

Imagining the Contemporary: No future?

Hilary term 2022

Coordinator: Dr Julie Bates.

Description

As critics including Eric Hayot have pointed out, it can be difficult to analyse and write about contemporary culture because we lack the critical distance to gain perspective on works that depict our own historical moment. This module aims to provide some of that critical distance, or 'leverage' as Hayot describes it.

Through its comparative approach, the module explores how socio-political topics that are of pressing concern to writers, artists and thinkers now were also examined in earlier periods. The module aims to illustrate how studying the ways in which these themes and issues were represented and understood in the past enables us to enrich our engagement with the contemporary iteration of those topics today.

The module considers a different socio-political topic each week, examining how it has been explored in a pair of texts. The module covers a range of creative works, critical concepts and cultural theories from the 20th and 21st centuries. The genres covered by the module include novels, films, essays, autofiction, memoir, a play, TV episode, and photo-text book. Critical works and resources will be uploaded to Blackboard throughout the module. The week-by-week outline below sets out the pair of works on which each lecture will focus.

Two important points for students

- *The emphasis of the module is on comparative analysis, so we encourage you to read or watch as many of the set texts as possible in advance of the module.*
- *Some texts on this module include offensive language, including racial, gender-based, able-ist, sexual and other slurs, and portray troubling events and narratives, including murder and sexual assault. We want to flag this in advance, and to emphasise that the School of English is committed to the critical analysis of these texts and of their contexts.*

Week-by-week outline and set texts

Week 1. Introduction [Julie Bates]

Overview of module; challenges and strategies for interpreting contemporary literature, history and culture; rationale for comparative approach; description of assessment method.

Week 2. Ecocriticism and environments [Julie Bates]

1. Primary work: Jim Crace, *Harvest* (Novel, 2013)
2. Paired with: Svetlana Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer* (Non-fiction, 1997)

Week 3. Post-humanism [Julie Bates]

1. Primary work: Mark O'Connell, *To Be a Machine* (Non-fiction, 2017)
2. Paired with: Karel Čapek, *R.U.R.* (Play, 1920)

Week 4. Technology, Dystopia and the Individual [Bernice Murphy]

1. Primary work: Charlie Brooker, 'NoseDive' episode of *Black Mirror* (TV series, 2016)
2. Paired with: Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (Novel, 1953)

Week 5. Late / Post Capitalism [Sam Slote]

1. Primary work: Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island* (Novel, 2015)
2. Paired with: Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Theory, 2009)

Week 6. The legacy of gender studies [Pádraic Whyte]

1. Primary work: Bernardine Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other* (Novel, 2019)
2. Paired with: Raewyn Connell and Rebecca Pearse, *Gender: In World Perspective*, 3rd edn. (Theory, 2015)

Week 8. Queer and trans experiences [Julie Bates]

1. Primary work: Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Autofiction, 2015)
2. Paired with: Juliet Jacques, *Trans* (Memoir, 2015)

Week 9. Migration [Julie Bates]

1. Primary work: Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West* (Novel, 2017)
2. Paired with: John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man* (Non-fiction & photography, 1975)

Week 10. Representation and construction of race [Philip Coleman]

1. Primary work: Yaa Gyasi, *Homegoing* (Novel, 2016)
2. Paired with: Zora Neale Hurston, 'How It Feels to be Colored Me' (Essay, 1928)

Week 11. Representation and construction of class [Rosie Lavan]

1. Primary work: Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (Memoir and social history, 2007, rev. edn. 2017)
2. Paired with: Keith Waterhouse, *Billy Liar*, dir. by John Schlesinger (Film, 1963)

Week 12. Futurology and obsolescence [Sam Slote]

1. Primary work: Denis Villeneuve, *Blade Runner 2049* (Film, 2017)
2. Paired with: Kathy Acker, *Empire of the Senseless* (Novel, 1988)

Learning Outcomes

- Explore the concept of 'the contemporary'
- Reflect on a range of socio-political concerns, including issues and themes related to humanism, capitalism, the environment, technology, gender, class, and race
- Develop the skills to make a comparative analysis of a range of creative and critical works produced in the 20th and 21st centuries
- Assess the ways in which the socio-political concerns under study have been represented and explored by a range of writers in a range of genres and media in the 20th and 21st centuries
- Develop a critical vocabulary for discussing the socio-political topics, issues and themes surveyed by the module

Method of assessment

Exam