This module addresses some of the major literary trends and cultural debates of modern and contemporary times. It considers the different ways that ‘modernity’ has been understood – whether it be as a period or as a particular constellation of values or some combination of both – and focuses on the multiple art-forms and theories of art this yielded. We will proceed in a loose chronological fashion, examining a broad swathe of writers, genres and intellectual disciplines. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive survey, but to focus on some salient or representative moments of recent cultural history that will allow you to make informed choices about more specialised options of study. The module is conducted through seminars, offering a broad variety of teaching styles and critical approaches. For each seminar there is core reading which is compulsory preparation, and also a selection of further reading which you are encouraged to sample as widely as possible.

THE TERM AT A GLANCE

Week 1: Introductory Meeting (Victoria Coulson)*
Week 2: Of Modernity and Modernism(s) (Nicoletta Asciuto)
Week 3: Modernist Poetry and the Politics of Allusion (Hugh Haughton)
Week 4: Expatriate Modernism: An American in Paris (Hannah Roche)
Week 5: Utopian Longings (Emilie Morin)
Week 6: Reading Week
Week 7: Masters and Slaves, Race and Modernity (Adam Kelly)
Week 8: Beckett’s Voices (James Williams)
Week 9: Paul Muldoon and Contemporary Poetry (Matt Campbell)
Week 10: The Contemporary Novel’s Aesthetic Debts (Alexandra Kingston-Reese)

*Note that this meeting is for students on the MA Modern and Contemporary Literature and Culture, rather than all students taking Reading Modernity.

With the exception of Week 1, all seminars meet on Tuesdays at 2pm in BS/008.
2) Of Modernity and Modernism(s)
Nicoletta Asciuto

Do we live in a modern age? Are our experiences in the twenty-first century “modern”?

In this seminar we shall investigate what we mean exactly when we talk about the modern in literature, and also think about how best to approach modernist texts. Can the word ‘modernism’ be applied to a variety of texts beyond the canonical names of T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce?

We will look at the various declinations of modern and modernist, starting with Charles Baudelaire’s own influential definition of modernity and Virginia Woolf’s famous statement that ‘On or about December 1910 human character changed.’ We will then move on to consider how the scholarly conversation on the modern has developed from the second half of the twentieth century onwards. You will be joining a lively scholarly debate which is still ongoing!

By the end of this seminar you will have gained a deeper understanding of the debates surrounding modernism/modernity, its theorization, and its current appropriation stretching out to global literature.

Core Reading (in this order)
Harry Levin, ‘What was Modernism?’, The Massachusetts Review, vol. 1 no. 4 (1960), pp. 609-630. [JSTOR]
Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, ‘Locating the Modern’, in Geographies of Modernism (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 1-5. [VLE]

Further Reading
Fredric Jameson. Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (London: Verso, 1991).
3) Modernism and the Poetics and Politics of Allusion: ‘Difficulty’ and Inter-textuality in T.S. Eliot and Marianne Moore

Hugh Haughton

In his essay on ‘Metaphysical Poetry’ of 1921, T.S. Eliot wrote that:

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into its meaning.

Addressing the question of ‘difficulty’ and the claim that modern poetry must be ‘more allusive’, the seminar will focus principally on T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land (1922) and Marianne Moore’s poems ‘Marriage’ (1923), ‘Poetry’ and ‘The Octopus’ (1924), published in Observations (1924). The Waste Land and Observations presented 1920s readers with verse that was multiply allusive, poly-vocal and often palimpsest-like. Both books also notoriously included extensive notes alongside the texts of the poems, para-textually foregrounding the dimension of allusion within their texts.

I would also ask you to read two essays by Randall Jarrell that bear on the problem as seen from the mid twentieth-century, ‘The End of the Line’ and ‘The Obscurity of the Poet.’ Taking off from there, the seminar will reflect on related questions. Is modernist poetry inherently difficult? If so, is it more so than poetry from earlier periods? Is it more allusive, or simply allusive in a different way? What is the relationship between poet and audience in these poems? Is there a crisis of transmissibility and the accessibility of poetic experience? Is the allusive modernist text necessarily elitist? What does it suggest has happened to the poet’s relationship to her audience? How does poetic form impact on notions of history and ‘tradition’ and vice versa? Is ‘Modernist’ poetry of the kind represented by Moore and Eliot now irrevocably past and passe?

Core Reading (these texts will be available on the VLE)

Further Reading
Victoria Bazin, Marianne Moore and the Culture of Modernity (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010)
I.A. Richards, ”’The Allusiveness of Modern Poetry,” in The Principles of Literary Criticism (1924)
4) Expatriate Modernism: An American in Paris

Hannah Roche

The final part of Gertrude Stein’s first novella, Q.E.D., a semi-autobiographical lesbian love story completed (and subsequently closeted) shortly after expatriation to Paris in 1903, opens with a reflection on homesickness:

There is no passion more dominant and instinctive in the human spirit than the need of the country to which one belongs. One often speaks of homesickness as if in its intense form it were the peculiar property of Swiss mountaineers, Scandinavians, Frenchmen and those other nations that too have a poetic background, but poetry is no element in the case. It is simply a need for the particular air that is native, whether it is the used up atmosphere of London, the clean-cut cold of America or the rarefied air of the Swiss mountains. The time comes when nothing in the world is so important as a breath of one’s own particular climate. If it were one’s last penny it would be used for that return passage.

Although she would go on to make ‘that return passage’ only twice in her lifetime, Stein spent much of her writing career exploring new ways of articulating her own ‘dominant and instinctive’ passion for America. Focusing on two key texts, The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933) and Paris France (1940), this seminar will examine the many problems and paradoxes that have come to define Gertrude Stein. How might we read the relationship between Stein’s expatriate identity and her experimental aesthetics? Why did Stein claim that ‘writers have to have two countries, the one where they belong and the one in which they live really’? Where does Stein’s expatriate identity intersect and interact with her sexual identity? Why would a ‘completely and entirely american’ [sic] writer choose to absent herself from America?

Core Reading
Extracts from Ernest Hemingway, A Moveable Feast (London: Arrow, 2011) [available on the VLE].

Further Reading
5) Utopian Longings
Emilie Morin

Modernity remains, in many ways, indissociable from reflections on utopia and the power of technology and politics. In this seminar, we will discuss Aldous Huxley’s classic *Brave New World* (1932) in the light of post-war and contemporary debates about utopian thinking, as they have developed within and around the work of Frankfurt School philosophers. Our aim will not be to determine whether *Brave New World* is best read as an example of utopian or dystopian fiction; rather, we will seek to explore, through these precise theoretical lenses, the parameters of Huxley’s reflections on technology, boredom and the failures of rationality as they unfold in *Brave New World*.

**Core Reading**

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (any edition) (you must bring a copy of this novel to the seminar)
Theodor W. Adorno, “Aldous Huxley and Utopia”, from Adorno’s *Prisms*, pp. 95-118 (scan on VLE, under Reading List)
Ernst Bloch and T.W. Adorno, “A Conversation on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing”, from Bloch’s *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, to be read from https://files.nyu.edu/scr266/public/Adorno_Bloch.pdf

**Further Reading**

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [you can either read the excerpt and the introduction in the Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, OR - if you wish to engage with this text in greater depth - you can read the introduction, chapter 2 on the culture industry and the concluding sections on propaganda]

**Background Reading/Surveys**

Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian fiction East and West: universe of terror and trial* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001)
This seminar will address arguably the most important American novel of the twentieth century, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952). Alongside engaging with the novel in the context of debates in African American intellectual circles at mid-century, we will read classic passages from Hegel and Marx that offer philosophical diagnoses of modernity, and consider how recent critics have explored *Invisible Man* in relation to Hegel’s master-slave dialectic and Marx’s materialism. This all bears upon the novel’s conception and exploration of the relationship between race and modernity, both in its own time and for our own.

**Core Reading (please read the texts in the following order):**

Barbara Foley, from *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man* (Duke UP, 2010), pp. 1-10.

**Further Reading**

From the debate in African American intellectual circles at mid-century (all available in the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*):


Key later texts on race, slavery, and modernity:

Davis, David Brion. *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. (Cornell, 1966)
Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Harvard, 1982)
8) Beckett’s Voices
James Williams

In this seminar we will read two works by Samuel Beckett—or four, depending how you count them—the play *Krapp’s Last Tape* and the trilogy of short prose texts known as *Nohow On* (*Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho*). These texts could be compared in many ways: we’ll be focussing on questions of voice and address. What voices are speaking in Beckett? Who are Beckett’s voices speaking to? Who is listening? Does a voice presuppose a self? What if selves have multiple voices? How is a voice on the page related to a voice in performance? Where are the lines between dialogue and monologue? How is Beckett’s writing animated by these questions?

Core Reading


I may also set some bits of supplementary reading e.g. letters, extracts from the theatrical notebooks for *Krapp*, etc. but if so I will notify you in good time, and will provide them as a hand-out at least a week ahead of the seminar.

* You may be reassured to know that our seminar will be on the English versions of all these texts. However, if you can read French and are interested in Beckett, you stand to gain a lot from comparing the English texts with their French versions. Please note, however, that Beckett’s composition practices were far more complicated than they are sometimes made out to be (i.e. writing in one language—at first English, then later, French—and then self-translating into the other). *Krapp’s Last Tape* was written in English for the Northern Irish actor Patrick Magee, then self-translated as *La Dernière bande* the following year. *Company* was first written in English, then immediately self-translated into French and published in 1980 as *Compagnie*; the English text was then revised in light of the French and published later the same year. *Ill Seen Ill Said* was first written in French as *Mal vu mal dit*: Beckett began translating it into English even as the French text was still being written and revised. *Worstward Ho* was written in English, and never translated by the author. Beckett regarded it as untranslatable, but this didn’t stop Édith Fournier from having a go: her translation, *Cap au pire*, appeared in 1991.

Further Reading

There is no set secondary reading, however you are encouraged to explore the following reading list and I would expect a well-prepared student to come to the seminar having read three or four article-length things, or equivalent, from it.

Campbell, Julie, “‘Echo’s Bones’ and Beckett’s Disembodied Voices’, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui*, 11 (1001), 454-60.


9) Paul Muldoon and Contemporary Poetry: From the Local to the Geopolitical
Matthew Campbell

This seminar will explore the early achievement and influence of Irish poet Paul Muldoon through the last volume he wrote before moving to the USA. It is a very influential book, treating in an oblique way the matter of poetry and violence, innovation and experiment, the limits of representation and the limits of form. Its poems are sometimes very short and sometimes very long, as in the extraordinary sonnet-narrative “The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants,” which closes the book. Muldoon and his contemporaries used to be called “postmodern” and this seminar will address the validity of that label. We will also explore Muldoon’s significance for broader UK and US literary culture, given his subsequent influence on Anglophone poetry – as a critic, poetry editor of The New Yorker, Princeton Professor and (part-time) rock musician.

Core Reading

Paul Muldoon, *Quoof* (London: Faber, 1983)
- More recent poems will be made available in the seminar.

Further Reading

Kendall, Tim and McDonald, Peter (eds), *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays* (Liverpool English Texts and Studies, 2003)
*Princeton University Library Chronicle* (Special Issue on Irish Poetry), 59, 3 (1998).
The Contemporary Novel’s Aesthetic Debts
Alexandra Kingston-Reese

This seminar will explore the aesthetic and formal legacies of modernism in the contemporary novel. Critics often compare the works of modernist authors (Woolf, Eliot, Joyce, Kafka, Beckett) to contemporary inheritors, but how do contemporary writers continue to engage with modernity’s aesthetic concepts, strategies, and techniques, even when they seek to recast them? We’ll be taking a specific look at contemporary modernism through Zadie Smith, one of the 21st-century’s most innovative and exciting novelists and her critically lauded novel, On Beauty (2006).

“It should be obvious from the first line that this is a novel inspired by a love for E.M. Forster, to whom my all fiction is indebted, one way or the other”—so goes Smith’s Acknowledgements to On Beauty, an “homage” to Forster’s classic modernist novel, Howard’s End (1910). Here, we will consider what methods contemporary writers like Smith use to extend and alter modernist aesthetics (through an attention to style, affect, and ethics) when they feel in aesthetic debt.

Although we won’t be doing a one-to-one comparison between the two novels, I thoroughly recommend you read Forster’s Howard’s End, since knowledge of the plot that Smith modernises will certainly be helpful in discussion.

Core Reading

James, David, “Modern/Altermodern” in Time: A Vocabulary of the Present, eds. Amy J. Elias and Joel Burges, NYU Press, 2016: 66-81. [VLE scan]

Further Reading
