Framing the Contemporary
(Core module for MA in Culture & Thought since 1945)

Module Programme
Autumn 2020

Module & MA Convenor: Dr JT Welsch (English)
Framing the Contemporary
Autumn 2020

AT A GLANCE

Please check your individual timetables for timings of each week’s session.
(N.B. The Week 6 session is an optional exhibition trip, with details to be confirmed shortly.)

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Tutors may email with additional instructions before their class, so look out for them in your inbox.

Required Reading
All required readings are listed below. Articles and book chapters are available digitally via the VLE Resource List for the module. The indication [VLE] means that to view a copy of this text, you need to go to the VLE, select ‘Framing the Contemporary’ and choose ‘Reading Lists’ in the left-hand menu. Additional reading suggestions are provided to help you explore the topics covered by the module and to begin research for assessed essays.

Preparatory Questions
Each tutor has provided a number of preparatory questions which will point you towards the issues, complexities, and problems raised by the class and readings. Please think about these as part of your seminar preparation.

Assessment
One Assessed Essay of 4500 words MAXIMUM (including references and notes, but excluding bibliography). This will be submitted electronically via the VLE by 4pm Monday of Week 2 of the Spring Term. Further details about electronic submission will be provided during term and at the last seminar in week 10 by the module convenor, JT Welsch.
Framing the Contemporary

Week 2
Tutor: Dr JT Welsch
Tutor’s Department: English and Related Literature
Email: jtwelsch@york.ac.uk

Seminar Title: On Culture and the Contemporary

Seminar Blurb:
This first session will introduce the module, its structure, foundational concerns and intellectual trajectory. It will establish a set of key questions that you will be able to refer to and explore as the module proceeds. You are asked to come ready to discuss your views of the contemporary world – its aesthetic, cultural, political and socio-economic dynamics – and how your previous studies/work/ experiences have informed your view/s of contemporary culture. The set readings for this seminar stretch from the postwar period, through cultural materialism and postmodernism into the present, and will lead us to examine different ways of theorizing contemporary culture. You are also encouraged to consult items on the preliminary readings list that appeal to you and your academic interests.

Key Preparatory Questions:
Q. What do we understand culture to be and how do (or can) its key features inform/structure our engagement with the world?
Q. Are categories of high and low culture (or art) static/useful/determining/unavoidable?
Q. What continuities and differences do we see in writings on culture from the postwar period through to the contemporary moment?

Required Reading: (read in this order)
Jameson, Fredric, 'Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', New Left Review I/146, July-August 1984. [VLE]

Instruction for seminar:
Please bring to class one object or photo that is an example of contemporary culture in a way that is important to you. You should select something around which you can craft an anecdote or a story.

Additional Suggested Reading:
Framing the Contemporary
Week 3
Tutor: Dr JT Welsch
Tutor’s Department: English and Related Literature
Email: jt.welsch@york.ac.uk

Seminar Title: The Creative Industries

Seminar Blurb:
This session will consider the twenty-first-century rise of the ‘creative industries’, both as a sector of economic and cultural activity and as a new area of study. The historical and political circumstances of new ‘creativity’ rhetoric – following New Labour’s establishment of the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport in 1997 and various cultural policy advanced since – mean that much of the discourse around the creative industries focuses on national or global economic benefits. In the context of this module, we’ll consider the effect of ‘the creative economy turn’ on actual cultural production (Brouillette, 2014). This includes important questions about the changing nature of creative labour, as well as the appropriation of ‘creative’ employment models for the wider economy. On this larger scale, we’ll consider how neoliberal fetishization of ‘creativity’ has promoted modes of creative entrepreneurialism across a range of freelance artists, small-business owners, and corporate branding. While much of the research in this emerging field has originated in the social sciences, this session will be a chance to discuss and reflect on ways that the tradition of ‘cultural studies’ in the Arts & Humanities – and the theories of Adorno and Bourdieu introduced in the first session – can adapt to these changes in cultural production.

Key Preparatory Questions:
Q. Is artistic autonomy possible (or desirable) in the new ‘creative industries’?
Q. How has recent economic policy rhetoric affected the practice of artists and writers?
Q. How does the rise of creative entrepreneurship affect our understanding of creative work’s purpose – or its status as a set of crafts, trades, or professions?

Required Reading:

Suggested Further Reading: Additional Suggested Reading:


Framing the Contemporary
Week 4
Tutor: Dr Kristyn Gorton
Tutor’s Department: Theatre, Film and Television
Email: kristyn.gorton@york.ac.uk

Seminar Title: Television, Affect & Emotion

Seminar Blurb:
Recent sociological literature on the concept of individualism illustrates the demand on the individual to be self-reflexive and to self-monitor and yet to be aware of the risks posed by modern society. This culture of individualism has given way to what Elliott and Lemert refer to as ‘privatised worlds’. Elliott and Lemert chart a shift from a politicized culture to a privatised culture in order to consider the impact of ‘reflexive individualism’ and the way in which it places emphasis on ‘choosing, changing and transforming’ (2006: 97). The shift that they identify has also been the subject of work by Lauren Berlant, who argues that we increasingly live in ‘an intimate public sphere’ (2000). We can see the influence of the rise of individualisation on television, particularly in the popularity of ‘reality’ and lifestyle television. Rachel Moseley identifies the ‘makeover takeover’ that has affected British television and argues that: ‘British makeover shows exploit television’s potential for intimacy, familiarity, ordinariness and the radical destabilization of the division between public and private’ (2000: 313). Beverley Skeggs (2004), Helen Wood and Beverley Skeggs (2004) and Charlotte Brunsdon (2004) have all discussed the way in which lifestyle and reality television ‘lifestyle Britain’. This session will explore the construction of emotion and affect in contemporary television in order to consider the neoliberal concept of transformation in television drama and reality tv formats (specifically for this seminar, HBO’s Enlightened and Showtime’s Nurse Jackie).

Key Preparatory Questions:
Q. What formal qualities in television (for example, music, camera angle, framing devices) help to construct emotion?
Q. Consider the relationship between self-help, care and neoliberalism in American culture.

Required Reading:

Instruction for seminar:
Please bring to class a clip or youtube link from a television series that you think expresses/captures emotion from a television drama series or a reality television format.

Additional Suggested Reading:
Piper, Helen (2004), ‘Reality TV, Wife Swap and the drama of banality,’ *Screen*, 45(4): 273–86,
Jack Katz’s *How Emotions Work* (1999),
Martha Nussbaum’s *Upheavals of Thought* (2001),
Jenefer Robinson’s *Deeper Than Reason* (2005),
David Eng and David Kazanjian’s *On Loss* (2003),
Brian Massumi’s *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002),
Rei Terada’s *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the “Death of the Subject”* (2001),
Framing the Contemporary
Week 5
Tutor: Emma Bryning
Tutor’s Department: Archeology
Email: evb520@york.ac.uk

Seminar Title: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Modern Graffiti

Seminar Blurb:
Graffiti is often understood as a modern practice and is commonly associated with vandalism, anti-social behaviour and criminality. Although usually perceived as a modern phenomenon, graffiti can also be understood as an act of mark-making and a continuation of practices which can be traced back to pre-history and ancient history, and found across the world. Consequently, graffiti can be understood as both a continuation of historic practices and, also, as a subcultural and countercultural practice rooted in modernity. Our understanding of modern graffiti history is commonly defined by the ‘birth’ of the modern graffiti movement in Philadelphia in the 1960s; the graffitied subway cars in New York City of the 1970s; the hip-hop movement of the 1980s and 1990s, and the burgeoning global artistic movement of street art in the early-2000s. However, its subcultural roots can also be traced back to periods such as the freight monikers of the late-nineteenth century and the soldier graffiti of the First and Second World Wars. As a result of both its complex history and definition, the study of graffiti intersects with a wide variety of disciplines: it can be viewed as a form of visual communication, an expressive art form, an illegal practice, a global artistic movement, an historic record and a tool to understand the distinction between private, public and social spaces. In this seminar, we will examine the different disciplinary approaches through which modern graffiti is understood and examined (including film analysis, archaeology and heritage studies, art history, gender studies and criminology) in order to gain a more interdisciplinary understanding of graffiti as an act of modern mark-making.

Key Preparatory Questions:
Q. Before looking at the required readings: how do you, personally, define graffiti and what do you think when you see graffiti around you? Do the aesthetics and placement of graffiti influence your reactions to such marks?
Q. Based on a film or television show (of your choice) which features graffiti: how is graffiti presented and what is the film-maker trying to show to the viewer through its use?
Q. How do the readings and different disciplinary perspectives of graffiti influence your understanding of the practice and the physical marks themselves, if at all?

Required Reading/Viewing:
One film or television show/episode of your choice which is either about or features graffiti to discuss. Please feel free to choose a a film from the additional suggested viewing list (below) or to choose a different example, whichever you prefer.

**Additional Suggested Viewing:**
Please feel free to choose one of the following documentaries as the required film or television show/episode of your choice to discuss. However, you can also choose your own example if you prefer.

*Bomb It.*, (2007). Directed by Jon Reiss [Film]. USA, Antidote Films.
*This is Berlin Not New York.*, (2008). Directed by Ethan H. Minsker [Film].

**Additional Suggested Reading:**


For our Week 6 (Reading Week) session, we are hoping to offer an optional trip to visit a museum exhibition, which will link with themes from the module.

Given the changing situation due to Covid-19 restrictions, we’ll be confirming details of this trip shortly. The Centre for Modern Studies will cover all travel costs and entrance fees.
Framing the Contemporary
Week 7
Tutor: Dr Ana Bilbao Yarto
Tutors’ Department: History of Art
Email: ana.bilbao@york.ac.uk

Seminar Title: TBC

Details for this session will be confirmed shortly, in relation to the exhibition visit.
Framing the Contemporary

Week 8
Tutor: Dr JT Welsch
Tutor’s Department: English and Related Literature
Email: jt.welsch@york.ac.uk

Seminar Title: Digital Culture

Seminar Blurb:
It goes without saying that cultural production and consumption has been utterly transformed by the spread of the internet. The broad aim of this session is to historicise these developments and the new critical approaches they require. In the 30 years since the invention of the World Wide Web and the past decade’s rise of mobile internet use via smartphones, perceptions of online culture have swung from the utopian rhetoric of 90s Silicon Valley start-ups evoking Marshall McLuhan’s ‘global village’ (1962) to the dystopian realities of social media’s election meddling, privacy and mental health concerns, and the accommodation of abusive, extremist views. For humanities scholars, the encroachment of networked technology into every aspect of life and work – through participatory media, fandoms, meme culture, online political movements, and other overlapping forms – poses practical challenges for studying these dynamic and materially complex phenomena, not least because any academic study of digital culture must contend with the web’s own self-critical discourses. In this seminar, we’ll consider the issues involved in working with ‘texts’ that might change or become inaccessible at any moment, and whose authorship is often communal. To that end, we’ll also consider historical continuities with the community networks and commercial structures that have always supported cultural production.

Key Preparatory Questions

Q. What is the cultural status of the internet as a site for creative work or commentary?
Q. Is the internet primarily a new medium for the transmission of more or less analogous artefacts, or has it engendered a fundamental shift in culture?
Q. What are the practical challenges for critics working with digital artefacts?

Required Reading:

Additional Suggested Reading:
Seminar Title: Stop and Search: Taking the Long View

Seminar Blurb:
The use and abuse of ‘Stop and Search’ powers by police is central to contemporary discussion of the UK criminal justice system as institutionally racist. The Home Office, UK College of Policing and the Association of Chief Police Officers consider it a vital tool in their fight against crime. Their critics believe the discretionary use of this police power at street level has racist effects and stokes tension between black and minority ethnic groups and the police. It reinforces a belief that these groups are over-policed and under-protected. In response, the law-and-order bureaucracy says the powers are vital in the fight against violent crime that afflicts these communities disproportionately. This debate harks back to the mass non-white immigration after 1945. The history of these powers and their use is, however, longer and more complex. This seminar explores this history to illustrate how modern and contemporary history can inform and improve contemporary debate.

Keywords
racial profiling; racism; police discretion; pre-emptive policing; reasonable suspicion; minorities

Key Preparatory Questions
Q. Why is ‘Stop and Search’ central to the contemporary politics of policing? Consider the official publications below.
Q. Is 'pre-emptive' policing an essential tool for law enforcement? Consider the genealogy of Stop and Search.
Q. What makes police officers suspicious of people? Consider the history of the policing of minorities, and look for historical continuities and discontinuities.
Q. Does (and should) taking ‘the long view’ inform the debate around police reform? Consider the effect of placing black Britons' experiences in the longer history of policing minorities.

Required Reading:
Before you start the reading, watch this short film - an exercise in activist history from Nuwave Pictures - Fighting SUS! 2018: https://vimeo.com/299801770 (Duration: 00:44:18). For the project and research underpinning the film, see: https://fightingsus.on-the-record.org.uk/read/. For a satirical take on Sus from 1980, watch the ‘Constable Savage’ sketch from Not the Nine O’Clock News featuring Rowan Atkinson and Griff Rhys Jones: https://youtu.be/y5dy9URkLFI (Duration: 00:03:38). The punchline rests on knowing what the SPG (Metropolitan Police Special Patrol Group) was. It was an elite unit used for public order policing with a reputation for use of excessive force and racism. It played a lead role in the run up to the Brixton Disorders of 1981 and the Miners’ Strike of 1984/5.

Required:


[https://www.gov.uk/police-powers-to-stop-and-search-your-rights](https://www.gov.uk/police-powers-to-stop-and-search-your-rights) [government advice to citizens]

[https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn03878/](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn03878/) [House of Commons Briefing Paper]


Lawrence, Paul. “The Vagrancy Act (1824) and the Persistence of Pre-emptive Policing in England since 1750.” *British Journal of Criminology* 57 no. 3 (2017): 513-531. [VLE]


Additional Suggested Reading:


[https://archives.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/contemporary_history.html](https://archives.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/contemporary_history.html)


[http://www.historyandpolicy.org/opinion-articles/articles/scraping-the-police-stop-form](http://www.historyandpolicy.org/opinion-articles/articles/scraping-the-police-stop-form) and a piece for *BBC History Magazine* here  
Framing the Contemporary
Week 10
Tutor: Dr Catherine Laws
Tutor's Department: Music
Email: catherine.laws@york.ac.uk

Seminar Title: Performance and Subjectivity

Seminar Blurb
The arts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have pushed us relentlessly to interrogate inherited notions of the self, expression and communication: to ask ourselves, again and again, who we think we are and how we can speak meaningfully to one another. Increasing globalisation and the development of recording and photographic technologies, running alongside psychoanalytical understandings of selfhood and the impact of scientific principles of uncertainty, are often theorized as having prompted a crisis of identity, representation and authenticity. At the same time, the throwaway playfulness of pop culture and digital manipulation offer endless possibilities for self-reinvention. It is perhaps harder than ever to know who 'I' am, but 'I' am ever more self-aware. The fluid, dynamic, embodied and contingent qualities of subjectivity are experienced on an everyday basis. Within the performing arts, a 'performance turn' has recently allowed for a stronger focus on the production and experiencing of subjectivity in the context of live events: as ephemeral, dynamic, contingent and embodied, resisting conceptualisation into a stabilised notion of an artwork. Music offers a useful context for this topic, particularly due to its striking ability to carry subjectivity - a sense of what it is to be and feel in the world - without the specifics of character. Musical performers do not explicitly 'play' a role, except in opera and music theatre, and a performer may be concerned with emotional expression but rarely pretends to be experiencing those feelings personally. Moreover, Western classical music offers a model of distributed subjectivity, with composerly and performative agencies entwined. Nevertheless, many performers express musical intentions primarily in terms of individual self-expression and pure presence – the individual performative ‘voice’ expressing an apparently authentic ‘sonic self’, as Naomi Cumming puts it -- and similar ideas are often found in media discourse around performers. Likewise, the broader discipline of Performance Studies often pivots on questions of performance as presence and notions of authenticity. However, music is inherently collaborative, and every musician develops a sound, style or performance persona through a process of identification with and differentiation from the playing of others: peers, teachers, and idolised performers of the past and present. These positions will be explored in the seminar. We will take as a case study a recent composition, Ceci n'est pas un piano, by Annea Lockwood in a realisation by the presenter, Catherine Laws: a piece that is in part 'about' an individual performer-subject and the production of musical identity.

Key Preparatory Questions
Q. How is the production of subjectivity represented, mediated and interrogated in recent arts practices?
Q. How is subjectivity instantiated and embodied in live performance?
Q. What is the relationship between individual felt experience and networks of production in the context of performance? Or, more specifically, in musical performance how do the dynamic relationships between performer, musical materials, and the context of
performance affect the production of subjectivity?

**Required reading:**

**Additional Suggested Reading**
Annahid Kassabian, Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention and Distributed Listening. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). Especially the Introduction
BEFORE FINISHING THE MODULE, DISCUSS YOUR ASSESSED ESSAY IN AN OFFICE HOUR WITH THE TUTOR WHOSE CLASS WAS CLOSEST TO YOUR INTERESTS.

JT WELSCH will brief all students on essay requirements over the term and be on hand to answer any questions about assessment.

GOOD LUCK!