Proposal for ENGL 658

History and Historiography of Weimar Cinema

This course investigates the most influential non-American cinema by emphasizing how its history has been written, since from the first it was one of the most intensively studied cinemas. Weimar cinema did what no other German industrial product could accomplish in the aftermath of the First World War, which was to restore Germany almost immediately to the status of “civilized” nations (the apparently self-critical Cabinet of Dr. Caligari was championed by French critics who would have scorned to buy any other German manufactured good). Weimar films entered the newly created film collections of art museums more or less upon release, thereby defining what “art cinema” would look like for decades afterwards; they became staples of the “little cinema” movement in the United States; triumphalist postwar Hollywood worried about only one international rival, which was Germany. Indeed, German film from the interwar period came to constitute modernity in the eyes of many critics, and it was under fierce scrutiny from exiled members of the Frankfurt School of Social Research who expected to find in this fully realized mass art form the reasons for the collapse of German democracy in 1932-33.

The presiding geniuses of Weimar cinema not only exported their successful products but also themselves. Weimar cinema became a cinema of exiles even before the rise of Hitler, which complicates its historiography because its techniques and personnel established an international standard in performance and production values before the end of the 1920s, which was then dispersed to every important filmmaking nation thereafter. Erich Pommer produced films in three nations; figures such as Ernst Lubitsch directed in both the United States and Germany; German film was closely interwoven with French and Scandinavian film after the war, and German studios were the best equipped outside of Hollywood, attracting talents such as Alfred Hitchcock before his rise to fame in England and later Hollywood. Hollywood naturalized these émigrés as rapidly as it could, at the cost, in the view of some critics, of submerging an indigenous cinema in continental tastes and narrative strategies, such that there is now vigorous debate over whether film noir constitutes a genuinely American film movement or not.

While the course will survey major themes of Weimar cinema to establish the contours of what the cinema may be said to be, much of our work will focus on how the history of Weimar cinema has been written. We will consider such topics as the representation of gangsters, Lustmord and unconventional sexualities, the representation of the city and transportation, the ways in which film is connected both thematically and institutionally to other mass forms (the importance of German publishing to a cinema culture, the pressure brought to bear on studio organization by figures such as Alfred Hugenberg), and the relationship between cinema and state. We will also consider how Weimar stars such as Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, and Emil Jannings functioned both in Europe and the United States. The course will afford students the opportunity to survey the works of canonical and non-canonical film directors such as F. W. Murnau (Phantom, Faust, Sunrise, Nosferatu), Fritz Lang, Lubitsch, G. W. Pabst (Lulu, Diary of a Lost Girl),

Written sources will include selections from Emilie Altenloh’s “On the Sociology of the Cinema” (1914), Anton Kaes’s *Weimar Republic Sourcebook* and *Shell Shock Cinema*, Maria Tatar’s *Lustmord*, Siegfried Kracauer’s *From Caligari to Hitler*, Thomas Elsaesser’s *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany’s Historical Imaginary*, Matthew Biro’s *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin*, and Janet Ward’s *Weimar Surfaces*. Assignments will likely include a review essay, a cooperative reception study, and a final research paper on a topic of the student’s choice. I don’t expect students to read German, although they are welcome to work with German sources if they choose to. All assigned readings will be in English and the films will be subtitled.

The rationale for offering the course at this time include emphasizing the borderlessness of artistic production—Weimar cinema is a truly international cinema in many respects. Since the course examines not only what the cinema is but also how we have come to understand it (and the stakes of writing its history in a particular way, which are as much political as they are aesthetic), graduate students should find the emphasis on historiography useful to engendering a productive self-consciousness in their own research and writing on contextualizing artistic production and reception. Finally, the content of the course should be helpful to any graduate student considering working on Modernism, whether or not he or she has any preexisting interest in German culture. Graduate students interested in questions of what constitutes a national cinema or how media history is written should also find the course of interest.

Distribution Requirement:

English without Borders.