BRITISH CINEMA

Professor: Dr. Amy Sargeant

Course number: FILM 110

Aims and Objectives

The course introduces a wide range of issues concerning the role of cinema in the British cultural context, as distinct from and in connection with the cinemas of Hollywood and Europe. The course focuses on the following aspects:

- cinema as an economic system operating within an international audio-visual market
- cinema and national identity, particularly representations of London as Metropolis
- genre in cinema
- cinema as a formal system, considering questions of authorship, narrative and audience

Learning Outcomes

Students will learn:

- some of the major features of the relationship between cinema and society
- some of the major features of the cinematic institution in the UK
- some of the major critical and theoretical paradigms for academic study of cinema
- students will develop skills in the reading and analysis of film texts and film criticism

Method of Study

The class proceeds by way of a weekly screening, lecture and seminars. Attendance at all elements is compulsory and, with class participation, will be taken into account in the grade awarded. All classes start promptly at stated times.

Film Screenings

A series of key films is presented in the course of the weekly Screening Programme, ranging from the silent film, Piccadilly, through to the contemporary commercial success, The Queen. You are expected to consider these closely and seriously in the academic context of Film Studies, and in the wider context of your travels in London and the UK. It does not matter whether or not you are already familiar with any of the films.

Prospective students should note that the programme, which constitutes required viewing for the course, contains a wide range of representations of British society. Some may contain a degree of explicitness where matters of sexuality and violence are concerned. All films shown have been publicly exhibited and have formed part of the critical discourse on British cinema. Backup copies are available in the library.
Course Reader

Students are expected to complete basic preparatory reading for each week’s lecture and seminars, as a minimum. A Course Reader will be distributed online to students and recommendations for further viewing and reading will be made week by week.

Attendance Policy

Attendance will be monitored, and a register forwarded to the Programme Director each week. For details, please refer to full UC London Program attendance policy elsewhere.

Classroom Etiquette

Please turn off all mobile phones etc. on entering the classroom. The use of laptops is not permitted.

Assessment

Assessment will consist of:

1) A formative essay (30% of final grade)
   You will be required to respond to an essay question designed to test your understanding of the issues covered in the course thus far.

2) A mid-term essay (30% of final grade)
   This essay will reflect on the issues covered during the first half of the course. You will choose or devise your own essay topic, in consultation with the tutor.

3) A Final Examination (3 hours, 40% of final grade)
   Revision guidance and advice relating to the examination will be provided during seminars. You will be required to answer TWO essay questions chosen from a number of questions covering the whole course. The task is designed to test both breadth and depth of knowledge of course content. Please note: successful candidates are likely to take the whole time allowed for this examination.

Grade Criteria

The tutor will value work which provides clear evidence that it:
- answers the question directly and fully
- contains substantial content
- is clearly expressed and argued
- is able to describe and analyse its chosen objects well
- shows evidence of familiarity with the relevant critical and theoretical approaches.

Weekly Schedule
Lectures and seminars will take place on Mondays
Screenings follow on Monday evenings. Please note swapping of seminar slots during the semester and single guest seminar for *Brick Lane*. (TBC)

**Part One – London and the Concept of British Cinema**

This part will introduce students to some key general concepts that will underpin the weeks to follow – ideas about nationality, national cinema, the cinematic city and British cinema will be discussed through two iconic British films. The concept of close textual analysis in film studies will be introduced with special reference to *Passport to Pimlico*.

**Week 1**

**Introduction and TOWN TRAIL** Familiarise yourself with London landmarks and localities in British cinema.

NB BFI Southbank library and Mediatheque are shut on Mondays.

**NO evening screening**

**Week 2**

- **Lecture:** The English/The British/The Empire/The Monarch
- **Seminar:** discussion of Town Trail; initial queries etc.

- **Screening:** *The Queen* (Stephen Frears, 2006)
- **Reading:** Katie Fox, *Watching the English* (London: Hodder, 2005); [see also Ben Pimlott, *The Queen* (London: Harper Collins, 2002)]

**Week 3**

- **Lecture:** A quintessentially British studio?
- **Seminar:** discussion of *The Queen*

- **Screening:** *Passport to Pimlico* (Henry Cornelius, 1948)
  [look-up also BBC TV *The Secret History of Our Streets*, June – July 2012 and *London on Film*, June 2012]

**Part Two – Criminal London**
This section will address crime as a continuing object of audience fascination, establishing the aesthetic and narrative connections between British cinema and earlier storytelling and performative traditions (including the mythology surrounding Jack the Ripper). Furthermore, it will consider the ways in which the spaces of the city itself have been codified as either dangerous and un-knowable, or as ordered and respectable. Both class and race are encoded within the distinction between East and West London, with Sherlock Holmes distinguishing himself, not least, by his ability to ‘pass’ across from one end of town (representing consumption) to the other end of town (representing production).

Week 4
Lecture: Europe’s response to Hollywood’s dominance in the 1920s: crime; spectacle; melodrama
Seminar: discussion of Passport to Pimlico
Screening: Piccadilly (E. A. Dupont, 1929)

Week 5
Lecture: Crime as comedy caper and East End geezers
Seminar: discussion of Piccadilly
Screening: Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels (Guy Ritchie, 1998)

Week 6
Lecture: Holmes – the legacy – and new marketing strategies
Seminar: discussion of Lock, Stock
Screening: Sherlock (BBC TV series 1); [see also 2009 and 2012 Ritchie renditions]
Reading: Martin Willis, ‘Jack the Ripper, Sherlock Holmes and the narrative of detection’ in Alexander Warwick and Martin Ellis (eds.), Jack the Ripper: Media, Culture, History (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) [also, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle ‘A Study in Scarlet’ etc.]

Part Three – Bombing London

The Second World War was a crucial moment in British history, still evoked at moments of crisis as a key experience in the confirmation and forging of the national ‘character’. Much of this myth was cultivated through the legend of the London Blitz, the survival of landmarks, and the resilience displayed by the Royal Family and Londoners during the
bombings of 1940-1941. [nb *The King’s Speech*!] This section of the course will interrogate the notion that British cinema underwent its ‘golden age’ during the war period through the marriage of fiction and documentary film tradition, and examine its legacy. A variety of films, made both before and during the war, endorse the British documentary strand and the contribution of propaganda to the wartime atmosphere. *Waterloo Road*, made in 1945, is set against *Atonement*, which uses the Second World War as the backdrop to a love story offering a ‘heritage’ version of the past.

**Week 7**

**Lecture:** The People’s War: Propaganda and Documentary

**Seminar:** discussion of *Sherlock*

**Screening:** Selection of Documentary Films, 1930-1945 [*Fires Were Started*, etc.]

**Reading:** J. B. Priestley, ‘Postscripts’

Peter Stansky, ‘The First Days of the Blitz’ (extracts) (Yale University Press, 2008)

Andrew Higson, “‘Britain’s Outstanding Contribution to the Film’: The documentary-realist tradition” in Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays* (London: BFI, 1986)

**Week 8**

MID TERM BREAK – NO TEACHING

**Week 9**

**Lecture:** Documentary, Fiction and the State

**Seminar:** discussion of *Fires Were Started* etc.

**Screening:** *Waterloo Road* (Sidney Gilliat, 1945)


[see also, Ken Loach, *The Spirit of ’45* (2013)]

**Week 10**

**Lecture:** War, ‘Heritage’ and Memory

**Seminar:** discussion of *Waterloo Road*

**Screening:** *Atonement* (Joe Wright, 2007)

[see also Kiera Knightley ads for Chanel directed by Wright!]

**Reading:** Andrew Higson, ‘Re-presenting the national past’ in Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views* (London: Cassell, 1998)


**Part Four – London and Beyond**
Here we consider how areas beyond London – Scotland, its Highlands and Islands – have been represented on screen. If London is often regarded as the ‘centre’, these peripheral areas are often defined as remote, distinguished by their national and social difference and resistance to cosmopolitan influence. This section will consider the ways in which Scotland is cast as, on the one hand, archaic and mystical; on the other, as adopting a defiant and gritty stance in the face of such ‘soft’ romanticism.

**Week 11**
Lecture: The regions – mysticism
Seminar: discussion of *Atonement*

Screening: *I Know Where I’m Going* (Michael Powell/Emeric Pressburger, 1945)

**Week 12**
Lecture: Scotland and modernity
Seminar: discussion of *I Know Where I’m Going*

Screening: *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996)
Derek Paget (in Course Reader)

**Part Five – Multicultural London**

Ethnic minorities have been part of London life for several centuries. This section returns to the mixed community of *Piccadilly*, looking at more recent representations. *My Beautiful Laundrette* (originally made for television) addresses the racial tensions of Thatcher’s Britain, while *Brick Lane* provides an account of the experiences of a Muslim woman trying to hold her family together in the aftermath of 9/11.

**Week 13**
Lecture: Thatcher’s London
Seminar: discussion of *Trainspotting*

Screening: *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985)

**Week 14**
Lecture: Women’s Voices in the Modern East End
Seminar: discussion of *My Beautiful Laundrette*
Screening: *Brick Lane* (Sarah Gavron, 2007)

**Week 15**
Exam revision
**Guest Single Seminar 3.00 onwards: Brick Lane** (TBC)

Screening: Exam Film to be Chosen by Common Consent [repeat screening]

**Week 16**

FINAL EXAM

**Select Bibliography**

- Paul MORLEY (2013) *The North and Everything In It*
• Duncan PETRIE (2000) Screening Scotland (London: BFI)
• Jeffrey RICHARDS (1997) Films and British National Identity (Manchester: MUP)
• Sarah STREET (2002) Transatlantic Crossings: British Feature Films in the USA (London: Continuum)
• Patricia WARREN (1995) British Film Studios (London: Batsford)
• Brian WINSTON, Fires Were Started (London: BFI)

NB Consult also the Oxford University Press online bibliography for British Cinema

**Background Resources**

**British Film Institute**

The BFI Southbank houses an invaluable library and the Mediatheque (especially useful for documentaries and films otherwise difficult to obtain) in addition to its cinemas. It also hosts talks and small exhibitions. See also Charing Cross Library (behind National Gallery).

Copies of all films screened, including those from which extracts have been shown, will be available from the Bloomsbury Study Centre collection.

**NB Private viewing does not substitute for attendance at Class Screenings.**

Internet sources should be treated with caution. They are no substitute for substantial academic scholarship.

The BFI publication, *Sight and Sound*, contains articles and reviews of new releases while *Time Out* provides listings of films in London, and of relevant exhibitions, events, etc.

The Prince Charles (off Leicester Square) is to be recommended for its repertory programme, also the Renoir (Brunswick Square) and the Cinema Museum (Kennington).

**Instructor Biography**

Amy Sargeant studied at the Universities of Cambridge (MA) and Bristol (MA and PhD). She has written extensively on British cinema, of both silent and sound periods, and is especially interested in the interaction of film with broader cultural issues. Her most recent publications are a study of Joseph Losey’s *The Servant* (London: BFI, 2011) and essays for *Hitchcock Annual* and *Screen*.

Contact details will be given out in class. There is no Office Hour associated with this course, but you are welcome to make an appointment to meet in the break between the lecture and seminar slots.