



BRITISH LITERATURE

Master in English and American Language, Literature and History

Faculty of Liberal Arts

Course information

Master year 1 24 HOURS

Spring Semester 5 ECTS

Seminars (S)

Professor: Estelle Murail (PhD. King's College London and Paris Diderot University, France)

Course description

Traditional definitions of humanism emphasize the value and agency of human beings in relation to the world. Posthuman thinkers, however, think that “the human” as traditionally understood is a closed notion which does not reflect who we are anymore, and that “the human” is an open category in constant evolution. This posthumanist vision has gathered pace over the last forty years, and is now reflected in our cultural productions.

This course will begin by examining the different strands of posthumanism that exist today, and take the year 1818 as its starting point. It was the year Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus*, the story of a living being created by scientific endeavour. Shelley's novel was published at the very moment in Western history when the industrial and scientific revolutions were gaining momentum. Since then, the number of literary works representing the fears and hopes engendered by humanity's harnessing of technological power has soared.

The reference to Prometheus point to the concern that humans are taking powers reserved for the Gods or sacrificing their 'humanness' for extraordinary powers; subsequent literary works explore many dystopian possibilities, asking for instance whether humans will we make monsters of themselves, or create different categories of humans, some being worth more than others (think of Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, or Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*).

Others imagine the post-human condition as radically different: anthrocentric works of fiction advocate the removal of the category of man from its central place in the universe, and imagine the future as a community of things, animals, machines and humans living together.

Take for instance Richard Powers' 2018 novel *The Overstory*, whose central characters are not humans, but trees.

The material for this course will include a variety of academic articles, novels, short stories, paintings, photographs, films, and series which will explore the notion of the human, presenting it not as a static category, but as a process which is constantly evolving. A bibliography will be handed out at the beginning of term.

Course validation: in-class oral presentation or 12-page term paper with full bibliography.