

Underdogs and Anti-Heroes: The Social Realist Tradition in British Cinema



[Faculty Contact Information](#)

Name:

Email:

Office Hour information:

[Course Information](#)

Course Description

This course examines the origins and ongoing dynamism of the British tradition of Social Realist cinema. The British Film Institute claims 'realism has been Britain's richest gift to world cinema'. Social Realism has challenged the dominant, usually conservative narratives, of Britishness by championing the lives and experiences of ordinary people. We will also look at British Film as a cultural industry, an important factor in understanding the nature of British cinema.

Broadly chronological, the course opens with the 1930 works of the 'Documentary Mob' led by John Grierson. These early films were to be formative for British film and television, indeed British television and film has long enjoyed an intertwined history. Classes will also examine the brief flowering of the British studio system, especially the work Ealing Film Studios in the late 1930s-early 50s. Parallel to the British studio moment, was one of the century's most influential social research projects: Mass Observation, or as the founders put it: 'the anthropology of ourselves'. This inspired a new documentary movement, and continues to have a huge influence on British visual and social culture. The course will touch on the work of Free Cinema, and their 'poetry of the everyday' which was both influenced by and critical of the social realist traditions that preceded them. We'll look at the cycle of films featuring the disaffected English working class that began in the early 1960's and that has been described as an English version of the French nouvelle vague. This new cinema, exemplified by Woodfall Films, had strong links to a wider cultural rebellion of writers and theatre directors. In the late 20th the course turns to the modern masters of social realism: Mike Leigh and Ken Loach. We discover the new British black and Asian directors who brought fresh perspectives to the genre in the late 80s and 90s. Finally, we look at the current generation of British film-makers influenced by social realism. Throughout the course the chronological order will be interrupted by our visits to see the newest British films.

Course Goals

The course introduces students to key aspects of the history of cinema in the UK and explores how the dominant aesthetic of British cinema has been determined by a continuing discourse about 'realism.' In addition, the course demonstrates how film production in Britain was organised, funded, managed, and shaped by the demands of the audience during the first seventy years of its existence. The course also explores the essential relationship between cinema and society during this period.

Student Learning Outcomes

At the end of this course, students will:

1. Demonstrate a general knowledge of the history of cinema in the UK
2. Illustrate how the continuing discourse about 'realism' has informed the aesthetics of British cinema
3. Critique the relationship between the cinema in this period and its audiences and general society
4. Critique individual British film

Course Assignments, Grading, and Assessment

Assignment	Percentage	Grading Requirements
Attendance and Participation	20%	
Weekly Journals	5% each (35% total)	Please see rubric on MyStudy
Mid-term Paper	20%	Please see rubric on MyStudy
Individual Presentations	25%	Please see rubric on MyStudy

Brief Assessment Overview

Assessment 1: Weekly Journals, 7 in total

Due:

500 words on the subjects and films of the week's classes. You can respond to what most interests you from the week. At least one reference is required.

Assessment 2: Mid-term Paper (1,500 - 2,000 words)

Due:

Select one of the following prompts:

How important were Britain's early documentary makers in articulating the philosophy and new approaches to production in social realism? What are some key features of this early realist work? Refer to at least two examples of early British documentary films of the 1930s and 40s in your answer.

OR

What are some of the key features of the British 'New Wave' of film-makers? How did these films and film-makers differ and continue with outlooks and practices from the documentary and cinematic realists that preceded them? Choose a particular film/s to help discuss and illustrate your critique.

At least three references are required.

Assessment 3: Individual Presentations, 8-10 minutes

Due:

Choose either one or two contemporary social realist films, or a film-maker, and consider and evaluate their work in terms of messaging and purpose as well as cinematic technique and style. At least 5 references are required.

Grading

Alternative formats of the FIE Grading Rubric are available in the Student Resources area of MyStudy@FIE.

	Relevance Questions are interpreted correctly; Argument/thesis is clear and developed throughout; Discussion is focused on topic of the questions; Irrelevant content and discussion are not included	Knowledge and Understanding Recommended literature and/or research guidelines are used and interpreted appropriately; Selection and use of evidence shows understanding and insight; There is evidence of study beyond the recommended literature and that introduced in the module	Analysis, Critical Thinking and Integration of Experiential Learning Approach shows evidence of analysis and independent reasoning; Originality in argument; Evidence of critical insight and reasoned questioning of assumptions; Integration of connections and experiences outside of the formal classroom	Scholarship and Style Conclusions are well justified and complete; Facts reported and statements made are accurate; Writing is clear and fluent; All sources are appropriate, accurately acknowledged and formatted in recognised style; All work is the student's own
A 93-100 %	Totally appropriate interpretation and relevant; Excellent and thorough thesis development	Comprehensive understanding and mastery of core evidence and extensive wider reading	Excellent analytical skills, outstanding evaluation of evidence, independent and original critical insight; Meaningfully integrates experiential learning where appropriate	Exceptional fluency and accurate writing using appropriate language, conclusions are well-justified; Accurate and thorough referencing

A- 90-92%	Almost wholly appropriate interpretation and relevant; Very strong thesis	Very strong understanding of evidence and clear evidence of appropriate wider reading	Well-developed analytical skills, excellent evaluation of evidence, shows strong critical insight; Effectively integrates experiential learning where appropriate	Almost wholly accurate and fluent writing using appropriate language, conclusions are full and justified; Accurate referencing
B+ 87-89%	Appropriate interpretation and relevant; Good thesis throughout	Strong understanding of evidence and appropriate wider reading	Very good analytical skills, strong evaluation of evidence; Shows critical insight; Acknowledges and compares experiential learning and other perspectives	Largely accurate and fluent writing using appropriate language; conclusions are justified; Accurate referencing
B 83-86%	Largely appropriate interpretation and relevant; Thesis is clear	Good understanding of evidence and some appropriate wider reading	Good analytical skills, good evaluation of evidence; Shows critical insight; Acknowledges and compares experiential learning and other perspectives	Largely accurate and fluent writing using appropriate language; Conclusions are justified; Accurate referencing
B- 80-82%	Mostly appropriate interpretation and relevant; Thesis is underdeveloped but clear	Sound understanding of evidence and some wider reading	Sound analytical skills; Sound evaluation of data; Shows some critical judgement identifies	Sound level of accuracy and written fluency and some use of appropriate language; Conclusions are coherent;

			experiential connections	Sound use of referencing conventions
C+ 77-79%	Some appropriate interpretation and relevant; Thesis is underdeveloped and lacks clarity	Evidence is largely understood and some wider reading	Sometimes inconsistent analytical skills; Some evaluation of data; Shows some critical judgement though often descriptive; Identifies experiential connections	Sound level of accuracy and written fluency and some use of appropriate language; Conclusions are coherent but not fully supported; Sound use of referencing conventions
C 73-76%	May contain some misinterpretation and/or irrelevant material; Thesis lacks clarity	Evidence is largely understood; Limited reading beyond material introduced in module	Mostly inconsistent analytical skills; Some evaluation of data; Scant critical judgement mostly descriptive; Identifies experiential connections	Some level of accuracy and written fluency and some use of appropriate language; Conclusions are coherent but not fully supported; Sound use of referencing conventions
C- 70-72%	Limited interpretation and relevance; Thesis is inconsistent	Weak understanding of evidence; Limited reading beyond material introduced in module	Mostly inconsistent analytical skills; Some evaluation of data; Lacks critical judgement; Little integration experiential learning	Inconsistent written fluency; Weak use of appropriate language; Weak justification for conclusions; Adequate use of referencing conventions

D 60-69%	Limited interpretation and relevance; Lacks thesis	Weak understanding of evidence and limited, inappropriate wider reading	Inconsistent and weak analytical skills, poor evaluation of evidence, lacks critical insight; Little integration of experiential learning	Inconsistent written fluency; No justification for conclusions; Inaccurate use of referencing
F 0-59%	Significant misinterpretation and irrelevant material	Lacks understanding of evidence and inappropriate or no wider reading	Lacks analytical skills, lacks evaluation of evidence, lacks critical judgement; Lacks integration of experiential learning	Poorly written with little fluency; No justification for conclusions; Poor referencing; Evidence of plagiarism or inappropriate use of AI

Policies specific to this course

- **Co-curricular Activities and Field Trips:** Field trips for your FIE courses have been planned to help students achieve the learning objectives of the course and are required. They take place during class time unless otherwise noted. Details about required visits appear on the class by class schedule below. Please note that any make up for missed co-curricular activities are at the personal expense of the student.
- **Late submission of work:** Written work may be submitted later than the due date only with express permission in advance of the due date from the course instructor. Late work will receive a 5% reduction in points for each 24-hour period handed in past the deadline, including each weekend day. Work submitted a week late will be marked at a C or lower. Any extensions made beyond the last class meeting must be requested in writing to the faculty and include any information on the circumstances that require the extension, the nature of work yet to be submitted, and the date by which the work will be received. If said work is not received by the agreed extension date, barring further exceptional circumstances, the work will not be given credit.
- **Late arrivals to class or site visit:** Please arrive on time. Lateness, particularly on days with co-curricular visits, results in missed course material. Faculty may use their discretion to mark a student as 'Absent' if they feel the student has arrived too late or left too early to be considered 'Present' for that session.
- **Trigger Warnings:** Some topics covered in class may expose students to past traumas and evoke a negative reaction. Sensitive topics can vary, such as sexual violence, death, racism, or xenophobia. I want this to be an inclusive space where every student feels comfortable; therefore, I will provide content warnings before lectures for sensitive

subject matters. Content warnings are meant to give students a forewarning so they can prepare for their emotional safety. It is important to note that anything in the environment could be a trigger for someone's trauma, such as smell, sound, or texture; it is impossible to account for all possible triggers, and ask for grace as I do my best as an educator to warn students of potentially distressing content during lectures, assignments and/or discussions.

Attendance and Participation

- Regular attendance is essential in order to pass a course. A class constitutes lectures, student presentations, discussions, seminars, co-curricular activities, tests, and examinations. In addition, under UK Home Office regulations class attendance is mandatory.
- Class attendance and participation is formally recorded and incorporated into a student's final grade.
- In addition to physical presence in class, a student's participation in a class is evaluated on the mastery of assigned course readings as reflected in a consistent, valid contribution to class discussions, in-class exercises, and in asking questions that enrich the on-going discourse. Consistency and validity in participation is expected in every class. Limited participation will have a negative impact on a student's participation score.
- When unexpected events cause students to miss a class, it is the student's responsibility to initiate contact with the faculty member to notify them in advance, or as soon as is reasonably possible.
- Absence from class does not relieve a student of responsibility for assignments. Students bear the ultimate responsibility for all missed class material and assessment.
- If a student misses 25% or more of a course, then they may be awarded a failure for the course and/or not permitted to finish the course.
- [See the full attendance policy here](#)

Required Readings

Students are given all required readings as class handouts

The key text in the field is 'British Social Realism' Samantha Lay published by Wallflower Press, 2009.

Additional Resources and Readings

The British Film Institute's South Bank headquarters houses the Reuben Library, a considerable collection of books and journals you can access for research and independent study. In the same building is their Mediatheque, the 'worlds greatest film and tv archive' with over 95,000 titles, and also free for independent study.

<https://www.bfi.org.uk/bfi-reuben-library>

<https://www.bfi.org.uk/bfi-national-archive/watch-archive-collections/visit-us-view-archive-material/bfi-mediatheque>

[MyStudy@FIE](#)

MyStudy@FIE is FIE's virtual learning environment based on the open-source platform Moodle. Students are required to access MyStudy@FIE for course information, readings, link to resources, assignment submissions and communication with faculty.

[FIE's Values in the Curriculum](#)

A unique aspect to FIE's curriculum is our courses reflect an engagement with values of 1) knowledge and inclusivity, 2) ethics and human rights, 3) social and cultural engagement, and 4) sustainability. For information about each of these values and how each of FIE's courses aligns with them, please see [Our Values](#).

[Topics](#)

- What is Realism?
- John Grierson And the British Documentary
- As British as Ealing
- Mass Observation and The New Documentary
- The New Cinema
- The New Wave Realism: The 1960s
- The British Film Industry
- The Modern Masters of Social Realism
- New Voices, British Asian and Black Cinema
- Television And Social Realism
- New Voices – Social Realist Films by Contemporary Women
- The British Us Co-Production

[Possible co-curricular activities](#)

- Visit to the British Film institute
- Cinema screenings
- Q&As with filmmakers

[Academic Integrity](#)

By enrolling at FIE, you have joined an academic community and you are expected and required to act honestly regarding the work you submit for assessment in your courses. Academic integrity is closely related to the concept of good academic practice.

Any attempts to Cheat; Fabricate; Plagiarise; Collaborate without Authorisation; Participate in Academically Dishonest Activities; and/or Facilitate Academic Dishonesty will be viewed as a breach of this regulation.

[Please see FIE's Academic Integrity Policy in full.](#)

Most students do not have any problems understanding the rules and expectations about acting honestly at university. If you have any questions you must talk to your faculty or a member of FIE's Academic Team.

Writing and Language Support

FIE's Writing Support Tutors are available to assist students of all levels of expertise with all phases of the writing process. Available year-round and to all students. To book an appointment or for more information visit www.fie.org.uk/wst.

Please note that FIE allows the use of a foreign language/English dictionary in exam situations for students where English is not their primary language UNLESS the use of the dictionary would give the student a significant advantage (e.g. where the exam is aimed at getting the students to define terms that might be found in the dictionary).

Accommodations for Students

Students who wish to use academic accommodations at FIE can register to do so via FIE's Administration Team, by providing the appropriate supporting documentation. Students who have approved FIE academic accommodations should discuss them directly with their faculty member(s) within or around the first few class sessions, or via email. Exams are facilitated by FIE faculty and students should give 2 weeks' notice to faculty members if use of approved exam accommodations is required. The Administration team can assist students and faculty with liaison and facilitation as needed.

Additional Policies and Resources

Mental Health and Stress Management Support

FIE offers mental health support. If students wish to seek this support, including with FIE's counsellor, simply email studentlife@fie.org.uk. If you have a counsellor from back home that you are seeing, we strongly encourage you to maintain contact with them throughout your time studying abroad with FIE.

Diversity and Inclusivity

FIE regards its housing and classroom facilities as safe spaces to live, study, and work with students, faculty, and staff who are understanding, supportive, and trustworthy. Inappropriate, derogatory comments and/or actions, harassment, bullying, victimisation and discrimination are not tolerated. Any such behaviour will be investigated and dealt with appropriately. Students must be respectful of diverse opinions and of all class members regardless of personal attribute and use inclusive language in written and oral work.