

Imagining the Contemporary: No future?

Hilary term 2021

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 help provide some of that critical distance, or 'leverage' as Hayot describes it.

The module considers a different socio-political theme each week, and compares how that theme has been explored in a book, film, TV episode or graphic novel that has been written very recently with a literary work produced some years or decades ago. The week-by-week outline below sets out the pair of works on which each lecture will focus. Critical works and resources to support each lecture will be uploaded to Blackboard in advance of the lecture.

In addition to introducing students to a range of creative works, critical concepts and cultural theories from the 21st and 20th centuries, the module will demonstrate through its comparative methodology that many socio-political issues which seem unique to our time were also of concern in earlier periods. The module will aim to illustrate how studying how these issues were represented and understood in the past enables us to enrich our engagement with the contemporary iteration of those issues today.

Week-by-week outline and provisional texts

Week 1. Introduction [Julie Bates]

Overview of module; challenges and strategies for interpreting contemporary literature, history and culture; rationale for pairing very recent with earlier works, and for considering a range of genres and media; 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 Capek, *RUR* (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* (2019)
2. Paired with: Raewyn Connell, *Gender: In World Perspective* (Theory, 2009)

Week 8. Queer and trans experiences [Julie Bates]

1. Primary work: Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Autofiction, 2015)
2. Paired with: Jan Morris, *Conundrum* (Memoir, 1974)

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 related to humanism, economics, the environment, technology, gender, class, race, and migration
- 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 socio-political concerns have been represented and explored by a range of writers in a range of genres and media, and in different periods
- Develop a critical vocabulary for discussing the socio-political concerns and themes surveyed by the module

Method of assessment

Exam