
USyd Film Studies Reading Group 2018
Film Studies Program
Department of Art History
Dr Susan Potter, Academic Sponsor
USyd Film Studies Reading Group 2018

The **USyd Film Studies Reading Group** seeks to bring together postgraduate research students and staff who engage the object of film in their research practice. We hold regular screenings and discussions built around canonical and contemporary works of film criticism and theory. Our goal is to foster an environment that encourages diverse approaches to film studies as a scholarly discipline, from studies in technology and aesthetics to performance and adaptation, to ‘filmosophies’ informed by literature, images and sound. While we aim to interrogate some of the paradigm-establishing-and-shifting ideas underpinning the discipline, expertise is not a requirement to be involved in the group, and we welcome anyone who wishes to join. All readings are pre-assigned, selected by current postgraduate students to offer both new and established scholars a focused point for discussion.

In taking film as our object for analysis, we hope to engage the rich diversity of film studies, bringing together research students and staff from a range of departments and schools at the University of Sydney.

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**MEETINGS**

Mondays 5-7pm

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**VENUES**

Screenings: SNH Lecture Theatre 3003, Sydney Nanoscience Hub, A31

Reading group: Mills Tutorial Room 202, RC Mills Building, A26
READINGS

*For each reading group meeting, make sure to watch the film and read ALL of the required readings. The intellectual depth and vibrancy of our critical discussion depends on it. Additional texts are, of course, optional.*

Most readings are accessible electronically in one of three ways:

- through the library Crosssearch function or catalogue as eBook chapters or journal articles
- through the library catalogue by searching on the journal title
- by clicking directly on the reading reference (indicated by `[link]`).

If you are not able to access some readings, please email the Academic Sponsor (contact details below).

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## SCHEDULE AT A GLANCE

**Mondays, 5-7pm**

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PROGRAM

SESSION 1: 14 May
Introduction and Welcome

Decolonising the Euro-Western Crime Drama

*Television is the new frontier. Film is conservative. I’m sick of it.*
Jane Campion

*According to native Jane Campion, New Zealand's primary export is “morality.”*
Lynn Geller

*If “invisibility” is a trope long associated with older women in contemporary culture, then attention needs to be paid to the specific forms visibility might take.*
Sadie Wearing

Screening:
*Top of the Lake: Paradise Sold* and *Top of the Lake: Searchers Search* (Season 1, episodes 1-2). Directed by Jane Campion and Garth Davis, New Zealand, 2013.

Additional texts:
*An Angel at My Table*. Directed by Jane Campion, New Zealand, 1991.
SESSION 2: 21 May
Decolonising the Euro-Western Crime Drama II

He kakau taniwha e mapu ana, he tai pari, he tai timu.
It is the beating heart of an ogre that causes the tide to rise and fall.
Traditional story, as told in Wakatipu

With Top of the Lake, Campion explores topics that are thriving on television and floundering in films.
Melissa Silverstein

In its probing of the feminist and postcolonial discourses of Postfeminism, Campion’s Top of the Lake is a helpful tool with which one can consider the political dimensions of transnational digital television. This session seeks to interrogate the freedoms and privileges afforded to well-intentioned white intellectuals like Campion, and indigenous critiques suggesting that such work perpetuates cycles of silencing. For women directors from the independent film market, moving to a network can restrict the feminisms with which they can engage. Can a liberated artistic vision be an aid to those it seeks to represent, in the case of Top of the Lake, poor and oppressed women of colour?

Readings:

Additional texts:


Explaining zombies through the lens of a particular cultural theory can help us understand aspects of the figurative, generic and socio-political resonance of zombies, but zombies are plastic, amorphous and contradictory... Zombies are ubiquitous. They can be found in just about any genre or discourse and as they move sinuously across the cultural landscape they keep morphing, taking on ever new and ever more bizarre associations. I’m intrigued by what is it [sic] about these shambolic metaphors of death that makes them so compelling for people today.

Jennifer Rutherford, “Monstration.”

Screening:
(Warning: M15+. Film contains mild nudity and graphic cartoon violence.)

Additional texts:
SESSION 4: 25 June
Zombies and Meaning II

There is nothing simple about the mobile and plastic phantasm, metaphor, ritual, text, genre, identification and discourse – that is zombie. As much an event in language and ritual as they are in fantasy, zombies defy systematising.

Jennifer Rutherford, “Monstration.”

In this session we will not only discuss the meaning of the zombie in cinema, but the way in which the zombie operates as an empty signifier (or elastic metaphor) that can be adapted to a number of generic, cultural and academic discourses, whilst simultaneously disrupting the entire system of signification to its core.

Readings:


Additional texts:
The chief symptoms of violence in the action genre are manifested in the excessively demarcated worlds of gangsters and alienated individuals depicted in many films. The notions of boundaries and borders, no matter if they are set up only to be crossed and suspended, flourish in the cinematic worlds of the triad gangster films, and it is ‘ethnicity’, I would argue, which organizes this world of demarcation.

Kwai-Cheung Lo, 2007

Screening:


Additional texts:

SESSION 6: 23 July
The Gangster as Lone Hero Under Mass Surveillance: The Emerging Chinese Gangster Film Genre II

What I want to suggest is that there are here three different methods of character construction, which fit uneasily together. These methods are structural (we understand characters by what they do in the plot or how they function in the narrative), motivational (the reasons provided by dialogue and sometimes other elements such as performance and mise-en-scene as to why a character does such-and-such a thing) and star-based (the star's image already gives the character a certain set of traits).

Richard Dyer, “Four Films of Lana Turner”

This session will explore how the star image of Chinese actor Sun Honglei serves as an intertextual reference in Lethal Hostage and Drug War, one that connects the two films generically and politically. In 2012 Sun played the Chinese drug lord in the Chinese film Lethal Hostage, and a cruel Chinese anti-drug division police captain in the Hong Kong gangster film Drug War. As intertextual character and star, Sun not only contributes to the consolidation of an emerging genre, the Chinese gangster film, he also functions as a site at which political conflict is rendered legible, and critique of the Chinese regime can be registered.

Readings:

Additional texts:

In Yukinojo, the body becomes a scene of teaching, the sense in which Gregory Ulmer refers to Lacan’s seminars as a combination of the psychoanalytic scene and pedagogy. However, here the disciplinary boundaries that frame the possibility of the subject are themselves called into question.

Scott Nygren, “Inscribing the Subject.”

Screening:

Additional films:
An Actor’s Revenge can be described as a masterpiece of modernist filmmaking by way of its play on classical Japanese theatrical form and Western cinematic styles. This multi-layered spectacle shot in widescreen format epitomizes the definition of “meta-cinema” with doubling performances and levels of intertextuality that extend back to the early days of Japanese film history. In this week’s session we unpack these layers and explore definitions of cinematic modernism, particularly the melodramatic genre as avant-garde and the destabilization of gender.

Readings:

Additional texts:


SESSION 9: 10 September
The New Reality: Memory, Perspective and The Body in Kathryn Bigelow’s
Strange Days I

Mace: This is your life, right here, right now! It's real-time, you hear me, real time!
Time to get real, not playback. You understand me?

Screening:
Strange Days. Dir. Kathryn Bigelow. USA, 1995. (Note: This film is classified R18+)

Additional films:
SESSION 10: 17 September

The New Reality: Memory, Perspective and The Body in Kathryn Bigelow’s
Strange Days II

To obtain this conversion from the virtual to the actual it would be necessary, not
to throw more light on the object, but on the contrary to obscure some of its
aspects, to diminish it by the greater part of itself, so that the remainder, instead
of being encased in its surroundings as a thing, should detach itself from them as
a picture.

Henri Bergson, Matter and Memory

Kathryn Bigelow’s Strange Days flirts with the idea that visual stimulation through virtual
reality is analogous with addiction, explicitly suggesting that technology has a euphoric
yet radically harmful effect on the human experience. In conflating the effects of drugs
with an all-encompassing graphic technology, Strange Days establishes a parallactic
form of pure escapism from a dystopian cityscape, a backdrop for the hysteria and
apocalyptic anxiety surrounding the year 2000. More than twenty years since the film’s
release, is the everyday normalisation of technology threatening humanity’s natural
evolutionary trajectory? Virtual reality has been gradual and (seemingly) harmless in its
development. However, has a form of new reality, one, as Strange Days suggests,
deprived of sovereignty, already emerged through new media technologies? Such
questions will be explored through a discussion focussed on the role of the camera and
spectator in understanding image, spectacle, memory, and the body within the film.

Readings:

Body Means and Does.” In Matter and Memory, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W.

Giannachi, Gabriella. “Towards an Aesthetic of Virtual Reality.” In Virtual Theatres: An
**Additional texts:**


SESSION 11: 8 October
Theorising African Cinema: An East African Perspective

The ability to picture oneself is a vital need… The development of Africa implies among other things the production of its own images.

Gaston Kabore, Burkinabe filmmaker

Windows of Hope brings to life the African adage, it takes a village to raise a child.

Lizelle Bisschoff, African film critic

Screening:

Additional Films:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YP-wW8Ua_40
A Kenyan film shot with a mobile phone.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-XP0v6wolxM
New African nations were not in a position to take adequate advantage of cinema because they lacked the necessary technological expertise. Issues of education, industrialization, and technical and infrastructural development were considered of priority … while cinema appeared no more than a luxury.

Akin Adekosan, film critic

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, African filmmakers have been developing distinctive national cinemas even as their films are distributed regionally and transnationally across the continent and further afield. Defining African cinema is as challenging as drawing a clear boundary of Africa’s constituent countries and peoples. The category of African cinema is further problematized by the fact that Africans are spread all over the world. This highlights the challenge of determining whether African film should be defined by the location of the filmmaker or the film’s subject, or the racial identity of the filmmaker, etc. While contemporary African scholars are grappling with the challenge of how best to theorise African cinema, filmmakers have embraced the opportunities presented by digital technology and modes of distribution to tell their stories to diverse audiences.

Readings:

Additional texts:


SESSION 13: 5 November
Censorship in Iranian Cinema

We do not oppose cinema, we oppose vice.
Sayyid Ruhollah Mūsavi Khomeini (Ayatollah Khomeini), 1979

Screening:
A Separation. Dir. Asghar Farhadi. Iran, 2011

Additional texts:
The Salesman (Foroushande). Dir. Asghar Farhadi. Iran, 2016
No One Knows About Persian Cats (Kasi az gorbehaye Irani khabar nadareh). Dir. Bahman Ghobadi. Iran, 2009
Censorship is Iranian cinema’s most significant issue. It is enforced by law, expressed in practice via the preferences of institutions, and shaped by the opinions of (powerful) individuals. From a sociological perspective, censorship can be understood in terms of three domains: legal requirements, extra-legal practices, and broader sociopolitical circumstances. Part of the aim of this session is to consider how some Iranian filmmakers try to defy such forms of censorship, and find the new ways to convey meaning to their audiences.

Readings:

Additional texts: