

Imagining the Contemporary: No future?

Hilary term 2024

Coordinator: Dr Julie Bates

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.

Week 1. Introduction [Julie Bates]

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 [Björn Quiring]

- Primary work: Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* [excerpts] (Novel, 2008)
- Secondary work: Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* [excerpts] (Theory, 2013)

Week 4. Totalitarian fictions and the ends of truth [Björn Quiring]

1. Primary work: Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle* (Novel, 1962 & TV adaptation, 2015)
2. Paired with: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* [excerpts] (Theory, 1951)

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 [Amy Prendergast]

1. Primary work: Bernardine Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other* (Novel, 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: 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 [James Baxter]

1. Primary: Percival Everett, *Erasure* (Novel, 2001)
2. Paired: *Sorry to Bother You*, dir. Boots Riley (Film, 2018)

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

1. Primary work: Caleb Femi, *Poor* (Poetry, 2020)
2. Paired with: Shelagh Delaney, *A Taste of Honey* (Play, 1958 & Film adaptation dir. Tony Richardson, 1961)

Week 12. Apocalypse: A Year from Monday [Sam Slote]

1. Primary work: *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, dir. Stanley Kubrick (Film, 1964)
2. Paired with: Jacques Derrida et al., 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)' (Theory, 1984)

Important points to note

- 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.

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