Cinema and Culture of the Weimar Republic

Instructor:

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Course Description:

Weimar cinema is not only a defining period in German and, in fact, international film history, but also a key to understanding fundamental aspects of German society and culture in the interwar period. This course will trace the extraordinary development of German film between 1919 and 1933 while at the same time situating Weimar cinema in its historical moment and relating it to other forms of cultural expression, most importantly, literature. Firstly, we will look at Weimar cinema in terms of the experimentation with and innovation of film language, with the influence of Expressionism as well as the introduction of sound as major points of reference. And we will see how the development of Weimar cinema was accompanied by critical as well as theoretical debates about what film is or should be, both as art form and political medium. Secondly, we will look at Weimar cinema as interacting with broader transformations in society and culture. For instance, film was both part of and shaped by the modernisation of life occurring in interwar Germany, reflecting deep changes in social relationships, not least in terms of gender and sexuality. Finally, we will discuss historical interpretations of Weimar cinema as bearing the imprint of the traumas of the First World War as well as foreshadowing the rise of Adolf Hitler as charismatic leader.

As a course in “Expressive Culture”, “Cinema and Culture of the Weimar Republic” seeks to introduce you to the study and appreciation of artistic creation and to foster your ongoing engagement with the arts. Through critical engagement with German film, the course wants to introduce you to formal methods of interpretation and to understanding the importance of expressive creation in particular social and historical contexts. As a part of the College Core Curriculum, it is designed to extend your education beyond the focused studies of your major, preparing you for your future life as a thoughtful individual and active member of society. The course also makes use, whenever possible, of the rich cultural resources of Berlin.

Course Objectives:

- develop an understanding of film form and style, become attuned to different kinds of film language and learn how to read and describe aesthetic features

- trace the development of Weimar cinema and discuss its significance from theoretical as well as historical points of view
-situate Weimar cinema within the society of interwar Germany and relate film to other forms of cultural expression, most importantly, literature

**Assessment Components:**

**Class Participation: 15% of total grade**

Students are expected to productively contribute to discussions in class and to demonstrate knowledge of the pertinent films and texts.

**1 Sequence Analysis (4 pages): 5% of total grade, due in week 3**

The aim of the sequence analysis is to demonstrate your skills in discussing film in a scholarly way. You will be asked to identify a sequence from a film presented in the first three weeks of the course and explore its aesthetic features in terms of their significance for the film in question.

**1 Literature Review (4 pages): 10% of total grade, due in week 5**

In your literature review, you will discuss one of the seminal texts on cinema written during the Weimar Republic by the likes of Siegfried Kracauer, Lotte Eisner, Béla Balázs, or Rudolf Arnheim. Choosing one text from the syllabus, and focusing on an extract of 10 to 15 pages, you will show your skills in textual analysis and present your point of view on the argument proposed.

**1 Film Review (6 pages): 15% of total grade, due in week 7**

An important part of cinema culture which also flourished during the Weimar Republic is film criticism. You will be asked to engage with film criticism in a practical way by writing an extended review of one of the films presented in class. This will require you to look at your chosen film as a coherent work of art, judge its stylistic as well as thematic qualities, and situate it within the society and culture of its time.

**1 Mid-Term Exam (75 minutes) 15% of total grade, week 8**

**1 Critical Essay (6 pages): 20% of total grade, due in week 12**

In your critical essay, you will be asked to undertake a slightly broader survey of one or more works of film, literature or art from Weimar Germany. These can be chosen from the syllabus or – after consultation with your instructor – go beyond it. The topics of your essays will be based on your own suggestions, in consultation with your instructor. You will be required to consult and reference a limited amount of scholarly literature.

**1 Final Exam (120 minutes) 20% of total grade, week 14**
There will be an informal meeting to discuss your progress in week 9, and a second meeting to discuss progress with your critical essay shortly before the end of term.

**Sessions:**

**Week 1: Introduction to Cinema and Culture of the Weimar Republic**

**Aims:**
- sketch the development of cinema within the culture of Weimar Germany
- illustrate the mutually influential relationship between film and literature
- practice close readings of audio-visual features by means of selected clips from Weimar cinema

**Texts:**

(63 pages)

**Week 2: Shapes and Critiques of Expressionism**

**Aims:**
- explore forms of Expressionism in Weimar film and literature
- introduce Siegfried Kracauer and Lotte Eisner as critics of Weimar cinema
- revisit Kracauer’s *From Caligari to Hitler* and the debate surrounding it

**Film:**
The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920), dir. Robert Wiene.

**Texts:**

(73 pages)

**Week 3: The Eloquence of Motion and the Theory of Film**
Aims:
-trace the evolution of film language in *The Last Laugh*, its reception and influence
-draw connections to the contemporary theory of film language by Béla Balázs
-situate *The Last Laugh* within the cinematic oeuvre of Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau

Film:
*The Last Laugh* (1924), dir. Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau.

Texts:
(84 pages)

Week 4: The Modern City in Images and Words

Aims:
-place the city symphony in the context of other genres of the city film
-discuss the interrelation between urban modernity and modernist aesthetics
-draw connections to Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) as literary engagement with the modern city, e.g. through technique of montage

Film:
*Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (1927), dir. Walther Ruttmann.

Texts:
(89 pages)

Week 5: Technology and Sexuality

Aims:
place Metropolis in the context of artistic engagements with the modern city
discuss Kaes’ reading of the film as mirroring the traumata of the First World War
introduce the topic of gender and sexuality in Weimar film (question of male gaze
and female to-be-looked-at-ness)

Film:
Metropolis (1927), dir. Fritz Lang.

Texts:

Week 6: Physiognomy, Performance and Spectatorship

Aims:
deepen the discussion of gender and sexuality in Weimar cinema by discussing
physiognomy, performance and the position of the viewer in Pandora’s Box
follow the development of film theory and its concern with film language by
considering Balázs’ writings on the close-up in relation to Pandora’s Box
introduce the plays of Frank Wedekind as another example for the productive
interrelation between literature and film in the Weimar Republic

Film:
Pandora’s Box (1929), dir. Georg Wilhelm Pabst.

Texts:
Elsaesser, Thomas. “Lulu and the meter man: Louise Brooks, G.W. Pabst and
Pandora’s Box”. Weimar Cinema and After, pp. 259-292.
Wedekind, Frank: Four Major Plays. Lyme: Smith and Kraus, 2000 [excerpts of 20
pages from “Earth Spirit” and “Pandora’s Box”].

Week 7: Casting the “New Woman”

Aim:
contrast the male construction of the femme fatale in Pandora’s Box and other
films with the literary exploration of female perspective in The Artificial Silk Girl
-situate Pabst’s film and Keun’s novel within discourses of the crisis of gender as well as the “New Woman” in Weimar Germany

**Texts:**

**Week 8: Excursion to the Museum of Film and Television**

As a conclusion to the first part of the course, we will visit the Museum of Film and Television on Potsdamer Platz. The museum hosts an extensive collection of artefacts from the Weimar period. Looking at sketches, models, costumes and props from Weimar cinema, we will gain a concrete sense of the production histories of several of the films discussed during the semester. One of the exhibition’s highlights are photographs and documents from the production of *Metropolis*.

**Week 9: The Arrival of Sound and the Foreboding of Terror**

**Aims:**
- discuss the arrival of sound as a turning point in film practice and theory
- analyse the dramatic and stylistic use of sound in *M*, present conflicting views on the impact of sound on cinema in theoretical writings at the time
- discuss *M* in terms of its commentary on Weimar society as well as retroactive interpretations as pre-empting the crisis of democracy and the state of law

**Film:**

**Texts:**
(66 pages)

**Week 10: Film and the Worker’s Movement**

**Aims:**
- chart the history of proletarian film in Weimar Germany, from the imitation of Soviet models since the mid-1920s to the ban of *Kuhle Wampe* by the Nazi regime in 1933
- illustrate the political conflicts and financial problems during the film’s production
- discuss the use of sound as part of the film’s political aesthetics and agenda
Film:
*Kuhle Wampe or Who Owns the World* (1932), dir. Slatan Dudow.

Texts:
Silberman, Marc. “‘Whose Revolution?’ The Subject of *Kuhle Wampe*.” *Weimar Cinema*, pp. 311-330.
-- (ed. and trans.). *Brecht on Film and Radio*. London: Methuen, 2000. [ebook, excerpts on Brecht’s writings on film as well as the production of *Kuhle Wampe*, approximately 20 pp.]

(64 pages)

**Week 11: Literature and the Economic Crisis**

Aims:
-in comparison to *Kuhle Wampe* as proletarian film, introduce *Little man, what now?* as literary engagement with the Great Depression (“New Objectivity”)
-present adaptations of the novel to the screen from 1933 to post-war Germany East and West to show different understandings of the Weimar Republic’s demise

Text:

**Week 12: Visions of “Heimat”**

Aims:
-present the “Bergfilm” as “arguably the only indigenous German film genre” (Thomas Elsaesser) and its emergence during the Weimar Republic
-introduce the idea of “Heimat” and its relevance for discourses of German identity
-read *The Blue Light* in view of Leni Riefenstahl’s later films during the Third Reich and debate the question of a nascent aesthetics of Nazism

Film:
*The Blue Light* (1932), dir. Leni Riefenstahl and Béla Balázs.

Texts:


(70 pages)

**Week 13: “Snapshots of a Society in Decay”**

**Aims:**
- analyse how Christoph Isherwood’s semiautobiographical novel captures the cultural vibrancy and social disintegration of the Weimar Republic in the early 1930s
- use *Goodbye to Berlin* and the history of its stage as well as film adaptations to discuss the influence of Weimar culture, and why we continue to return to its legacy

**Text:**
Christoph Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939). [excerpts]

**Week 14: Excursion to Babelsberg Studio**

As a conclusion to our course, we will go on an excursion to Babelsberg Studio in Potsdam where many of the seminal works of Weimar cinema were produced. Babelsberg is still in operation as a film studio today, so some of the infrastructure in which directors such as Fritz Lang worked is now being used for new productions.

**Your Instructor**

Axel Bangert graduated from Humboldt University Berlin in 2006, with an M.A. thesis on contemporary Holocaust film. From 2004 to 2006, he worked as a research assistant at the Holocaust Memorial Foundation in Berlin. This was followed by a PhD in German film at the University of Cambridge. Since then, Axel Bangert held post-doctoral fellowships at Homerton College, the University of Cambridge, and the University of Leeds. His main research interests are German cinema and television, in particular portrayals of the Third Reich, European heritage film as well as transnational moving image production. His monograph *The Nazi Past in Contemporary German Film: Viewing Experiences of Intimacy and Immersion* appeared with Camden House in December 2014.