Course 8: Present Imperfect: Negotiating Identities in Film and Literature
Course Co-ordinator: Dr. Dawid de Villiers and Dr. Annel Pieterse
1 - 4 July & 8 July 2014

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course focuses on the way in which literature and film in South Africa have registered and reflected the social and political conflicts and tensions of the Apartheid years, and how, since the first democratic elections in 1994, these fields of cultural production have served—and continue to serve—as a means of questioning and negotiating identity, not only nationally, but also at the level of the community and the individual.

The primary aim of this course is therefore to identify currently prevalent thematic trends—for example, the ongoing interest in and engagement with the fact or metaphors of crime—while also thinking about South Africa’s cultural landscape as constituted in the interplay between, on the one hand, the country’s history and socio-economic realities, and, on the other hand, a range of global trends and developments.

A secondary aim of the course is to establish the shifts or continuities in the particular formal codes used in South African literature and film to represent these thematic trends. Over the course of the week, we will engage with both classic and current South African poems, short stories, a contemporary novel, as well as three films: one from the apartheid era and two more recent South African releases.

At the end of the course, students should be equipped with a basic understanding of the manner in which particular stylistic features are deployed in the representation of questions of identity in South Africa.

We will start our inquiry with a basic overview of the South African literary landscape, and concretise this by means of a few samples of poetry from the colonial and apartheid eras. These will serve to establish some of the key issues, topographies, and metaphorical tendencies that sub tend much of South African literature and cultural discourse. These will be fleshed out and developed through the consideration of a number of (recent and Apartheid-era) short stories. This will also prepare the ground for the consideration of Michiel Heyns’s prize-winning 2011 novel, Lost Ground, which diagnoses some of the ways in which the past informs, and persists in, the present.

We will then shift our attention to film, going back in time to consider the apartheid state in crisis in the 1980s, as represented the film, Mapantsula (1988), a key text in the history of South African film, which adopts the genre of the gangster film for the purpose of socio-political engagement. This also involves a shift from rural South Africa to the city of Johannesburg and its environs, Hillbrow in particular, which is also the primary setting for Jerusalema (2008), like Mapantsula a gangster film, but one which registers, to an important degree, South African ambitions to compete on a global stage.

Next, following the focus set in the first part of the course, we will consider a selection of South African poetry from the post-apartheid moment, as well as the more recent period. The chosen poems explore issues that suggest that there are many continuities with the structural and systemic inequalities of the apartheid past.

We end off the course with a screening and discussion of the South African black comedy Skeem (2011), a heist movie set in a holiday resort in the middle of the Karoo. The film intersects in interesting ways with the gangster genre explored in Mapantsula and Jerusalema. Unlike those films,
however, its setting provides a microcosm of contemporary middle-class South Africa, and the scramble for a box full of money that drives this farce presents a cynical view of the culture of self-enrichment in South Africa.

PRESENTATION

The course combines formal introductory lectures on the works described above with more informal group discussions on their implications.

ASSESSMENT

Final evaluation for this course will be based on class attendance and participation (10%), a test (40%) and an essay (50%). Both assignments are intended to consolidate ground covered in the course. The test will be written in class on Friday 4 July, while the essay—the basic planning for which will be done in class on the 8th—will be due on Friday 11 July.

Secondary readings—part of the preparation for the written assignments—will be made available during the course.

PRESCRIBED READINGS


Additional primary and secondary reading material will be supplied in class or made available on WebCT Blackboard, along with hand-outs that will form the basis of the discussions and the assessments.

Viewings of the films will be arranged during the course.

PROGRAMME

Please note that the lectures/discussions will proceed on the assumption that you have read the novel and short stories before class.

Tue, 1 July (Presenter: Dawid de Villiers)

9.00-9.30: Introduction: literature/space/history

9.30-10.30 Discussion of poetry

Luis Vaz de Camoens – The Lusiads (Adamastor section)
Thomas Pringle – “Afar in the Desert”
Thomas Pringle – “The Cape of Storms”
Frederick Brooks – “Nature’s Logic”
Andrew Geddes Bain – “Kaatje Kekkelbek”
Charles Ould – “Voortrekkers”
M. Grover – “I killed a man at Graspan”
Mrs. A. Dube – “Africa: My Native Land”
Roy Campbell – “The Serf”
William Plomer – “Johannesburg”
Guy Butler – “The Underdogs”
H. I. E. Dhlomo – “Renunciation”
Stanley Motjuwadi – “Taken for a Ride”
Mongane Wally Serote – “City Johannesburg”
Sipho Sepamla – “To Whom It May Concern”
Sipho Sepamla – “History-books, Amen!”
Shabbir Banoobhai – “When the first slave arrived at the cape”
Mafika Gwala – “In Defence of Poetry”
Achmat Dangor – “Slave Song”

10.30-11.00 Break
11.00-12.00 Discussion of poetry
12.00-13.00 Short stories

Nadine Gordimer – “The Bridegroom”
Gcina Mhlophe – “The Toilet”

12.30-14.00 LUNCH
14.00-15.30 Short stories

Ken Barris – “The Life of Worm”
Pumla Dineo Gqola – “In the Clarity of a Third Class Compartement”
Ivan Vladislavić – “Propaganda by Monuments”

15.30-16.00 On reading film
18.00-20.00 Screening of Mapantsula

Wed, 2 July (Presenter: Dawid de Villiers)
9.00-10.30 SA film; discussion of Mapantsula

Jacqueline Maingard – From South African National Cinema.
Leslie Marx – “Underworld RSA.”

10.30-11.00 Break
11.00-13.00 Screening of Jerusalema
13.00-14.00 LUNCH
14.00-16.00 Discussion of Mapantsula and Jerusalema
Thu, 3 July (Presenter: Annel Pieterse)

09:00-11:00  At the end of the rainbow: disillusionment in post-apartheid poetry.

For reference:
"The Silver Piece" - Tatamkhulu Afrika.
"itchy city" - Kgafela oa Magogodi
"South Africa, thank you for your love letters" - Loftus Marais
"Mud School" – Marlene van Niekerk

Secondary Readings:
"Afterword" to It all begins (Ed. Robert Berold) - Kelwyn Sole
"Between a howl and a whine" - Hedley Twidle

11:00-11:30  Break

11:30-13:30  Screening: Skeem

13:30-14:40 LUNCH

14:30-16:00 Discussing Skeem

- From city to countryside: the importance of setting.
- Black comedy and farce: questions of genre.
- The holiday resort: from utopia to dystopia.

Fri, 4 July (Presenter: Annel Pieterse)

09:00-10:30  Discussing Skeem.

- "Skeeming": a national compulsion?
- Enclosure: an obsession with fences.
- Cultural stereotypes
- Masculinities and femininities
- (Interracial) love conquers all?

10:30-11:00  Break

11:00-11:45  Assessment question and group discussion.

11:45-13:00  Written assessment to be completed in class.
Tue, 8 July (Presenter: Dawid de Villiers)

9.00-9.30 Recent SA fiction and non-fiction; Michiel Heyns

9.30-10.30 Lost Ground

10.30-11.00 Break

11.00-13.00 Lost Ground

Finuala Dowling – “The novel that Heyns was always going to write.” (review)
Jane Rosenthal – “In search of lost ground.” (review)

13.00-14.00 LUNCH

14.00-15.00 Lost Ground

15.00-16.00 Essay planning