

Course Title

Expressive Culture:

Film – Cinema and Culture of the Weimar Republic

Course Number
CORE-UA 9750

Spring 2020

Syllabus last updated on: 4-Dec-2020

Lecturer Contact Information
TBA

Course Details

Seminar: Wednesdays, 1:30pm to 4:15pm (starting 5 Feb 2020)

Screenings: Wednesdays, 4:30pm to 6:00pm in sessions 2, 4, 5 and 8, 9, 11 (in sessions 1 and 3 films will be shown during regular seminar time)

Location: Rooms will be posted in Albert before your first class. Please double check whether your class takes place at the Academic Center (BLAC – Schönhauser Allee 36, 10435 Berlin) or at St. Agnes (SNTA – Alexandrinenstraße 118–121, 10969 Berlin).

Prerequisites

Critical interest in German cinema, motivation to engage with prescribed films and texts, willingness to contribute to seminar discussions.

Units earned

4

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 modernization 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 students to the study and appreciation of artistic creation and to foster the ongoing engagement with the arts. Through critical engagement with German film, the course wants to introduce students 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 students’ education beyond the focused studies of their major, preparing students for their 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 Objective

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 4

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 5

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 and judge its stylistic as well as thematic qualities.

1 Mid-Term Exam (75 minutes) 15% of total grade, week 6

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 15

There will be an informal meeting to discuss your progress in week 8, and a second meeting to discuss progress with your critical essay shortly before the end of term.

Failure to submit or fulfill any required component may result in failure of the class, regardless of grades achieved in other assignments.

Required Text(s)

Stephen Brockmann, *A Critical History of German Film* (Rochester: Camden House, 2010).

The title is available as an electronic resource via NYU Library:

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3003717>

There are also several copies available in NYU Berlin's Reading Room (note though that these copies cannot be taken out of the library).

All other texts will be made available via NYU Classes.

Please follow this link for the [NYU Berlin Library Catalogue](#) or the link on NYU Berlin's website (Academics/Facilities & Services).

Supplemental Text(s) (not required to purchase)

For an introduction to German cinema, see:

Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel, *The BFI Companion to German Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1999).

Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2008).

All titles are available in NYU Berlin's Reading Room.

Internet Research Guidelines

To be discussed in class.

Additional Required Equipment

n/a

Session 1 – Wednesday, 5 Feb 2020

Introduction

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.

Screening

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920), dir. Robert Wiene (74min).

Texts:

Brockmann, Stephen. "Weimar Cinema 1919-1933: Historical Overview." *A Critical History of German Film*. Rochester: Camden House, 2010, pp. 43-58.

Kaes, Anton. "The Debate about Cinema: Charting a Controversy (1909-1929)." *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987), pp. 7-33.

Session 2 – Wednesday, 12 Feb 2020

Shapes and Critiques of Expressionism

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.

Screening

The Last Laugh (1924), dir. Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau (90min).

Texts:

Eisner, Lotte H. "The Beginnings of the Expressionist Film". *The Haunted Screen. Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969, pp. 17-38.

Hansen, Miriam. *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2011, pp. 3-17.

Kaes, Anton. "Tales from the Asylum." *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, pp. 63-86.

Kracauer, Siegfried. "Caligari." *From Caligari to Hitler. A Psychological History of the German Film*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947, pp. 61-75.

Session 3 – Wednesday, 19 Feb 2020

The Eloquence of Motion and the Theory of Film

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.

Screening

Berlin, Symphony of a Great City (1927), dir. Walther Ruttmann (65min).

Texts:

Balázs, Béla. "Visible Man." *Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*. Edited by Erica Carter. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. New York: Berghahn Books, 2010, pp. 17-51.

Freund, Karl, "Behind My Camera" (1927). *The Promise of Cinema. German Film Theory 1907-1933*. Edited by Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer and Michael Cowan. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2016, pp. 509-12.

Kracauer, Siegfried. "The Hotel Lobby." *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. Translated, edited and with an introduction by Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 173-185.

Elsaesser, Thomas. "Nosferatu, Tartuffe and Faust: Secret affinities in Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau." *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary*. London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 223-258.

*****deadline for Sequence Analysis*****

Session 4 – Wednesday, 26 Feb 2020

The Modern City in Images and Words

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.

Screening

Metropolis (1927), dir. Fritz Lang (153min).

Texts:

Döblin, Alfred. *Berlin Alexanderplatz. The Story of Franz Biberkopf*. New York: New York Review Books, 2018, pp. 1-35.

Eisner, Lotte H. "Tragedies of the Street". *The Haunted Screen*, pp. 251-268.

Kracauer, Siegfried. "The Mass Ornament". *The Mass Ornament*, pp. 75-88.

Mennel, Barbara, "Modernity and the City Film: Berlin." *Cities and Cinema*. London: Routledge, 2008, pp. 21-45.

Session 5 – Wednesday, 4 Mar 2020

Technology and Sexuality

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-atness).

Screening

Pandora's Box (1929), dir. Georg Wilhelm Pabst (133min).

Texts:

Eisner, Lotte H. "The Handling of Crowds". *The Haunted Screen*, pp. 223-236.

Huyssen, Andreas. "The Vamp and the Machine: Technology and Sexuality in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*". *New German Critique* 24/25 (Fall/Winter 1982), pp. 221-237.

Kaes, Anton. "The Industrial Battlefield". *Shell Shock Cinema*, pp. 167-181 and 200-210.

Kracauer, Siegfried. "The Group as Bearer of Ideas". *The Mass Ornament*, pp. 143-170.

*****deadline for Literature Review*****

Session 6 – Wednesday, 11 Mar 2020

Physiognomy, Performance and Spectatorship

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.

Texts:

Balázs, Béla. "The Close Up". *Early Film Theory*, pp. 100-111.

Elsaesser, Thomas. "Lulu and the meter man: Louise Brooks, G.W. Pabst and *Pandora's Box*". *Weimar Cinema and After*, pp. 259-292.

Eisner, Lotte H. "Pabst and the Miracle of Louise Brooks". *The Haunted Screen*, pp. 295-307.

Wedekind, Frank: *Four Major Plays*. Lyme: Smith and Kraus, 2000 [excerpts of 20 pages from "Earth Spirit" and "Pandora's Box"].

*****deadline for Film Review*****

Session 7 – Wednesday, 18 Mar 2020

Casting the "New Woman"

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:

Keun, Irmgard, *The Artificial Silk Girl* (1931). [excerpts]

*****mid-term exam in second half of session*****

23 Mar to 27 Mar 2020 – Spring Break – No Class

Session 8 – Wednesday, 1 Apr 2020

Excursion to 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*.

Screening

M (1931), dir. Fritz Lang (111min).

Session 9 – Wednesday, 8 Apr 2020

The Arrival of Sound and the Foreboding of Terror

Discuss the arrival of sound as a turning point in film practice and theory; analyze 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.

Screening

Kuhle Wampe or Who Owns the World (1932), dir. Slatan Dudow (74min).

Texts:

Arnheim, Rudolf. "Sound Film". *Film Essays and Criticism*. Translated by Brenda Benthien. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997, pp. 29-51.

Balázs, Béla. "The Sound Film". *Early Film Theory*, pp. 183-210.

Herzog, Todd. "Fritz Lang's *M* (1931): An Open Case." *Weimar Cinema: An Essential Guide to Classic Films of the Era*. Edited by Noah Isenberg. Columbia University Press, 2009, pp. 291-301.

Kracauer, "Murderer Among Us". *From Caligari to Hitler*, pp. 215-222.

Session 10 – Wednesday, 15 Apr 2020

Film and the Worker's Movement

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.

Texts:

Alter, Nora M. "The Politics and Sounds of Everyday Life in *Kuhle Wampe*". *Sound Matters: Essays on the Acoustics of German Culture*. Edited by Nora M. Alter and Lutz Koepnick. New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004, pp. 79-90.

Hake, Sabine. "*Kuhle Wampe* and 'Those Who Don't Like It'". *The Proletarian Dream: Socialism, Culture, and Emotion in Germany, 1863–1933*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2017, pp. 319-333.

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.] Routledge, 2000), 260-77.

Session 11 – Wednesday, 22 Apr 2020

Literature and the Economic Crisis

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.

Screening

The Blue Light (1932), dir. Leni Riefenstahl and Béla Balázs (86min).

Text:

Fallada, Hans. *Little man, what now?* Translated by Eric Sutton. London: Putnam, 1933. [excerpts]

Session 12 – Wednesday, 29 Apr 2020

Visions of “Heimat”

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.

Texts:

Rentschler, Eric. “The Blue Light.” *The Ministry of Illusion. Nazi Cinema and its Afterlife*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 27-51.

Schulte-Sasse, Linda. “Leni Riefenstahl's Feature Films and the Question of Fascist Aesthetic.” *Framing the Past: The Historiography of German Cinema and Television*. Edited by Bruce Murray and Christopher J. Wickham. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992, pp. 140-166.

von Moltke, Johannes. “Introduction. Locating Heimat.” *No Place Like Home. Locations of Heimat in German Cinema*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, pp. 1-18.

*****deadline for Critical Essay*****

Session 13 – Wednesday, 6 May 2020

“Snapshots of a Society in Decay”

Analyze 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]

Session 14 – Wednesday, 13 May 2020

Revision

The final regular seminar session will be devoted to revising the critical, theoretical, and historical texts on Weimar cinema and culture discussed over the course of term. In addition to arguments and their contexts, the session will also be an opportunity for revising artistic strategies crucial for understanding films and novels from interwar Germany.

Session 15 – Wednesday, 20 May 2020 – Final Exam

Classroom Etiquette

No laptops allowed during class. Mobile phones are to be switched off. Drinks are allowed in the classroom, but food is not.

Suggested Co-Curricular Activities

To be discussed in class.

Your Lecturer

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.

Academic Policies

Assessment Expectations

Grade A: The student makes excellent use of empirical and theoretical material and offers well-structured arguments in their work. The student writes comprehensive essays / answers to exam questions and their work shows strong evidence of critical thought and extensive reading.

Grade B: The candidate shows a good understanding of the problem and has demonstrated the ability to formulate and execute a coherent research strategy.

Grade C: The work is acceptable and shows a basic grasp of the research problem. However, the work fails to organize findings coherently and is in need of improvement.

Grade D: The work passes because some relevant points are made. However, there may be a problem of poor definition, lack of critical awareness, poor research.

Grade F: The work shows that the research problem is not understood; there is little or no critical awareness and the research is clearly negligible.

Grade Conversion

Your lecturer may use one of the following scales of numerical equivalents to letter grades:

A = 94-100 or 4.0
A- = 90-93 or 3.7
B+ = 87-89 or 3.3
B = 84-86 or 3.0
B- = 80-83 or 2.7
C+ = 77-79 or 2.3
C = 74-76 or 2.0
C- = 70-73 or 1.7
D+ = 67-69 or 1.3
D = 65-66 or 1.0
F = below 65 or 0

Attendance Policy

Participation in all classes is essential for your academic success, especially in courses that meet only once per week. Your attendance in both content and language courses is required and will be checked at each class meeting. As soon as it becomes clear that you cannot attend a class, you must inform your professor by e-mail immediately (i.e. before the start of your class). Absences are only excused if they are due to illness, Moses Center accommodations, religious observance or emergencies. Your professor or NYU Berlin's administration may ask you to present a doctor's note or an exceptional permission from NYU Berlin's Director or Wellness Counselor as proof. Emergencies or other exceptional circumstances must be presented to the Director. Doctor's notes need to be submitted to the Academics Office, who will inform your professors. Doctor's notes need to be from a local

doctor and carry a signature and a stamp. If you want the reasons for your absence to be treated confidentially, please approach NYU Berlin's Director or Wellness Counselor.

Unexcused absences affect students' grades: In content courses each unexcused absence (equaling one week's worth of classes) leads to a deduction of 2% of the overall grade and may negatively affect your class participation grade. In German Language classes two or three (consecutive or non-consecutive) unexcused absences (equaling one week's worth of classes) lead to a 2% deduction of the overall grade. Three unexcused absences in one content course and five unexcused absences in your German language course may lead to a Fail in that course. Being more than 15 minutes late counts as an unexcused absence. Furthermore, your professor is entitled to deduct points for frequent late arrival or late arrival back from in-class breaks. Please note that for classes involving a field trip, transportation difficulties are never grounds for an excused absence. It is the student's responsibility to arrive in time at the announced meeting point.

Exams, tests and quizzes, deadlines, and oral presentations that are missed due to illness always require a doctor's note as documentation. It is the student's responsibility to produce this doctor's note and submit it to the Academics Office; until this doctor's note is produced the missed assessment is graded with an F and no make-up assessment is scheduled. In content classes, an F in one assignment may lead to failure of the entire class.

Regardless of whether an absence is excused or not, it is the student's responsibility to catch up with the work that was missed.

Attendance Rules on Religious Holidays

Members of any religious group may, without penalty, excuse themselves from classes when required in compliance with their religious obligations. Students who anticipate being absent due to religious observance should notify their lecturer AND NYU Berlin's Academics Office in writing via e-mail one week in advance. If examinations or assignment deadlines are scheduled on the day the student will be absent, the Academics Office will schedule a make-up examination or extend the deadline for assignments. Please note that an absence is only excused for the holiday but not for any days of travel that may come before and/or after the holiday. See also [University Calendar Policy on Religious Holidays](#)

Late Submission of Work

- (1) Written work due in class must be submitted during the class time to the professor.
- (2) Late work should be submitted in person to the lecturer or to the Academics Office, who will write on the essay or other work the date and time of submission, in the presence of the student. Another member of the administrative staff may also personally accept the work and will write the date and time of submission on the work, as above.
- (3) Work submitted late receives a penalty of 2 points on the 100 point scale for each day it is late (excluding weekends and public or religious holidays), unless an extension has been approved (with a doctor's note or by approval of NYU Berlin's administration), in which case the 2 points per day deductions start counting from the day the extended deadline has passed.
- (4) Without an approved extension, written work submitted more than 5 days (excluding weekends and public or religious holidays) following the submission date receives an F.

- (5) End of semester essays must be submitted on time.
- (6) Students who are late for a written exam have no automatic right to take extra time or to write the exam on another day.
- (7) Please remember that university computers do not keep your essays - you must save them elsewhere. Having lost parts of your essay on the university computer is no excuse for a late submission.

Provisions for Students with Disabilities

Academic accommodations are available for students with documented disabilities. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980 or see their [website](#) for further information.

Plagiarism Policy

The presentation of another person's words, ideas, judgment, images or data as though they were your own, whether intentionally or unintentionally, constitutes an act of plagiarism. Proper referencing of your sources avoids plagiarism (see as one possible help the [NYU library guide](#) to referencing styles).

NYU Berlin takes plagiarism very seriously; penalties follow and may exceed those set out by your home school. Your lecturer may ask you to sign a declaration of authorship form.

Note that some assignments in the course may be checked for plagiarism by using TurnItIn or other another software designed to detect offences against academic integrity.

It is also an offense to submit work for assignments from two different courses that is substantially the same (be it oral presentations or written work). If there is an overlap of the subject of your assignment with one that you produced for another course (either in the current or any previous semester), you **MUST** inform your professor.

For a summary please follow the link to [NYU Global's academic policies](#).