Spring 2020 Course Description

Instructor: David McWhirter
Course: ENGL 481
Title: Early Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life

Description: Focused on films dating from the origin of motion pictures in the late nineteenth century to the end of the silent period (roughly 1930), this course will examine the ways in which early cinematic productions simultaneously symptomatize, thematize, and shape modern culture and society. The rapid emergence of the movies as the dominant medium of the twentieth century is in part a reflection of the medium’s entanglement with the rapid historical, social and technological developments that shaped modernity. Cinema, for example, was both an example and a reflection of a historical moment marked by the rise of multiple new technologies. The movies are closely tied to the increasing urbanization of ordinary lives, to the new experiences of time and space that big cities imposed on human subjects; indeed the movies helped make new forms of experience possible, helped structure new forms of distraction, attention, and consciousness – new ways of seeing and being in a newly structured or (some felt) fragmented world. What does it mean for our thinking about modern subjectivity that cinema and psychoanalysis come into being simultaneously? How do the movies both portray and produce changing understandings of gender, sexuality, and race, new modes of embodiment and abstraction? How does our perhaps first genuinely global medium – because of the absence of spoken dialogue, the silent film quickly achieved an unprecedented range and rapidity of international distribution – both contribute to and comment on the rapid globalization taking place in social, economic, and cultural spheres? Along with regular on-line screenings of a representative range of silent-era films from the U.S., Germany, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, Japan, and elsewhere, work for the class will include a short, basic history of early cinema, and readings focused on the history, theory and analysis of cinema’s relations to modernity. Students will undertake a 15-17 page research paper on a topic of their own choosing, and there will be various subsidiary requirements (an initial brief description of the project; a tentative bibliography; a draft of the paper’s opening pages; a mandatory conference to discuss the project) spread throughout the semester.

Proposed Readings: Weekly film screenings and additional readings (on eCampus) focused on the history, theory and analysis of cinema's relation to modernity.