

## Call for Papers

### Touching from a Distance: Close Reading and Looking Now

Centre for Modern Studies Symposium | University of York | Friday 15 May 2026



*Touching from a Distance: Close Reading and Looking Now* asks what it means to pay genuine critical attention to texts, art objects, and media in the twenty-first century. Close reading and close looking, central to English Literature and History of Art and widely practised across the arts and humanities, are increasingly represented and reframed as a range of things: fading skills, teachable methods, resistant gestures, passé ‘formalist’ techniques, or conservative modes of approaching ‘the text’ now eclipsed by more fashionable critical tools.

Close reading is having a moment: witness John Guillory’s *On Close Reading* (2025) and Robert Douglas-Fairhurst’s *Look Closer: How to Get More Out of Reading* (2025). This one-day symposium explores the acts of close reading and close looking, asking what they enable, considering their historical roots, and reflecting on their contemporary ‘reinventions’.

What do we mean by ‘close’ today? What kinds of attention, labour, intimacy, and time does it imply? Is close reading still at the heart of humanistic enquiry, or has it become a nostalgic ideal? What does the act of paying attention do to, or say about, the object of enquiry? And what might close reading and close looking offer to, and demand from, different media?

We aim to bring together colleagues from across the arts and humanities at York and beyond for a day of shared attentional practice, foregrounding the contentious questions of value, difficulty, and scale that close reading and close looking inevitably raise. At once timely and deliberately out of step, this symposium treats close reading and close looking as living practices, ones that reach beyond their supposed confines and touch much of what we do.

We invite proposals for papers that offer close readings of texts and objects (broadly conceived), are about close reading and close looking (however understood), or do both. Possible topics might include:

- The meanings of ‘closeness’: intimacy, tact, care, extraction, possession, knowledge
- Close reading and close looking as method, skill, pedagogy, ethics, and critical habit
- Attention as labour: time, exhaustion, speed, distraction, and institutional pressures
- Taste, value, judgement, and the place of aesthetic criticism now
- Value, difficulty, and critical scale: what close attention is for, and what it costs
- Close reading after, with, without, and against theory
- Art objects and close looking: materiality, technique, scale, surface and depth, display
- Description, paraphrase, evidence, and the boundary between noticing and interpreting
- Close reading as apolitical, political, and/or anti-political
- Close reading in the archives: detail, fragment, metadata, microhistory, restraint
- Close reading across disciplines and media

## **Format**

We welcome individual proposals for 15 to 20 minute papers for this in-person symposium. We especially welcome proposals from Early Career Researchers and postgraduate researchers at York and elsewhere, alongside colleagues at any career stage.

## **Submissions**

Please send a brief abstract (250 words maximum) and short bio to [nicholas.dunn-mcafee@york.ac.uk](mailto:nicholas.dunn-mcafee@york.ac.uk) by Monday 16 March 2026.

## **Key dates**

- Abstract deadline: Monday 16 March 2026
- Notification of decisions: Monday 23 March 2026
- Symposium: Friday 15 May 2026

## Centre for Modern Studies

The Centre for Modern Studies at York (CModS) is a vibrant research centre dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of the period from 1830 to the present. *Touching from a Distance: Close Reading and Looking Now* is a CModS Research Strand for the 2025–26 academic year.

