

# HPSC0013 Science and Popular Culture

## Course Syllabus

2024-2025 session | Prof Emily Dawson | [sts-dor@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:sts-dor@ucl.ac.uk)

### Course Information

Science and technology permeate popular culture. From films like Dune to the BBC television series Spring Watch, science and popular culture are deeply intertwined. In this module we explore science in popular culture using theories from social sciences including science & technology studies, cultural studies and media studies. Science and popular culture are related in ways that you might not think! In this module we will examine how they are co-constructed, mutually intertwined and deeply involved in shaping one another. As with any module, your active participation in the group and taking responsibility for your own learning are crucial. Together, we will develop our skills as researchers, as well as critical consumers, producers & regulators of science in popular culture across different media. We'll think too, about how cultural production and scientific/technological production influence one another; shaping the future before it exists.

**Key themes** of this module are 1) thinking about how science and culture shape one another, 2) the relationships between producers and publics, 2) thinking about how science is represented (both in terms of *who* is represented when knowledge is produced and why this matters) and 4) thinking about science and popular culture in terms of dominant cultural practices. **Key theories** in this module are about publics/audiences/users, patterns of cultural consumption (and how this is affected by class, 'race'/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability/disability and their intersections), communication theory, representation and social justice, as well as feminist and post-colonial approaches to understanding culture.

### Basic course information

Course website:	See moodle
Moodle Web site:	<a href="https://moodle.ucl.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=7422">https://moodle.ucl.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=7422</a>
Assessment:	45% media analysis assignment, 50% exam, 5% participation.
Timetable:	Tuesdays 11 – 1pm.
Prerequisites:	None
Required texts:	See moodle
Course tutor(s):	Prof. Emily Dawson
Contact:	<a href="mailto:sts-dor@ucl.ac.uk">sts-dor@ucl.ac.uk</a>
Office Hours:	Tuesdays 2-4, in the office or on teams: TERM TIME ONLY

## Schedule

UCL Week	Topic	Date	Preparation Activity
6	Introduction: Outline of the course, methods, theories & popular culture as a “system”		Essential readings Practical activity
7	Media: TV & Communication Theories		Essential readings Practical activity
8	Media: Museums & “The Public”		Essential readings Practical activity
9	Media: Films & Representation		Essential readings Practical activity
10	Media: Social Media & Structural Inequalities		Essential readings Practical activity
11	READING WEEK		
12	Genre: News production & News Values		Essential readings Practical activity
13	Genre: Science Fiction & the collective imagination		Essential readings Practical activity
14	Genre: Fan-Fiction, Activism & Messing Up the Circuit of Culture?		Essential readings Practical activity
15	Genre: Advertising & Regulation		Essential readings Practical activity
16	Conclusions: Exploring ‘Value’ in Popular Culture & Structural Inequalities		Essential readings Practical activity

## Course Design: Aims & objectives

### Aims:

This module revolves around two strands of thought. First, that science, society, politics and culture are mutually co-constructed. Second, that science in popular culture can be studied and understood. *And that this study is important because culture is the space where our selves are known and lived, in relation with others.* In other words, cultural practices help us learn who we are, who others are, how to be and what do to.

Despite evidence to suggest that most people in the UK continue to get most of their

information about science and technology via their TV and, increasingly, online, we know remarkably little about how the landscape of science in popular culture operates. Most studies are piecemeal, concentrating on one medium or even only one media artifact (as you will in your coursework!). Drawing on theories from cultural studies, media studies, sociology and, of course, science and technology studies, we will look at science in popular culture as a *system*, we will look at specific *media*, and we will look at *genre* to try to understand what work is being done through these practices. Importantly, to bring us back to that first strand of thought, throughout the module, we will work with ideas from a range of disciplines, such as post-colonial studies, critical race theory and intersectional feminism to learn about how structural inequalities are enmeshed within science in popular culture. Who gets to be represented in science related popular culture and how are they represented? Who are the producers, consumers and regulators of science in popular culture? What does this matter for our identities and our societies?

*Your participation matters!* This is a participatory class where students help to design the curriculum and lead their own discussions and activities. On a weekly basis you will have readings and practical activities to do, including group work and active note-taking (individually and in groups). Each week you will need to read the essential readings (& any of the additional readings that you find interesting) and carry out any of the more practical tasks outlined in this syllabus & on moodle. These will be things like asking your friends what forms of popular science they consume, watching a particular film or TV show, listening to a podcast, looking at something on social media, visiting museums, science centres, science festivals, science comedy events, a café scientifique, hackerspace and other ‘spaces’ of popular science as well as reading newspapers or parts of a novel.

### Objectives:

By the end of this module students should be able to:

- critically engage with a range of forms of science-related popular culture;
- convey how science, technology and society are related;
- demonstrate knowledge of the relevant literature for the module;
- demonstrate skills in qualitative data analysis;
- reflect on the role of popular culture in the evolution of scientific debate;

### Assessments

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#### Summary

	Description	Deadline	Word limit	Deadline for Tutors to provide Feedback
Coursework	Media analysis assignment (45%)	05/03/2025	1500 (2,000 for Level 6/iBSc students)	TBC

<b>Essay</b>	Exam (50%)	TBC	3 essays in 3 hours	TBC
<b>Participation</b>	Reading groups & discussion (5%)	Ongoing	n/a	

**Specific Criteria for Assessment for this Module:**

**1) Media Analysis Project, 45%**

Word limit: **1500 (2000 words for Level 6/iBSc students).**

For this assignment, you will have to select **ONE** piece of science in popular culture and you will need to critically analyze it and reflect on its STS credentials. Connect it to or critique it using a particular theory or readings, through argument based writing (i.e. not just a description). The piece can be based on the following:

- ☛ A feature published in a newspaper
- ☛ A popular science book
- ☛ A Novel
- ☛ A Museum or Science Centre Display
- ☛ An image (photograph, painting, portrait)
- ☛ A film (fiction or documentary)
- ☛ A TV programme
- ☛ A website (including blogs)
- ☛ A theater play
- ☛ An advertisement
- ☛ A podcast
- ☛ A radio show
- ☛ A children’s book
- ☛ A You Tube vlog (or channel—but we would need to discuss this)
- ☛ Micro blogging (but we would need to discuss exactly what!)

Your analysis should try and answer the following questions and you must use some of the theoretical tools from the module and your knowledge of STS:

- What is the piece under scrutiny about?
- How does it relate to the topic of the course (science in popular culture)? And what makes it interesting in relation to that topic?
- What does analyzing this piece of science in the media enable you to claim about science in popular culture?

Media Analysis Assignments must be structured, written documents. They **must** include the title, sub-titles and a reference list alongside your own research and analysis. The references must be correct in the main text and in the reference list. Ideally you will use APA 6<sup>th</sup> but other recognized referencing systems will be accepted. Your assignment **must** have an argument and that argument **must** be apparent to readers.

If you need clarification come and talk to me during my office hours. This is a creative

assessment, it allows you to share your (supported) opinions and some people have a lot of fun with it, but it is really useful to have support figure out what 'thing' to analyse.

## 2) Exam Term 3, 50%

In term 3 you will sit a three hour exam where you will write three short essays based on the exam questions. We will prepare for this throughout the term. Main points:

- The key thing to remember is that all essential readings are **ASSESSABLE** readings! As with any exam essay (& the media analysis assignment above) it is crucial to make use of module reading material, the concepts taught in the module and to go beyond these with **your own** research and reading.
- Exam essays **must** be structured, that is, they **must** include the title, sub-titles and a reference list. Your essay **must** have an argument and that argument **must** be apparent to readers.
- You must use references and they **must** be correct. Avoid any interpretation of your work as exhibiting plagiarism at all costs.

**Assessment criteria for all coursework are those found in the STS students' handbook.** You should make sure you have a really good look at them & come and talk with me if you want to figure out what they mean for these assessments in more detail.

## 3) Participation, 5%

In class you will work in reading groups weekly to discuss that week's themes, essential readings and any additional readings you found interesting. Each week one group will be in charge of making notes about the discussion, meeting up and creating an overview using the template at the end of this syllabus, to share with the whole class.

### AI statement

Students are permitted to use AI tools for specific defined processes within the assessment. AI tools can be used for:

- Creating summaries of readings (especially if you need translations), though please do read the 'real' papers afterwards, once you've got some understanding of it, as the 'real' readings have different information and you might miss the point of an argument by only looking at an AI summary.
- Researching and finding references, though again, please do use your own energies to read references and look yourself through bibliographies and the library.
- Students **must** note their use of AI at the start of every submitted assignment.

The use of AI is not in itself a learning outcome, and it should not be used to generate your analysis or write your assignments.

<b>Topic:</b>	<b>Name:</b> _____ <b>Date:</b> _____ <b>Class: HPSC0013</b>
<b>CUES (Reduce)</b>	<b>NOTES (Record)</b>

**SUMMARY (Reflect & Review)**