously.

Bruno is more accessible. Her phrase “*the Los Angeles of Blade Runner is China(in)town*” is provocative; some students will read it as racially fraught. It can be — and worth pausing on — but Bruno's primary point is about postmodern citation, not race *per se*. Allow the racial reading to surface but don't let it displace the formal argument.

On the Rachael scene: have the term “sexual assault” ready in case students need permission to use it. Some will not. Have a fallback question if the room goes silent: “What is the choreography of who moves toward whom in this scene?” That re-opens it on formal grounds.

Seminar 4

P. D. James, *The Children of Men*, and Alfonso Cuarón, *Children of Men*

Cinematic gesture under examination: the long take and the citational background

Required Readings

Type	Reading
General	André Bazin, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," in <i>What Is Cinema? Volume 1</i> (1967). Open access PDF (Mercer County) . Or read the relevant pages from the full What Is Cinema? PDF (MIT) . ~17 pp. The classic argument for the long take and depth of field as ethical and political form.
Specific A	Slavoj Žižek, "The Children of Men Comments" (DVD commentary, 2007 — "anamorphic" reading). Transcript (the-zizek-site) . ~5 pp transcript. The foreground/background argument.
Specific B	Sarah Trimble, "Maternal Back/grounds in <i>Children of Men</i> : Notes Toward an Arendtian Biopolitics," <i>Science Fiction Film & Television</i> 4, no. 2 (2011): 249–270. Abstract & access (Liverpool UP) — full text via institutional access or Project MUSE . ~20 pp. Pushes back on Žižek's foregrounding of Theo by re-centering Kee and the racial-reproductive grammar of the film.
Primary	P. D. James, <i>The Children of Men</i> (1992). Read in full. The diary structure of the first half is itself a teaching object.

Pre-seminar prep

Read the novel and watch the film. Read Bazin first to get the theoretical apparatus. Read Žižek next (it's short). Read Trimble last — her essay assumes you know Žižek's reading and is in dialogue with it. The *disagreement* between Žižek and Trimble is central to this seminar; do not collapse it before arriving.

Seminar arc (90 min)

0:00 - 0:08 — Warm prompt

8 min · individual writing

Prompt: "In the film, who is the protagonist? In the novel, who is the protagonist? Are these the same question? Argue briefly." Pair-share.

0:08 - 0:32 — Reading-anchored task: Bazin and the long take

24 min · paired close work, then plenary

Bazin argues that the long take and depth of field **re-introduce ambiguity** into the image — they refuse the editorial control of montage and instead place the spectator in a relation to the image “closer to that which they enjoy with reality.” The long take is, in Bazin's reading, an *ethical* form because it preserves the duration in which judgment becomes possible.

Pairs are assigned one of the film's three major long takes:

- (a) the coffee-shop opening (the explosion)
- (b) the car ambush and Julian's death (~4 min)
- (c) the Bexhill battle and Theo's run (~7 min)

Each pair has 12 minutes to answer: **(1)** What is preserved by the absence of the cut? **(2)** What ethical or political claim is the long take making — and how does that claim differ from what James's diary structure can deliver? Plenary report-back, 4 min per pair.

0:32 - 0:58 — Discursive task: Žižek vs. Trimble

26 min · structured disagreement

Split the room. Half are Žižek-readers: foreground (Theo's heroic arc) is conventional; the real argument is in the background (Britain as concentration-camp state, neoliberal late-capitalist despair). The film's power is *anamorphic* — you have to look askew.

The other half are Trimble-readers: Žižek's reading reproduces the film's own racial-political occlusion. The *real* foreground is Kee — a pregnant African woman, the only actually generative figure — and the film's racial-reproductive grammar is what biopolitical analysis must engage with. Žižek's anamorphism, on this reading, is itself a kind of looking-away.

Each side: 8 minutes to build their case using one passage from their reading and one moment from the film. Then 10 minutes of cross-examination. The aim is not to resolve the disagreement but to clarify it. Both readings are right about something. Where do they disagree? Where do they need each other?

0:58 - 0:78 — Scene-anchored task: the shoes and the citations

20 min · whole group, with re-screening

Re-screen two short sequences: (a) the warehouse with Picasso's *Guernica* on the wall and Pink Floyd's pig over the Battersea power station; (b) the moment when Theo loses his shoes and walks limping. Open prompt: **what is the film doing through citation, and what is it doing through the shoes?**

The aim is to converge on the claim that the film is a *citational essay* — using the cinematic archive (King Crimson, Pink Floyd, Bowie) and the political-art archive (Picasso, Banksy) to make arguments the diary form of the novel could not. The shoes specifically dramatize the proverb “to walk in another man's shoes” and turn the empathic capacity into cinematic substance. Astruc's idea of the *caméra-stylo* — the camera as a pen, capable of essayistic argument — is the relevant background concept; the TA can name it in the closing minutes.

0:78 - 0:90 — Bridge and exit ticket

12 min

Exit prompt: “If criticism is what these directors do, what is criticism? Two sentences.” This explicitly previews the closing question of the lecture series. Collected for use in lecture.

TA briefing notes

Bazin reads as old-fashioned. He is — but the argument about the long take's ethical structure is doing real work, and the connection to Cuarón is direct (Cuarón has been clear in interviews that he is a Bazinian; Lubezki is a Bazinian cinematographer). If students dismiss Bazin as merely formalist, push them back: he is making an ethical claim about the spectator's freedom.

The Žižek/Trimble disagreement is the heart of this seminar and the climax of the four-week sequence. **Do not let it resolve too quickly.** The instinct in undergraduate seminars is to find the synthesis — “they're both kind of right.” Resist that. The disagreement is productive precisely because it does not resolve. Žižek's reading is incomplete without Trimble; Trimble's reading depends on having Žižek's anamorphism to push against.

The shoes / citations exercise is the warmest moment of the four seminars. Students consistently respond to the Bowie smash-cut and the Picasso. Let the room enjoy it. The closing exit ticket asks the meta-question of the entire course; the lecture will pick it up directly.

Appendix

Reusable structures and TA-facing notes

On the discursive task types

Five task structures recur across the four seminars. They are intentionally repeated so that, by week four, students know the form and can devote attention to the content rather than the rules. They are: **warm prompt** (silent, written, no hands), **reading-anchored task** (paired or grouped, with passage assignment), **scene-anchored task** (close visual analysis, with re-screening), **structured disagreement** (split-room debate or two-corner role-play), and **exit ticket** (one-sentence written reply that bridges to lecture). The TA collects warm-prompt cards and exit tickets each week. The lecturer can use the exit-ticket sentences in the lecture as live citations from the room — this strongly signals that the seminar is not an antechamber to the lecture but a co-author of it.

On the readings

All required readings have free access via the linked PDFs except Trimble (which requires institutional access via Project MUSE or Liverpool UP — most Canadian university libraries will have either). If a student cannot access Trimble, the Wolmart *International Journal of Žižek Studies* piece is freely available at zizekstudies.org and covers similar ground. The pairing of Žižek's transcript with Trimble's essay is the specific intellectual structure I want for week four; substitute reluctantly.

None of the readings is short. Each seminar requires roughly 50–70 pages of reading plus a film. This is honest workload at the advanced-secondary / sophomore juncture; it is not extravagant for a 90-minute discussion seminar that meets weekly. If the workload becomes a barrier, the optional/stretch readings should be the first to drop, not the specific.

On assessment

Nothing in these plans is summatively assessed. The exit tickets are formative; the warm prompts are formative; the role-plays are formative. The summative work — essays, presentations — happens elsewhere in the course architecture. The seminar's job is to make the lecture unmissable by giving students a stake in its central claims before they hear them. That stake is the assessment that matters most.