

PROGRAMME SPECIFICATION

Name, title and level of final qualification(s)	MA Critical Theory (Level 7)
Name and title of any exit qualification(s)	PG Dip Critical Theory (120 credits) PG Cert Critical Theory (60 credits)
Awarding Body	University of London
Teaching Institution(s)	Birkbeck, University of London
Home school/other teaching departments	Creative Arts, Culture and Communication
Location of delivery	Central London
Language of delivery and assessment	English
Mode of study, length of study and normal start month	Full-time (1 year) Part-time (2 years) September
Professional, statutory or regulatory body	N/A
QAA subject benchmark group(s) Higher Education Credit Framework for England	N/A
Birkbeck Course Code	TMACRTHY_C
HECoS Code	100320 (English Studies) 101233 (Cultural Studies)
Start date of programme	Prior 2008/9
Date of programme approval	Prior 2008/9
Date of last programme amendment approval	November 2022
Valid for academic entry year	2024-25
Date of last revision to document	31/10/2022

Admissions requirements

Our standard postgraduate entry requirement is a second-class honours degree (2:2 or above) from [a UK university](#), or an [equivalent international qualification](#). Your first degree does not have to be in Arts and or Humanities.

We will review every postgraduate application to Birkbeck on its individual merits and your professional qualifications and/or relevant work experience will be taken into consideration positively. We actively support and encourage applications from mature learners.

On your application form, please list all your relevant qualifications and experience, including those you expect to achieve.

We welcome applicants without traditional entry qualifications as we base decisions on our own assessment of qualifications, knowledge and previous work experience. We may waive formal entry requirements based on judgement of academic potential.

Course aims

The MA Critical Theory explores the provocations of various waves of critical theory in relation to culture. It focuses on a multitude of critical theoretical approaches – with an emphasis on the contributions of the German critical tradition from Kant, through Marx to the Frankfurt School and all those thinkers and thoughts following in its wake. It takes account of the crossings of politics and aesthetics and theory's acknowledgement of and resistance to social injustice. Culture is understood here in its broadest sense, and it is explored in relation to contestations around topics such as:

- Subjecthood
- science and technology
- materialism
- ecological crisis
- the everyday
- migrancy
- global and planetary forms
- sexuality
- gender.

The insights and analyses of twentieth and twenty-first century forms of critique – with references to Idealist aesthetics, Marxism, critical theory, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, speculative realism, techno-cultural theories, ideological and political critique and more - are considered in relation to numerous forms, including literature, print culture, painting, film, photography, music, digital formats such as touchscreens, gaming or virtual environments. In short, the course engages with new technologies, disparate cultural forms and the modes of enquiry that have recently transformed the traditional disciplines.

- A flexible modular scheme of option courses and independent research allows students to work on themes and problems in past and present media and cultural and critical thought. To complete the course, students do one compulsory course, three options and a dissertation.

All students begin with our compulsory course, Theorising the Contemporary, Contemporary Theorising, which explores flashpoint questions in Critical Theory and Literary and Cultural analysis. It is based around lecture content, weekly readings, guided interpretation and shared

cultural experiences. It includes a research skills component to aid in the transition from BA to MA level work.

Key topics on our compulsory module include topics such as:

- migrants' narratives and refugee film-making,
- precarity and emergent pandemic storytelling
- ecological crisis and world unmaking
- low-fi and glitch aesthetics of resistance
- nonhuman forms of agency
- post-gender and xeno-feminism
- contemporary manifestos
- hope and futurity in the 21st century.

Through small seminar group discussion with leading practitioners in the field, you will help determine the direction of critical theory – at our campus in the heart of historic Bloomsbury, home to radical literary, artistic, and political ideas since the Bloomsbury Group.

The second compulsory module is titled 'Origins and Futures in Critical Theory' and it surveys various of the wellsprings and directions of critical theory from the contributions of Adorno and Benjamin through to second and third wave Frankfurt School, the continental philosophy tradition and planetary critical theory in the age of decolonisation and eco-crisis. Part of the work in this module explores cultures of theory and their histories and contexts, as various studies have now exerted in intriguing ways critical theoretical methods on the production of critical theory.

In the spring term, we offer a range of options, which allow greater focus on questions raised more broadly within the compulsory modules. The options associated with the course allow students to move across a wide range of cognate subjects, building up areas of expertise that are developed in self-chosen essay topics. Finally, the course provides one-to-one supervision for a dissertation, framed by a dedicated dissertation skills course that runs in the summer term.

Students have access to some of the best library resources in the world, including the University of London Library and the British Library, just a few minutes away from the College buildings in Bloomsbury. Cultural research is enhanced by access to galleries, museums, the National Theatre, the Camden People's Theatre, the British Film Institute, Tate Modern and Britain, the Wellcome Galleries, the Institute of Contemporary Arts and a host of other cultural institutions. Our inhouse cinema schedules regular screenings, often with filmmaker input – and each March hosts the world-renowned Essay Festival. Birkbeck has very active research centres and institutes – including the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities - that add further ways of deepening knowledge of critical theory and modern and contemporary culture.

Course structure

Level	Module Code	Module Title	Credit	Comp Core/ Option	Likely teaching term(s)
Full-time – 1 year					
7	AREN095S7	Theorising the Contemporary, Contemporary Theorising	30	Compulsory	1
7	AREN296S7	Origins and Futures in Critical Theory	30	Compulsory	1
7		Option 1	30	Option	2
7		Option 2	30	Option	2
7	AREN295Z7	Dissertation Skills	0	Compulsory	3
7	AREN145D7	Dissertation (Literature and Culture 1800-Present)	60	Core	3
Part-time – 2 years					
Year 1					
7	AREN095S7	Theorising the Contemporary, Contemporary Theorising	30	Compulsory	1
7	AREN296S7	Origins and Future Critical Theory	30	Compulsory	2 (tbc)
7	AREN295Z7	Dissertation skills	0	Compulsory	3
Year 2					
7		Option 1	30	Option	1
7		Option 2	30	Option	2
7	AREN145D7	Dissertation (Literature and Culture 1800-Present)	60	Core	3

Core: Module must be taken and passed by student

Compulsory: Module must be taken but can be considered for compensated credit (see CAS regulations paragraph 24)

Option: Student can choose to take this module

Indicative Option choices include:

AREN231S7 Being Human

ENHU053S7 Contemporary U.S. Fiction

ENHU050S7 Post-War to Contemporary

AREN197S7 Freud in the World: psychoanalysis, literary writing and the legacies of history

SC04023S7 Critical and Creative AI

Other options will vary annually, to maximize student choice. You may also choose one option outside the course from across the college, depending on compatibility and availability. Options outside the course may have prerequisites or limit numbers, but there are many cognate courses on our other MAs in literature, cultural studies, and, for instance, in film, history of art, and psychoanalysis.

How you will learn

Your learning and teaching are organised to help you meet the aims of the course. As a student, we expect you to be an active learner and to take responsibility for your learning, engaging with all of the material and sessions arranged for you.

Each course is divided into modules. Each module has a dedicated online virtual learning site (called a Moodle page) which will have a weekly breakdown of the course, including reading, video guides, pre-recorded lectures, and often reading resources. Each page will tell you what to expect, the work you need to prepare each week, links to reading lists, and all the information about how and when you will be assessed. The Moodle page is also where you submit your written work.

Teaching on this course is a combination of lectures (some pre-recorded and available on Moodle) and in-person seminars. Some courses may offer the chance of online seminars, meaning that you do not have to attend in person.

Lectures are designed to provide you with an outline or overview of the topic, to engage you with the material and direct you to other resources. They are a springboard for your own learning.

Seminars are group sessions where you will be asked to contribute to discussion or group work around the topic, with material set in advance for which you need to prepare.

We have designed the programme so full-time students are in classes twice a week in Autumn and Spring terms, and part-term students only once a week. There are a small number of Summer and intensive options available instead of Spring options. Participation in these can be discussed once on the course.

How we will assess you

The course is assessed through four essays of c.5000 words, two for the compulsory modules and two for your options. These summative essays are handed in after the completion of the teaching of the module (usually in 3 windows: January, April and September).

The dissertation is of c.15000 words and completed in the summer term and over your final summer on the course, being handed in usually in mid-September.

Essay and dissertation preparation and supervision is programmed into the MA.

Assessment is designed to enhance your learning rather than simply to test it. We often allow students to develop their own critical questions, usually in consultation with teachers, which allows for individually tailored research work to be produced.

Learning outcomes (what you can expect to achieve)

'Learning outcomes' indicate what you should be able to know or do at the end of your course. Providing them helps you to understand what your teachers will expect and also the learning requirements upon which you will be assessed.

At the end of this course, you should be able to:

Knowledge

- evidence master's level knowledge and critical understanding various directions in Critical Theory as historical and contemporary phenomena.
- discuss, analyse and appraise the value of critical theory and its contribution to understanding contemporary life and culture.

- Read closely and analyse critically texts and discourses, with attention to specific cultural and critical forms, using concepts and terminology appropriate to the study of critical theory.
- develop a conceptual understanding that allows you to evaluate some of the key waves and motivations of critical theory and be able to apply its methods and insights to cultural or other phenomena of your choice.
- Show an understanding of the historical context in which ideas develop and become challenged.

Skills

- Demonstrate skills as a reflective, independent, lifelong learner that can be carried into professional contexts and personal development.
- Conduct detailed critical analysis of a research question, undertake independent research and come to critically informed and evidence-based conclusions in both written and verbal form.
- use critical and research resources to master's level competency, able to deal with complex cultural issues critically and creatively.

Values

- Understand how study of critical theory can enhance nuanced reflection on complex issues in a diverse, global context.
- Appreciate the diversity of debates touched by Critical Theory as an unfurling tradition and respond empathetically to difference.
- Develop the importance of research and evidence for working in an area of study where synthesis of research, opinion and argument are central to reaching sound conclusions.

Careers and further study

Humanities graduates are trained to be effective researchers with good communication skills and an ability to sift and critically assess a wide range of textual and other cultural materials. Graduates emerge from the degree with an enhanced range of subject-specific skills and wider transferable and employability skills.

You will find graduates of this MA in the following kinds of roles:

- Journalism
- Professional Writing (including creative writing careers)
- Artists and filmmakers
- Arts administration or research
- Digital technologists
- Human rights work and the advocacy sector
- Law and business professions
- Publishing roles
- Teaching in schools or as lecturers in further and higher education
- Museum and Cultural Heritage work
- Curation
- Cultural education or information officers

A number of our Masters students go on to study at PhD level following the course. We provide structured support and guidance to MA students interested in continuing their studies to the next post-graduate level.

We also have many MA students already in professional work who are taking the degree to enhance their skills at work, or even just to follow a passion for reading and study in a structured way.

Birkbeck's MA Critical Theory graduates will complete the degree with a set of valuable attributes, for example:

- High-level oral and written communication skills in English
- Postgraduate-level research skills, including the ability to properly source their information and the ability to use online and library resources with efficiency and skill
- Skills in evaluating and assessing different types of information
- The ability to present an argument, informed by analytic frameworks and evidence
- Confidence gained in seminar interaction with other students and in the use of constructive, explorative dialogue and debate to seek answers to complex questions.

Birkbeck offers a range of careers support to its students. You can find out more on [the careers pages of our website](#).

Academic regulations and course management

Birkbeck's academic regulations are contained in its [Common Award Scheme Regulations](#) and Policies published by year of application on the Birkbeck website.

You will have access to a course handbook on Moodle and this will outline how your course is managed, including who to contact if you have any questions about your module or course.

Support for your study

Your learning at Birkbeck is supported by your teaching team and other resources and people in the College there to help you with your study. Birkbeck uses a virtual learning environment called Moodle and each course has a dedicated Moodle page and there are further Moodle sites for each of your modules. This will include your course handbook.

Birkbeck will introduce you to the Library and IT support, how to access materials online, including using Moodle, and provide you with an orientation which includes an online Moodle module to guide you through all of the support available. You will also be allocated a personal tutor and provided with information about learning support offered within your School and by the College.

[Please check our website for more information about student support services](#). This covers the whole of your time as a student with us including learning support and support for your wellbeing.

Quality and standards at Birkbeck

Birkbeck's courses are subject to our quality assurance procedures. This means that new courses must follow our design principles and meet the requirements of our academic regulations. Each new course or module is subject to a course approval process where the proposal is scrutinised by subject specialists, quality professionals and external representatives to ensure that it will offer an excellent student experience and meet the expectation of regulatory and other professional bodies.

You will be invited to participate in an online survey for each module you take. We take these surveys seriously and they are considered by the course team to develop both modules and the overall courses. Please take the time to complete any surveys you are sent as a student.

We conduct an annual process of reviewing our portfolio of courses which analyses student achievement, equality data and includes an action plan for each department to identify ongoing enhancements to our education, including changes made as a result of student feedback.

Our periodic review process is a regular check (usually every four years) on the courses by department with a specialist team including students.

Each course will have an external examiner associated with it who produces an annual report and any recommendations. Students can read the most recent external examiner reports on the course Moodle pages. Our courses are all subject to Birkbeck Baseline Standards for our Moodle module information. This supports the accessibility of our education including expectations of what information is provided online for students.

The information in this programme specification has been approved by the College's Academic Board and every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information it contains.

Programme specifications are reviewed periodically. If any changes are made to courses, including core and/or compulsory modules, the relevant department is required to provide a revised programme specification. Students will be notified of any changes via Moodle.

Further information about specifications and an archive of programme specifications for the College's courses is [available online](#).

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