Module Description

It has become common to refer to the twenty-first century as a time of crisis. The 9/11 attacks in 2001; major ecological disasters such as the Sri Lanka tsunami in 2004, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and Fukushima in 2011; the global financial crisis of 2008; Occupy and the Arab Spring in 2011; the various victories of the populist right over recent years: all of these have become indelible markers of a world in flux. The reigning ideologies of the second half of the twentieth century – liberal democracy and communism – are either in abeyance or under threat, while the risk of further ruptures – financial, political, social, environmental – is seemingly ever-present.

Against the background of these large changes in twenty-first-century life around the globe, this module examines some signal examples of the narrative art of our time, and asks: What makes this art political? What role does it (or should it) play in contemporary life? When we assess 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? What critical methods allow us to persuasively connect aesthetics and politics?

Structured in two parts – the first focused on the period of neoliberal hegemony, the second on the recent rise of populisms of the left and right – the module will approach the questions above 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. We will examine broad issues of gender, subjectivity, climate, economy, and affect, as well as exploring up-to-date political concerns such as far-right extremism, the migrant crisis, Brexit, and Black Lives Matter. Secondary readings will include contemporary academic criticism alongside essays on politics and aesthetics from publications including the Guardian, London Review of Books, New Left Review, New Statesman 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.

Texts to Buy

Margaret Atwood, Oryx & Crake (Virago, 2013).
Roberto Bolano, 2666, trans. Natasha Wimmer (Picador, 2009)
Mohsin Hamid, Exit West (Penguin, 2018)
Jesmyn Ward, Sing, Unburied, Sing (Bloomsbury, 2018)

The module mark is awarded for a 4,500-word essay, submitted in Week 1 of the Spring term.
1. The Neoliberal Order

Week 2  The Climate of Neoliberalism
*Take Shelter* (dir. Jeff Nichols, 2011)

Week 3  The Politics of “World Literature”
Roberto Bolaño, *2666* (2004), Parts I, II, III
*Even the Rain* (dir. Icíar Bollaín, 2010)

Week 4  The Gendering of Violence
Roberto Bolaño, *2666* (2004), Part IV
*4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days* (dir. Cristian Mungiu, 2007)

Week 5  The Ruin of Ideologies
Roberto Bolaño, *2666* (2004), Part V
*Werckmeister Harmonies* (dir. Béla Tarr, 2000)

2. From Neoliberalism to the New Populism

Week 7  The Return of the Far Right
*22 July* (dir. Paul Greengrass, 2018)

Week 8  The Environment of Brexit
*Sorry We Missed You* (dir. Ken Loach, 2019)

Week 9  The World of the Migrant
*Atlantique* (dir. Mati Diop, 2019)

Week 10  The Matter of Black Lives
Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017)