Cool Britannia: British Cinema since the 1980s

Course Content

British cinema has received more than its fair share of controversy, as critics and film makers have debated what kinds of film should best represent the nation, and to what extent such concerns have affected its achievements as art or as successful entertainment. While desiring to construct a sense of national identity, British cinema is also subject to the demands of the global marketplace, and is, like any national cinema, compelled to establish itself at the box-office within the shifting global contexts of popular tastes and marketing.

This course will offer a selective introduction to contemporary British Cinema both as art and as social document. We will examine the fortunes of British film as it strives to represent a Britain undergoing significant social, cultural and economic changes, and in particular, the ways in which it has responded to the shifting political landscape from the Thatcher years of the 1980s through to those of New Labour and the present. In doing so, we will explore a rich variety of film examples, ranging from independent and personal works to international blockbusters.

The aims of the course are to establish the significance of the films as historical products of their time, while also exploring the various artistic strategies that make them unique as film texts. The critical debates we will explore will include matters such as authorship, and genre, and will address some of the ways that received ideas of British national identity have been established or challenged through such critical perspectives as the so-called ‘heritage film’ or the British realist legacy.

Week 1 A Thatcherite Cinema? Chariots of Fire (Hugh Hudson, 1981)

Week 2 Whose Britain? My Beautiful Launderette (Stephen Frears, 1985)

Week 3 The ‘Heritage Film’ Howard’s End (James Ivory, 1992)
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Week 4  Cool Britannia and Youth Culture
        Trainspotting (Danny Boyle, 1996)

Week 5  The Realist Tradition – Loach as a Realist
        Auteur; Looking for Eric (Ken Loach, 2009)

Week 6  The Monarchy and British Cinema
        The King’s Speech (Tom Hooper, 2010)

Week 7  James Bond – a British Hero? Skyfall, Sam
        Mendes, (2012)

Intended Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course you should have:

▪ an awareness of some of the key phases
  in the development of British cinema

▪ an understanding of the socio-political and artistic
  contexts for the production of individual films

▪ a fundamental grasp of the terminology and
  approaches necessary to describe the style
  and techniques of individual examples