

LTEN 189: Postcolonial Literatures

How to Live in a World City: Housing, Precarity, and Migration in Contemporary Film

London has arguably been a global city for centuries. It has been the metropolitan center of a global empire and an epitome of the mass urbanization and stark inequalities that accompanied industrial modernity. The legacies and continuations of those histories are present in the everyday life and spaces of the city, especially in its incredible cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity. This course will examine the geographies, cultures, and representations of London as a contemporary “world city.” We will read scholarship related to urban studies, architecture, and city politics while watching contemporary film that explores London’s politics and cultural fabric. How is contemporary London a city formed through both its imperial history and its postcolonial migrations? How does income inequality and precarity affect the social geographies and everyday life in the city? How does London’s cosmopolitan character fit with the politics of English national identity? In considering these questions, the course places an emphasis on both structures of power and forms of resistance marked by the dynamics of race, class, religion, and gender.

Fulfills B requirement for Literature majors

Films

Stanley Kubrick (dir) - *A Clockwork Orange*
Stephen Frears (dir) - *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*
Stephen Frears (dir) - *Dirty Pretty Things*
Andrea Arnold (dir) - *Fishtank*
Andrea Luka Zimmerman (dir) - *Estate: A Reverie*
John Akomfrah (dir) - *Twilight City*

Secondary Texts (selections)

Doreen Massy - *World City*
Loretta Lees et al - *Gentrification*
Lynsey Hanley - *Estates: An Intimate History*

Assignments

Attendance and Participation - 30%

- Attendance and discussion are key components of this class. While illness and emergencies are excused absences, students are otherwise required to come to class, be prepared, and offer their thoughts in a constructive and inclusive discussion space

Excursion Notebook - 20%

- This notebook will be a space for students to reflect on the various excursions. There will be specific prompts given in advance of each excursion, so that students know what to look for.

Final Essay - 50%

- The final essay will be a 8-10 page paper that compares at least two films from the course. Successful papers will have a specific argument, closely analyze examples from the films, situate each film in its historical and social context, and have a clear organization.

Schedule

Week 0 (before arriving)

Stanely Kubrick (dir) - *A Clockwork Orange*

Week 1

Stephen Frears (dir) - *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*

Alison Ravetz - *Council Housing and Culture* (selections)

Excursion: Thamesmead Estate

The “council estate” has been a metonym both for the optimism of postwar welfare state planning and a byword for continued class conflict, with connotations, deserved or not, of criminality. We will open this class by considering the representational politics of social housing in Britain, in particular by visiting the Thamesmead Estate—an experiment in social housing that became associated with criminality in part due to Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange*.

Week 2

Stephen Frears (dir) - *Dirty Pretty Things*

Doreen Massey - *World City* (selections)

Excursion: London Museum Docklands

London has long been at the transit of its own empire, bringing in people from all over the world. This week we will pair Stephen Frears’ film about the precarity of contemporary migration with a visit to the Docklands museum. The London Docklands were historically a working class district of shipping and transit that, in the past 40 years, have been converted into a glittering financial area. As a result, the museum and the experience of this part of the city showcases London’s role in world transit and in finance.

Week 3

Andrea Arnold (dir) - *Fishtank*

Lynsey Hanley - *Estates: An Intimate History* (selections)

Excursion: Barbican estate tour

This week we will continue to think about the housing estate through a visit to the Barbican estate and cultural center. The Barbican offers excellent architectural tours, and often has interesting contemporary arts exhibitions. Through visiting the estate, students will learn about the aesthetics and politics of social housing.

Week 4

Andrea Luka Zimmerman (dir) - *Estate: A Reverie*
Loretta Lees et al - *Gentrification* (selections)

Excursion: class visit with Andrea Luka Zimmerman (possibly off-site)
Zimmerman is an accomplished documentary filmmaker and an activist for social housing in Britain. Her documentary *Estate: A Reverie* tracks the forced removal and demolition of a housing estate in East London in which Zimmerman lived herself. We will watch this documentary and visit with Zimmerman to understand how she approached her film and her thoughts on social housing in London today.

Week 5

John Akomfrah (dir) - *Twilight City*

Excursion: local exhibition (tbd)

In the summer, London is full of exhibitions, performances, and “pop-up” events. Though it is hard to predict what kind of events will be occurring this far in advance, we will certainly be able to take students to see how artists use the contemporary city as a site for art and performance.