6AAEC083

Medieval/Modern: Text, culture and the politics of time

This module explores how the Middles Ages has been rejected, reiterated and reimagined in modernity. Beginning with the Gothic literature of the eighteenth century, the course tracks medieval revivals and reworkings across period, nation and medium to explore how the medieval past is refashioned according to contemporary ideologies. What does it mean to describe an element of contemporary culture as ‘medieval’? Why and how have people turned towards the Middle Ages to understand the present and imagine the future? In addition to popular medieval literature and major critical and political movements, medievalisms in art, architecture, film, photography, music and video games are potential subjects of study. Key topics include temporality, authenticity, gender, performance, nationalism, fantasy, racism and cultural memory. Individual final essays will focus on one particular aspect of how the medieval past functions/functioned in the historical present.

Course convenor: Josh Davies (Joshua.davies@kcl.ac.uk), room VWB7.11. Office hours: Tuesday 2-3pm, Thursday 11am-12pm.

Assessment: 1 x 3,500 word essay (90%, end-semester deadline); 1 x 750 word essay (10%, mid-semester deadline)

THE LITERATURE REVIEW SHOULD BE “MEDIEVALISM AND…”

Course outline

All essays will be posted on KEATS. Screenings of A Canterbury Tale, Edward II and Game of Thrones will be arranged in weeks 7, 8 and 9. Please make sure you have access to copies of Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto, Paul Kingsnorth’s The Wake and Caroline Bergvall’s Drift.
Week 1

Introduction: Medievalism, Medieval Studies and Living in the Past

Reading: Umberto Eco, ‘Dreaming of the Middle Ages’ and Sarah A. Chrisman, ‘I love the Victorian era. So I decided to live in it’

Week 2

Gender and time

Reading: Horace Walpole, The Castle of Otranto


Week 3

Language and ethnicity

Reading: Thomas Gray, ‘The Bard’ and Janos Arany, ‘The Bards of Wales’


Week 4

Faith and history

For this and next week’s class please familiarise yourself with some of the Gothic Revival buildings listed here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Gothic_Revival_architecture

Come to class prepared to talk about at least one Gothic revival building in the UK.

Week 5

Colonial and post-colonial

Please complete some preliminary research on the following buildings and come to class prepared to talk about their design, location and historical and cultural contexts: Central Railway Station, Antwerp; St Pancras Railway Station, London; Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, Mumbai; Union Station, St Louis; Cathedral of St John the Divine, New York.


Week 6

Vision and desire

Texts: Julia Margaret Cameron’s illustrations to Tennyson’s Idylls of the King. Available online: http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/tennysons-idylls-of-the-king-photographically-illustrated-by-julia-margaret-cameron

Ford Madox Brown, ‘The Manchester Murals,’ available online: http://www.manchester.gov.uk/townhall/info/8/about_the_town_hall/19/the_town_hall_murals_by_ford_madox_brown/2

Further reading:


Week 7, 10 November

Remembering and forgetting

Text: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, A Canterbury Tale (124 mins, 1944)

Week 8

Bodies and environments

Text: *Game of Thrones*, seasons 1-4


Week 9

Nation and nationalism


Week 10, 1 December

Nation and migration


Preliminary bibliography


