Bog bodies, bicycles and big houses: the material imagination of Irish writing

Hilary Term 2017

Dr Julie Bates

This module examines the material imagination that informs modern Irish literature, and more generally considers the critical moment implicit in the creative process. We will study a range of literary texts and will also make reference to works of film, television and visual art. Our close readings will be informed by guided tours and handling sessions run by curators in the Kildare St and Collins Barracks sites of the National Museum of Ireland (NMI).

The module requires students to formulate new responses to modern Irish literature by drawing on the collections of the NMI and reflecting on the material imagination of the authors under study. The module’s methods of assessment reflect its focus: students will undertake a practice-as-research set of creative assignments, where the forms and outcomes of their responses constitute an integral aspect of their research and critical reflection.

Students will first write a 500 word response to their choice of artefact from the collections of the NMI. They will then develop these initial ideas in a 1,000 word summary of an extended written piece of creative non-fiction or fiction that engages with their choice of writer on the course, and may involve a visual component. These written pieces (of 4,000 words in their final drafts) will be collected in a *Granta* or *Cabinet* magazine-style group publication to be launched by a public reading (and exhibition if several students create visual projects) in the Long Room Hub at the end of term.

Assessment:

Group creative project in response to the NMI collections, with the following components:

1. Written response to students’ choice of artefact from the collections of the NMI. We will visit the two NMI sites in the first weeks of the course, and students will submit their written pieces the week after the second visit. I will collate and distribute these responses for group analysis and discussion in the seminar the following week (500 words, 10%)

2. Summary and outline of creative work of non-fiction or fiction that responds to students’ choice of writer on the course and may involve a visual component. Due in week 6, so the group can choose the thematic focus of the publication. (1,000 words, 30%)

3. *Granta* or *Cabinet* magazine-style publication to be launched by a public reading (and exhibition if several students create visual pieces) in the Long Room Hub at the end of term (4,000 words if piece is entirely written, lower word counts as appropriate if
students’ projects also feature work in other media, in which case their piece will include images of the visual components and will take the form of a photo-essay, 60%)

Course outline:
Week 1:  Introduction
- Introduction to the concepts of material imagination and practice-as-research, and the assessment methods of the oral presentation, group publication and public event.

Week 2:  Irish football jersey

Week 3:  Bicycle
- Dervla Murphy, *Full Tilt* (1965) (& Flann O'Brien, Samuel Beckett)

Week 4:  Drab maternal dress

Week 5:  Expressive female clothing

Week 6:  Suitcase
- Brian Friel, *Philadelphia Here I Come!* (1964) (& Eavan Boland)

Week 8:  Pint

Week 9:  Big house
- Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (1929) (& John Banville, Selina Guinness)

Week 10:  Old boots

Week 11:  Bog body

Week 12:  Greatcoat

Learning Outcomes:
- Map the dramatic cultural shifts in modern Ireland by tracing the recurrence of certain material and thematic representations in modern Irish literature.
- Advance new readings of Irish literature by employing an interpretative strategy attuned to the material imagination of a wide range of authors and works.
- Complete a practice-based creative project that engages with both the resources of the National Museum and the creative practice of authors on the course.
- Develop sophisticated conceptual and collaborative professional skills as a result of the group publication and public reading which will conclude the course.

**Preliminary reading:**
An additional bibliography will be supplied at the start of the module. Resources and excerpts will be uploaded to Blackboard throughout the course.

- Paul Caffrey, 'Irish Material Culture: The Shape of the Field,' *Circa*, No. 103 (Spring, 2003), pp. 29-32.