



Maastricht University

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[Contemporary Literature and Arts: Cultural Interventions and Social Justice](#)

Courses & curriculum 2021 - 2022

The specialisation Contemporary Literature and Arts: Cultural Interventions and Social Justice offers you the opportunity to study 21st century literature and arts from an interdisciplinary perspective. You will examine how contemporary literature and arts intervene in issues of social justice, such as racial injustice, class and gender inequalities, climate justice, the rights of migrants and refugees, the discrimination of LGBTQ people, ageism and ableism.

Course summaries

SEMESTER 1

Period 1 (8 weeks):

Entering the field: Social Justice in Contemporary Literature and Arts (12 ECTS)

In this course, we study works of contemporary literature and art through the topical lens of social justice and through the critical lens of key theoretical texts from relevant fields, such as postcolonial studies, gender and sexuality studies, environmental and health humanities, and critical age and disability studies. We establish how and to what effect contemporary literature and arts are intimately connected with issues of social justice. These include racial injustice, class and gender inequalities, climate justice, the rights of migrants and refugees, the discrimination of LGBTQ+ people, ageism and ableism. We explore the relationship between 21st-century literature and arts on the one hand and contemporary issues of social justice on the other by studying influential works from literature, the visual arts, performing arts, and film. We then study key texts from critical and cultural theory that help us develop a deeper understanding of these works in the context of social justice. We also explore how contemporary literature and arts not only reflect on and/or represent issues of social justice, but also how they can actively intervene in the spheres of politics and society at large.

Period 2 (8 weeks):

Researching the field: Positioning in Relation to Cultural Objects, Theories and Methods (12 ECTS)

This course builds on Period 1 by going deeper into the theoretical debates that have arisen in relation to social justice issues and by introducing students to the relevant methodologies that will allow them to critically analyse works of contemporary art and literature. Students will also learn to reflect on their own positionality vis-à-vis the works they encounter. Following on from Period 1, we will work with key theoretical debates that have developed robust concepts and critiques for the analysis of contemporary literature and arts that seek to highlight and intervene in social injustices and inequalities. These include (post)humanism, (post)coloniality, the concepts of slow death and normative health, counter-publics, and queer disidentification. Relevant methods include narrative and visual analysis, critical discourse analysis, intermedial approaches, comparative analysis, and archival research. Equipped with these theoretical and methodological tools, students then collaboratively develop an analysis in which the cultural object becomes a dialogue partner that can illuminate their own position of knowing. In this way, students learn to reflect on intersectional ways of being, on situated knowledge, and on becoming agents of change.

Period 3 (4 weeks):

Course summaries

Elective: “What If...?” Speculative fiction in search of more just futures (5 ECTS)

To a certain extent, all literature and art is speculative in that they imagine possible worlds separate from the reality we live in. Speculative fiction, however – including fantasy, science fiction, magic realism, horror, utopia and dystopia – is the genre that does so by definition. In this course, we study the ability of speculative fiction to critically reflect on the past and the present in order to imagine futures that are more socially just. We focus mainly – albeit not exclusively – on literary and cinematic works that engage with “what if...?” questions about pressing societal transformations relating to climate change, decolonisation, sustainable care, and queer families. The tutorials and lectures introduce students to the history of the genre of speculative fiction and the ways in which its artistic forms can be studied in connection to its ideological signification. Theoretical insights are paired with critical readings of primary works that result in two writing exercises: a creative one (non-graded) in which students are invited to use their imagination to rewrite an episode of one of the primary texts on the syllabus; and a review (graded) of a film or literary work in which students assess the alternative social and political aspirations articulated in it.

Research and Writing (1 ECTS)

SEMESTER 2

Period 4 (8 weeks):

Elective: Time to Act: Cultural interventions and activism (12 ECTS)

This course provides students with the skills to put their critical understanding of art and literary interventions into practice. To that end, the course is focused on a group project. In collaboration with societal partners, students will design their own cultural intervention – an intervention that mobilises art and/or literature to deal with a predefined issue. To prepare for this project, students will explore concepts and case studies that address how literary and artistic works activate new socio-political imaginaries, and how they transform contemporary modes of struggle for social justice. Students will elaborate on concepts such as activism (art activism), the politics of aesthetics, counterpublics, post-critique, cultural politics, prefiguration, and aesthetic revisioning. Case studies change from year to year, depending on topical issues. Examples range from anti-racist street art in the context of Black Lives Matter to participatory arts in residential dementia care, from environmental activism to anti-colonial poetry, from interspecies performance to transgender portraiture. Drawing on these studies and on their liaison with societal partners, students will – in the second half of this course – design their group projects, and critically reflect on this process via an individually written commentary.

OR Internship (12 ECTS)

Period 5-6 (12 weeks):

Thesis (18 ECTS)

Disclaimer: The specialisation Contemporary Literature and Arts: Cultural Interventions and Social Justice starts in September 2022. The course titles and descriptions given here are indicative and have yet to be approved by the Faculty.