**MA in Modern and Contemporary Literature and Culture**

**2017-18**

**CORE MODULE: READING MODERNITY**

**AUTUMN TERM**

Convenor: Dr Adam Kelly  
Email: adam.kelly@york.ac.uk  
Office No. D/J/114; Phone Ext. 4571

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 (Adam Kelly)* |
| Week 2: | Of Modernity and Modernism(s) (Nicoletta Asciuto) |
| Week 3: | Modernist Poetry and the Politics of Allusion (Hugh Haughton) |
| Week 4: | Elizabeth Bowen and the Modern Short Story (Victoria Coulson) |
| Week 5: | Utopian Longings (Emilie Morin) |
| Week 6: | Reading Week |
| Week 7: | Confession and Death at Mid-Century (JT Welsch) |
| Week 8: | Beckett’s Voices (James Williams) |
| Week 9: | Contemporary Novel’s Aesthetic Debts (Alexandra Kingston-Reese) |
| Week 10: | Signifying Katrina (Bryan Radley) |
*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 Thursdays at 9am in BS/007.
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


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 his 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 passé?

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


Further Reading

Victoria Bazin, *Marianne Moore and the Culture of Modernity* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010)
This seminar will explore the modern short story through one of its most renowned practitioners, Elizabeth Bowen. Reading from *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen*, we will focus on the author’s fiction from the 1930s and 40s, specifically the following stories (page numbers in parentheses):

'The Cat Jumps' (398-407);
'The Little Girl's Room' (472-482);
'The Apple Tree' (513-524);
'Tears, Idle Tears' (536-543);
'The Easter Egg Party' (591-601);
'Ivy Gripped the Steps' (772-802).

Bowen's novels are *The Hotel* (1927); *The Last September* (1929); *Friends and Relations* (1931); *To the North* (1932); *The House in Paris* (1935); *The Death of the Heart* (1938); *The Heat of the Day* (1949); *A World of Love* (1955); *The Little Girls* (1964); *Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes* (1968). If you want to explore Bowen's novels, I would recommend that you read them in chronological order. It is not obligatory to have read any of them for the seminar.

**Core Reading**


**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)
7) Confession and Death at Mid-Century
JT Welsch

This seminar will explore the sense of cultural and personal loss in the work of John Berryman and Delmore Schwartz. We’ll consider their fraught associations with other mid-century ‘confessionalist’ writing, focusing on the elegiac forms by which both writers registered a perceived death of modernism. Berryman and Schwartz’s use of personae will also be an opportunity to consider the critical challenges posed by radically autobiographical writing. The main reading will be Berryman’s *Dream Songs* and selections from Schwartz’s writing, although you are encouraged to explore both writers further.

**Core Reading**


- The text of the poems is the same in any edition, but please read Michael Hoffmann’s introduction to the 2014 FSG Classics edition.
- Within the whole, please focus on the elegies for Delmore Schwartz (No. 146-158), and other writers: Theodore Roethke (No. 18), Robert Frost (Nos. 37-39), Sylvia Plath (Nos. 153 and 172), R. P. Blackmur (No. 173), Ernest Hemingway (No. 235), Randall Jarrell (No. 259), Louis MacNeice (No. 267), and William Carlos Williams (No. 324).


**Further Reading**


Robert Lowell, ‘For John Berryman’ and ‘To Delmore Schwartz’, *Collected Poems*


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.

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 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**


**Further Reading**


This seminar will examine the political and cultural legacies of Hurricane Katrina, the storm that devastated much of the southern United States in 2005. The focus will be on Mary Robison’s 2009 experimental novel One D.O.A., One on the Way. Does Robison’s fragmentary, blackly comic, and generically mutable narrative provide an apposite aesthetic response to the challenge of representing the political ruptures, psychic wounds, and temporal discontinuities of New Orleans after Katrina? The critical coordinates for our discussion will include the biopolitics of disposability and ideas of disaster capitalism / apartheid (via the work of Henry Giroux and Naomi Klein respectively).

Core Reading


Further Reading / Viewing

Nandini Gunewardena and Mark Schuller, eds., Capitalizing on Catastrophe: Neoliberal Strategies in Disaster Reconstruction (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008), esp. the three chapters that comprise Part 3, “Exposing Katrina: Class, Race, and Displacement”, pp. 117-156.
Cynthia Whitney Hallett, Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), 101-133. [This chapter provides a useful summary of the first twenty years of Robison’s career, with a focus on the short stories and her place within the minimalist movement.]
Chester Hartman and Gregory D. Squires, eds., There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina (London: Routledge, 2006).