

Plots and Prospects: The Country House in English Culture

Overview:

In painting and prose, on the page and on screen, English country homes have long housed depictions of national identity. On these estates can be found some of the core forms and fictions of Englishness – concerning class, inheritance, decorum – as well as themes unique to the stately home itself. This course traces how artists and storytellers have used the country estate as an evocative setting and an encapsulation of society, from the eighteenth century to the present. We begin with the apparent serenity of the grand pile in the 1700s and the tensions it hardly managed to keep hidden, before considering the freighted symbol of national memory the country home became during the Victorian period. In the twentieth century, we follow the quietly subversive desires that haunted the halls of grand houses in modernist narratives, even as the country house opened to visitors after the Second World War. Finally, we consider the way the country house produced genres of its own – ending in the present, where on screen and in person the country home now thrives as a spectacular relic of Englishness encapsulated.

But this is not a course about architecture as such; our discussions concern what the country house has meant, and continues to mean, in its archive of literary and visual depictions. Working with images, clips from film and television, and short literary passages (provided as handouts), we pay close attention to the details of country house culture – its scenes and styles, dialogues and gestures. Ultimately, we will try to answer: why does this peculiar form of residence hold such a defining place in English culture?

Outline:

1.	Prospects	A selection of artworks; and of short literary extracts from Ben Jonson, Mary Leapor, and Jane Austen.
2.	Inheritances	Charles Dickens, <i>Bleak House</i> (chapter seven, 'The Ghost's Walk')
3.	Plots	Extracts from E. M. Forster, <i>The Longest Journey</i> ; and Kazuo Ishiguro, <i>The Remains of the Day</i>
4.	Thresholds	Clips from <i>Atonement</i> (dir. Joe Wright) and <i>Belle</i> (dir. Amma Asante)
5.	Legacies	Clips from <i>Downton Abbey</i> , episode one

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