

# Liverpool Film Seminar

2014 - 2015

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Every year, Liverpool Film Seminar invites six experts to deliver a series of talks. Topics vary greatly and the series does not focus on a specific aspect of film. Instead, a range of genres and approaches are celebrated, from historical reach to the internet's impact on cinematic material.

## **Professor Sarah Street** (University of Bristol)

### **Synthetic Dreams: Colour-Film-Music in the 1920s**

In the 1920s cinema enjoyed an expanded relationship with other media. Significant developments in the colour field provoked dynamic exchanges involving avant-garde practices as well as popular narrative forms. The desire to explore colour, film and music as an organic, synthetic experiment was a particularly marked tendency, encouraging lively debates on the nature and impact of that combination of forms. The word 'synthetic' was doubly appropriate, referring to the application of vibrant, synthetic colours produced chemically, and the utopian synthesis of media forms.

While associations between colour and music have a long history, this paper will examine the most notable experiments with Colour-Film-Music during the 1920s. The films of Walther Ruttmann, Oskar Fischinger, Sergei Eisenstein and Viking Eggeling all operated in this tradition; in addition Thomas Wilfred and Mary Hallock Greenwalt's Lumia experiments, various colour-organs and moving light displays in movie theatre auditoria were significant.

Such examples will be located with reference to theoretical writings on the phenomenon by Adrian Klein, Loyd Jones and Sergei Eisenstein. As they and others observed, avant-garde practice was particularly suited to innovating with visual and musical correspondences, and the revolution in colour made this arena even more attractive as filmmakers sought to expand non-representational, moving forms while at the same time locate them in terms of codification and aesthetic/emotional impacts.

As Klein (1926) observed, colour-music and mobile colour projections were connected to 'a general pleasure in "colour for colour's sake"' in everyday life. Advertising images contributed to this context of meshing artistic experimentation with the commercial imperatives of the decade. As cinema was developing as an institution characterized by specific sites for film exhibition, at the same time those venues were non-exclusive as locations for intermedial, color-light performances.

The paper will give examples of how movie theatres and cinemas showcased light displays, colour-music experiments, and stage prologues for films, demonstrating clearly how avant-garde practices became relevant to more popular forms of entertainment. Considering this material as part of a larger project that deals with questions around intermediality and theorizing the 1920s in Pierre Bourdieu's terms as a field of complex, interacting and competing cultural production, the paper will conclude by placing the Colour-Film-Music synthesis in relation to broader, intermedial and industrial trends, as well as its implications for conceptualizing the coming of sound towards the end of the decade.

### Biography:



Sarah Street is Professor of Film at the University of Bristol, UK. She has published widely on British cinema history. Her most recent publications are as author of *Colour Films in Britain: The Negotiation of Innovation, 1900-55* (2012, winner best book prize awarded by the British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies, 2014) and co-editor with Simon Brown and Liz Watkins *Color and the Moving Image* (2012) and *British Colour Cinema: Practices and Theories* (2013). Her current project is *Colour in the 1920s: Cinema and its Intermedial Contexts*, working with Joshua Yumibe, Vicky Jackson and Bregt Lameris. She is a co-editor of *Screen* and the *Journal of British Cinema and Television*.