Political Fictions:  
Film and the Novel in the Global 21st Century  
Spring 2019 – Fridays 11am-1pm – B/S/008

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Office Hours: Tuesday 11-12pm, Friday 3-4pm  
Screenings: Tuesday 1-4pm, BS/005

Module Description

What makes narrative art political? When we interpret the politics of a written or visual text, how do we weigh the claims of artistic intention, aesthetic tradition, global and local contexts of production and reception, and the various modes of unconscious at work? In this module, we will approach these questions with respect to 21st-century novels and films that derive from and depict situations all over the globe, from the US and Latin America to Africa, Asia and Europe. Through these texts we will engage with the most prevalent political constellations and ideologies of our time, including neoliberalism, globalization, communism, fascism, and liberal democracy. We will examine broad issues of gender, ecology, economics, affect, migrancy, and aesthetic autonomy, as well as exploring up-to-date political concerns such as Brexit and Black Lives Matter. Secondary readings will include contemporary academic criticism alongside essays on politics and aesthetics from publications including the New York Times, the London Review of Books, Public Books, Dissent, Jacobin, the Guardian and n+1. One subtheme of the module will therefore be its engagement with the thriving contemporary literary culture in print and online, and students will be encouraged to view their own critical writing in relationship to this realm, as well as the more strictly academic one.

Module Requirements

The main mark is awarded for a 4,500-word essay, submitted in Week 1 of the Summer term.

Other compulsory requirements for those taking this module are as follows:

First, weekly film screenings at 1pm on Tuesday should be attended by all students. I will attend most of the screenings, although the screening assistant will take responsibility for showing the film.

Second, compulsory critical readings for each seminar will be available on the VLE site, and should always be brought to class, either via printing or a tablet device, alongside that week’s novel.

Third, by 9am on Friday, two hours before class, each student will send an email about the week’s material to political.fictions@gmail.com. This email should contain 2 points of interest about the novel under discussion, 2 points of interest about the film, and 1-2 points of interest about the critical reading. Points of interest should not be very long: two or three sentences each will suffice. These points will be used to shape the seminar discussion, so be prepared to expand verbally on points you have raised in your email.
Week 2  The Neoliberal Self and the Ethical Apocalypse  
*Nightcrawler* (Dan Gilroy, 2014)  

This seminar introduces the political concept of neoliberalism. We will explore the relationship between neoliberalism and contemporary narrative, and ask how particular texts might subvert or reinforce neoliberal structures. Examining two North American texts, we will consider their engagement with selfhood and ethics, on the level of form, content, and affect.  

**Required:**  
Stephen Metcalf, “Neoliberalism: the idea that swallowed the world,” *Guardian*  
William Davies, “’What is ‘Neo’ about Neoliberalism?’” *New Republic*  
Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, Chapters 1-3  

**Suggested:**  
David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Introduction & Chapters 1 & 2  
Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Chapters 9-11  
Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, Chapters 1 & 2  
Pierre Bourdieu, “The Essence of Neoliberalism,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*  
Jane Elliott, “Suffering Agency: Imagining Neoliberal Personhood,” *Social Text*  
Michel Feher, “Self-Appreciation; or, the Aspirations of Human Capital”  
Jeremy Gilbert, “What Kind of Thing is ‘Neoliberalism,’” *New Formations*  
Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History,” *National Interest*  
Benjamin Kunkel, “Dystopia and the End of Politics,” *Dissent*  
*Take Shelter* (Jeff Nichols, 2011)  

Week 3  The Politics of World Literature: Core and Periphery  
(23 Jan)  
Roberto Bolaño, *2666* (2004), Parts I, II, III  
*Hidden* (Michael Haneke, 2006)  

This seminar approaches another prominent contemporary category – world literature – through two texts that feature an engagement with global inequality by European characters possessed of economic and cultural power. The required critical reading emphasises the politics of world literature both at its origins and in the contemporary moment.  

**Required:**  
The Editors, “World Lite,” *n+1*  
Matthew Eatough, “The Literary History of World Systems, II,” *Literature Compass*  

**Suggested:**  
Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review*  
Pankaj Mishra, “The Case Against the Global Novel,” *Financial Times*  
Matthew Eatough, “The Literary History of World Systems, I,” *Literature Compass*  
Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe*, Introduction  
*Even the Rain* (Icíar Bollaín, 2010)
**Week 4**  **Framing Gender and Materialist Realisms**
(1 Feb)  Roberto Bolaño, *2666* (2004), Part IV  
*4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days* (Cristian Mungiu, 2007)

This seminar compares two texts that take violence against women as their subject, one in the context of global capitalism and the other of European communism. We will attempt to theorise the stripped-back aesthetic of both texts; to that end the critical readings for this week provide political context for the primary texts rather than offering a full analysis of their aesthetics.

**Required:**  David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, section on Mexico  
A O Scott, “New Wave on the Black Sea,” *New York Times*

**Suggested:**  Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*  

**Week 5**  **In the Ruins of the Future**
(8 Feb)  Roberto Bolaño, *2666* (2004), Part V  
*Werckmeister Harmonies* (Béla Tarr, 2000)

This seminar explores two texts that follow an individual on a journey through a strange and malign European landscape. Both texts feature long, episodic scenes and apparently discrete stories, and the reader/viewer is asked to create meaning in an atmosphere of obscurity. In contrast to the previous week, here the critical texts offer decisive readings of the two texts, which we shall debate in class.

**Required:**  Sharae Deckard, “Peripheral Realism, Millennial Capitalism, and 2666,” *MLQ*  

**Suggested:**  András Bálint Kovács, “The World According to Béla Tarr,” *Kinokultura*  
Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” *Under the Sign of Saturn*  
Hannah Arendt, “Total Domination,” from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*  
Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*  
*Pan’s Labyrinth* (Guillermo del Toro, 2006)

**Week 6**  **Reading Week**
Week 7       The World of the Migrant
In This World (Michael Winterbottom, 2003)

Turning from Europe and the Americas to Asia, this seminar considers two texts engaging the figure of the migrant or refugee. We assess the challenges of representing migrant experience, focusing on two genres that have been used to do so: magical realism and the docudrama.

Required:  Thomas Nail, “The Political Centrality of the Migrant,” *Perspectives on Migration*
Pankaj Mishra, “Welcome to the Age of Anger,” *Guardian*
Steve Rose, “The Refugee Crisis on Screen,” *Guardian*

Suggested: Thomas Nail, *Theory of the Border*
*Dheepan* (Jacques Audiard, 2015)

Week 8       The Matter of Black Lives
*Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017)

This seminar considers African American culture in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and the renewed discourses of white supremacy in the America of Donald Trump. We examine two celebrated recent texts, alongside attempts to conceptualise the political temper of black culture in the present moment.

Required:  Childish Gambino, *This Is America* (music video)
Sheri Marie Harrison, “The New Black Gothic,” *LARB*
Jared Sexton, “Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word,” *Rhizomes*

Suggested: Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *Atlantic*
Adolph Reed, “The Case Against Reparations,” *nonsite*
Sebastian Weier, “Consider Afro-Pessimism,” *Ammerikanstudien*
Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture*
Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*
*Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016)
**Week 9**  
**The Culture of Brexit**

(8 Mar)


*I, Daniel Blake* (Ken Loach, 2015)

This seminar assesses the politics of British cultural production against the background of the UK’s vote to leave the EU. Focusing on two widely discussed texts that diagnose the state of Britain under a regime of neoliberal austerity, we will ask what role narrative art can play in creating stories about historical events while they remain in process.

**Required:**

William Davies, “The New Neoliberalism,” *New Left Review*

Kristian Shaw, “Brexlit,” *Brexit and Literature*

**Suggested:**

Tom Hazeldine, “Revolt of the Rustbelt,” *New Left Review*

Robert Eaglestone, ed. *Brexit and Literature*

*The Selfish Giant* (Clio Barnard, 2013)

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**Week 10**  
**The Business of Art**

(15 Mar)


*The Square* (Ruben Ostlund, 2017)

The module ends with an examination of two texts that reflect on the role of art in the wake of the global financial crisis and the Great Recession. Framed by a dual concern with global inequality and the fate of the modernist ideal of the autonomous artwork, these texts and readings will allow us to consider the possible future intersections of aesthetics and politics, in and beyond neoliberal culture.

**Required:**

Mark Banks, “Autonomy Guaranteed?” *Journal for Cultural Research*

Jedediah Purdy, “The Accidental Neoliberal,” *n+1*

Yanis Varoufakis, Introduction to *The Communist Manifesto*

**Suggested:**

Sarah Brouillette, “Academic Labour, the Aesthetics of Management…” *nonsite*

Nicholas Brown, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Real Subsumption,” *nonsite*

Sebastian Budgen, Review of *The New Spirit of Capitalism, New Left Review*

Rachel Greenwald Smith, “Six Propositions on Compromise Aesthetics,” *the Account*


**Required Texts**

Margaret Atwood, *Oryx & Crake* (Virago, 2013)


Ben Lerner, *10:04* (Granta, 2015)


Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (Bloomsbury, 2018)