

M 5:00-6:00 PM, Honors Lounge W 5-7:00 PM, Lawson 121	Spring 2026
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South Asian Film and Cultural Politics

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This honors seminar is an introduction to South Asian cinemas that takes film as a lens into the culture, history, politics, and society of the region. Given that South Asia encompasses several countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) and possibly a hundred or so languages and dialects, this will be a quick introduction! Colonial wars in the late 18th and early 19th centuries split the region into nation-states. The end of the British Empire in 1947 came with the Partition, i.e., the division of India and Pakistan into two nations. It is a bitter and tragic event that continues into the present as an open wound; its memory is deployed cynically to stir hatred or turned into a cry for solidarity across national divides. We have chosen to organize the course nation-wise to give a taste of the plurality and dynamism of the culture of this region. At the same time, we have also organized it historically and thematically to demonstrate the commonalities that tie the region together as South Asia. The nation-state is a useful category, but we also wish to displace it, going beyond the hegemony of the Bombay/Indian film industry to showcase the diversity of South Asian cinematic culture.

The seminar will consist of screenings (usually on Wednesdays) and discussions (mostly on Mondays). As this is a seminar, we expect you to come to class ready to discuss the readings and engage in collaborative learning.

Course Objectives

- Critical and historical thinking through the interpretation of specific films and the cinematic experience in broader historical and social contexts.
- Analytical writing, i.e., to interpret and read film texts and present an argument in writing.
- Appreciate the aesthetic and narrative traditions in South Asian cinema.
- Critique the portrayal of gender, caste, religion, and nationalism in South Asian films.

Class texts

All materials will be on D2L.

Assignments:

1. *Screening notes:* 3 at 10 points each. 1-2 pages double space. Total 30 points. We will give you a prompt. Due Fridays at 11:59 PM on d2l.
2. *Film Analysis:* A shot-by-shot description and analysis of an assigned sequence: 20 points.
 - Note down (in bullet form) all the shots in the sequence screened and number them. You may include the dissolves in one item on the list, but note the number of shots.
 - Write a very brief 1-2 line description of what happens in each shot. Avoid interpretative terms, such as “weird, or “odd,” etc.
 - Fill in the details of misc-en-scene in your shot list: lighting, props, and acting.
 - Note cinematographic elements, such as depth of field and focus, long take, dissolves, mobile framing, and shot scale.
 - Fill in the details of sound. Pay close attention to sound and the way in which the impact of the words is enhanced through sound manipulation. No need to note the dialogue
 - In a two-page essay (double-spaced), interpret the sequence, placing it within the whole film and offer your own analysis of how these elements work, both literally and metaphorically.
3. *Class presentation:* 20 points
In week 2, we will divide you up into groups of 3. Each group will lead the discussion for the day they are assigned. You will watch the film and do the reading in advance and create a film poster around which you will prepare the class for the film. Questions to consider are: What is the style of the film? What did you find notable about it? What can you glean about the political nature of the film? How is it intervening in creating a representation of its historical moment? You must meet with Haris and Jyotsna in advance of the week you will be presenting so that we can plan the class together.
4. *Final paper:* An extended film review for one of the films screened in class or seen outside. 20 points
 - First draft: 5
 - Second draft: 10
 - Final version: 10
5. Class participation 10 points.

Course schedule

Week 1 Introduction: Imagining South Asia

- 1/12: Introductions, Mapping perceptions of South Asia, key scenes from *Mangal Pandey* (Ketan Mehta, 2005, India, 2 hr. 30 min).
- 1/14: *Mangal Pandey* (Ketan Mehta, 2005, India). Watch the rest of the film on your own.

Reading: Philip Lutgendorf, *Is there an Indian way of filmmaking?*

Week 2 Partition & Displacement

- 1/21: Documentary/archival records related to the partition
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aNCSjqzIss> and
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eATr7e03N6w>

Reading: Pandey, *Remembering Partition* (2001).

Week 3 Partition Trauma & Gender

- 1/26: Reading: Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence* (1998).
- 1/28: Film: *Khamosh Pani* (Pakistan, 2003, dir. Sabiha Sumar, 1 hr 39 m)

Due Screening Notes 1: 1/30, 11:59 PM on D2L

Week 4 Liberation & Identity

Group 1 Presentation

- 2/2 Orthodoxy vs. Bengali identity; roots of 1971 war.
Reading: Masud, *The Clay Bird: Essays and Screenplay*.
- 2/4: Film: *Matir Moina* (*The Clay Bird*) (Bangladesh, 2002, dir. Tareque Masud, 1 h 38m) <https://www.kanopy.com/en/siu/watch/video/11833195>

If you are off campus, an authentication page will pop up asking you to log in with your SIU credentials. Alternatively, you can find it by performing a title search for “The Clay Bird” on the library catalog. Off campus students will still need to log into via this method. Problems accessing, click here: <https://libguides.lib.siu.edu/askalibrarian>

Week 5 Civil War & Kinship

Group 2 Presentation

- 2/9 Maoist conflict, caste and kinship fractures.
Reading: Snellinger, *Making of a Democratic Political Culture in Nepal* (2018).
- 2/11 Film: *White Sun* (*Seto Surya*) (Nepal, 2016, dir. Deepak Rauniyar, 1 hr. 29 m)
<https://www.amazon.com/White-Sun-Dayahang-Rai/dp/B07BRVB6WB>

Due Screening Notes 2: 2/13, 11:59 PM on D2L

Week 6 Ethnic Conflict & Exile

Group 3 Presentation

- 2/16 Tamil struggle, exile, motherhood.
Reading: de Mel, *Women & the Nation's Narrative* (2001).
- 2/18 Film: *Kannathil Muthamittal* (India/Sri Lanka, 2002, dir. Mani Ratnam. 2h 17m)
<https://www.amazon.com/Kannathil-Muthamittal-Madhavan/dp/B07MCWSH1D>

Week 7: Post-colonial violence

- 2/23: *Reading*: TBD
- 2/25: Film: *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer* (India, 2002, dir. Aparna Sen, 126 minutes)

Due Screening Notes 1: 2/27, 11:59 PM on D2L

Week 8: Tradition vs. Modernity

Group 4 Presentation

- 3/2: Media, faith, and generational change.
Reading: Raju, "Globalisation, Modernity and Identity in Bangladesh Cinema" (2014).
- 3/4: Film: *Television* (Bangladesh, 2012, dir. Mostofa Sarwar Farooki, 1h 46m)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8c4Nyo4hFn8>

Spring Break

Week 9 South Asia, post 9/11

- 3/16: reading Pervez Khan work in progress.
- 3/18 Film: *Kuda Ke Liye* (Pakistan, 2007, dir. Shoaib Mansoor)

Due Shot by shot analysis -3/20, 11:59 PM on D2L

Week 10 Labor, Gender & Global Capitalism

- 3/23: Garment workers' struggle, gendered labor. *Reading*: Kabeer, *The Power to Choose* (2000).
- 3/25: Film: *Made in Bangladesh* (Bangladesh, 2019, dir. Rubaiyat Hossain. 1h 35m)
<https://www.amazon.com/Made-Bangladesh-Rikita-Nandini-Shimu/dp/B08HP88MML>

Week 11 Migration & Diaspora

- 3/30: *Reading*: Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (2002).
- 4/1 Film: *Mississippi Masala* (India/USA, 1991, dir. Mira Nair. 1h 58m) Amazon Prime.

Film review, draft 1 due 4/3 11:59 PM on D2L

Week 12: Migration, Blocked Mobility & Postwar Life

- 4/6 *Reading*: Castles & Miller, *The Age of Migration* (2013), South Asia section.
- 4/8: *Flying Fish* (Igillena Maluwo)
(Sri Lanka, 2011, dir. Sanjeewa Pushpakumara, 1h 34m)
Link: https://vk.com/video-136471876_456244958

Week 13 – Censorship & Authoritarianism

- 4/13: *Reading*: Gopal Guru, *Caste, Communication and Culture* (2012).
- 4/15: Film: *Court* (India, 2018, dir. Chaitanya Tamhane, 1 hr. 56 min)

Film review, draft 2 due 4/17 11:59 PM on D2L

Week 14 – Cinema across the borders

- 4/20: *Reading* TBD

- 4/22: Film: *Tere Bin Laden* (India, 2010, dir. Abhishek Sharma, 1 hr. 36 min)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fq_7WwfkVFE

Week 15 – Realism

- 4/27: Reading: *Athique*, Transnational Audiences: Media and Migration in South Asia (2016).
- 4/29: Film: *Joyland* (Pakistan, 2022, dir. Salim Sadiq, 2 hr. 7 minutes)

Film Review final due: May 4th

Final notes:

All work, please. Otherwise, you can't pass the course.

Please don't plagiarize. Most folks who plagiarize do so because they get scared. Please understand your campus's policies regarding plagiarism and academic misconduct. If you have questions, ask us, and we will assist.

Please keep us informed if stuff comes up and you need flexibility and grace. We will work with you.

Questions? Please ask. Anytime. All of the time.