Statement of Grant Purpose

United States, Film Studies

From Hollywood to London: A Comparison of American and British Film Noir

A dark tunnel leads to an unknown future. A dead body lies abandoned on the ground. Crossed street signs, unknown assailants, lampposts forming halos of light in the surrounding darkness, and in the middle of this sinister world treads the lone detective. An offspring of American cynicism following World War II, Film Noir depicts a dark, dangerous, and complicated world. Film Noir is often difficult to describe because, it is not specifically linked to one particular genre or type of story; rather, Film Noir is considered a style of filmmaking that is created through a specific combination of visual and thematic conventions. Throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s, the blending of these precise conventions led to the development of an instantly recognizable Film Noir style. More recently, however, film scholars such as Vivian Sobchack have begun to question the historic periodization and uniformity of Film Noir’s stylistic conventions by examining textual features to determine what makes a noir film. In particular, film scholars have begun to investigate what it means when post-war American anxieties are expressed without the use of the stylistic conventions associated with Film Noir to determine the degree to which these films are uniquely grounded in American culture. World War II had taken an even more direct toll on Great Britain and therefore many of the same conditions that led to the development of the noir sensibilities in the United States fostered a similar- yet identifiably British- Film Noir style. If granted a Fulbright award, I will study the use of Film Noir in a British film setting by completing an M.A. in Film Studies at Queen Mary University of London.

Film is a unique medium in that it is able to speak to many different cultures while at the same time serving as an expression of the cultural values of the society in which it was created. Because of film’s global reach and its ability to act as a universal language, film also has the power to transcend language barriers and locations. It is this power of film that first attracted me to studying film. I began my college career as a production major because I wanted to make movies that had the power to affect people on a deeper level. While initially fascinated by the technical aspects of filmmaking, my primary interests are now in the storytelling and the artistic, cultural, and theoretical aspects of filmmaking. I am interested in why and how films have such power to affect people so deeply. Film Noir in particular fascinates me; indeed, in Film Noir, the story revolves as much around what is not seen as what is shown on screen, and there is a sense of an alternate, sinister world lurking just below the surface and out of sight. It is this search for what lies just out of reach that keeps me constantly coming back to these noir thrillers.

My research will focus on comparing the Film Noir traditions of Great Britain and the United States during the 1940s and 1950s. I will first explore whether there was a uniquely British embodiment of the Film Noir tradition, by continuing the research I began during my undergraduate studies on Film Noir thrillers as cultural chronotopes of the time and place in which the films were made. Using the resources of Queen Mary University of London and the British Film Institute archives, I will examine films produced in Great Britain throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, such as *The Third Man*, *They Made Me a Fugitive*, and *It Always Rains on Sunday*, for the iconography and themes associated with Film Noir. I will identify British films that could be classified as Film Noir and analyze these films in relation to this historical context to test the thesis that film noir is uniquely connected to postwar American culture. Additionally, by examining the impact of location and setting, especially films set in London, I hope to find further evidence of a British Film Noir tradition starting with Alfred Hitchcock’s
seminal *The 39 Steps* before moving on to other films of the era. I will conduct this research in the broader context of completing the 1-year M.A. in Film Studies at Queen Mary University of London. The M.A. program is designed to examine the ways in which a century of cinema has shaped our experiences of space and time, and the curriculum would enable me to take courses designed to enhance my filmic lexicon as well as broaden my understanding of the narrative, cultural and historic implications of film. By enhancing my film studies background through this coursework, I will be fully prepared to carry out the research necessary for my thesis and examine the correlation between the traditionally American Film Noir and the British films of the era and finish my dissertation in summer 2017.

The Film Studies Department at Queen Mary University of London will provide me with the opportunity to explore the relationship between film theory and practice. My research of the post-war environment in Great Britain will be enhanced by the resources associated with studying at Queen Mary University of London including access to major cultural centres such as the British Film Institute, the British Library, and the National Archives. Additionally, I will benefit from the mentorship of Dr. Mark Glancy, who has conducted his own research on the connection between 20th Century Hollywood and its influence on British cinema, and has expressed his support for my project in the accompanying affiliation letter. Dr. Glancy is an expert in the unique relationship between British and American films, which makes him an ideal advisor for my thesis project. As well as being on the cutting edge of new approaches to understanding film, Queen Mary University of London will offer me the chance to immerse myself in British film. I plan to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the Living British Cinema Forum, which is an initiative set up by the Film Studies Department at Queen Mary to foster connections between academics, students, journalists, and practitioners in the British film industry through workshops and screenings. I also would welcome the opportunity to become involved in Queen Mary’s own in-house production studio, Mile End Films.

Film can serve as a textual embodiment of a particular culture and as such it is able to provide outsiders a glimpse into the lives of the people who created the film. Understanding a film to its fullest involves reading a film as a text created by the filmmakers as a cultural chronotope of the time, location, and historical significances of the period and place in which the film was made. Film Noir is an especially chronotopic type of film because of the heavy influence the social context has in determining the tone and subject matter. The socio-cultural connections between the United States and Great Britain run long and deep, therefore, it seems natural that the Film Noir styles in each country would influence each other. Studying film offers a way to gain a deeper understanding of a country’s cultural and historical experiences, which is why I hope to deepen my own understanding of the British and American post-war experience through my investigation of British noir. I hope that by using film to deepen my comprehension of people’s experiences it is possible to foster cross-cultural engagement and gain a greater understanding of a society’s values and traditions. The experience of living and studying abroad will enrich my experience with cultures outside my own and expand my involvement with film traditions that exist outside the umbrella of Hollywood. Through the Fulbright Award and the knowledge gained from a M.A. in Film Studies at Queen Mary University of London, I will be well equipped to further my comprehension of film structure and cultural relevance, which will leave me in a unique position to continue my education and eventually receive my PhD in Film Studies. Film has the power to influence and move people on a mass scale; that is why understanding the social and cultural connections film has to a society is becoming even more important in the coming future.
9 September 2015

Dear Members of the Fulbright Screening Committee,

I am writing to support the application of [Redacted] for a Fulbright Scholarship to complete the MA in Film Studies at Queen Mary University of London.

[Redacted] has produced an impressive research proposal – one that intersects with my own expertise in American and British cinema of the 1940s and 1950s, as well as the expertise of my colleagues at Queen Mary, who cover a wide range of national cinemas. Our MA in Film Studies, taught by Film Studies and History scholars, offers a wide array of optional modules in these fields, as well as a core course that offers students a solid grounding in theoretical and methodological issues. [Redacted]’s interests will be well supported here.

While we have not yet begun our application process for 2016-17 and therefore I cannot say that [Redacted] has been offered a place on the MA, she has an impressive academic background and I am hopeful that her application will be successful.

[Redacted] has demonstrated a sound understanding of her topic thus far, and will develop a stronger command of historical and theoretical issues with instruction from our specialists at Queen Mary. I look forward to providing supervision for her dissertation through intensive one-to-one meetings. She will also receive further guidance through group workshops and training with other Masters students throughout the year. I anticipate that this project will be fruitful and would like to offer my mentorship in ensuring its success.

I fully support her application.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Dr Mark Glancy
Reader in Film History
Queen Mary University of London
PERSONAL STATEMENT

United States, Film Studies

As the daughter of an immigrant, my life has always been defined by my Somali heritage. Not only have I been exposed to different cultures from a young age I have also come to appreciate everything I have been given throughout my life. My father immigrated to the United States in the 1980’s with five dollars in his pocket to continue his education at an American university. So when it came time for me to apply to college my father had some strong opinions about what I should be studying. Film has always been my passion; I love the way a well-crafted film has the power to transcend language barriers and locations to impact people no matter their cultural differences. But, as a typical immigrant parent, my father was less than pleased with my decision to major in film at university. He wanted the best for me, but could not see any merit in professions beyond those he deemed practical. As he said, “I’m not paying one penny for any of that Hollywood business.” This declaration left us at a standoff for many months until we were finally able to come to a compromise. My father found a list of all the majors my school offered and proceeded to mark the ones he believed were appropriate. As long as I selected a major from the approved list, he would allow me to double-major with film and would pay for my education. I picked chemistry from the list, as I had done well in chemistry in high school and thought that it would not be difficult for me. I was wrong.

At first, chemistry did not appear to be too challenging and I was doing well in all my classes. Then sophomore year and organic chemistry rolled around, and reality hit me. In the past, academics had always come easily for me, but for the first time, something was not clicking. I thought that after I pulled through organic chemistry things would get better; once again, I was wrong. I knew that I was a smart person, but every single day in my chemistry classes I felt like I was unintelligent. I felt like I was not as good as the other students and that I was disappointing my father. I wanted to quit chemistry, but I knew that was not an option if I wanted to finish the rest of my education. At that point I resolved that I was smart enough to be a chemist, and that I was not going to let anything get in my way, especially my own insecurities. Eventually, I graduated summa cum laude, with two bachelor’s degrees, and as president of my school’s American Chemical Society student chapter. As much as I wanted to be angry with my father for forcing me into a major I did not want, I could not be mad. In fact, I was actually thankful. This experience taught me that I am so much stronger than I could have ever imagined. Four years of blood, sweat, tears, and chemical burns later I came out a better person. I know that whatever challenges life may place in my future, I am good enough and strong enough to get through them. That is the biggest lesson my chemistry degree taught me.

As much as my chemistry major proved a transformative experience, my passion remained for film. My film studies classes became a refuge from all the challenges of my chemistry major. They reminded me why I love learning and they gave me the opportunity to approach learning from a place of joy and genuine interest rather than just survival. My experience showed me that I have the ability to work in multiple and diverse disciplines successfully and this experience will also allow me to engage with different cultures and operate successfully in the multicultural environment of London. Because of my ethnic background I have always appreciated cultural diversity. I danced with an East Indian Bollywood studio for a number of years, and with all the East Indian influence in London, I would love to start dancing again and would welcome the opportunity to expand my involvement with all the distinctive sides of London. It is with this enthusiasm for new experiences with which I will approach the new challenge of living and studying abroad as a Fulbright scholar.