

CFP Imagining a Future (inside/outside) Britain

How has the future of the United Kingdom and its various components been imagined, conceived and projected at all periods, including the present day? Drawing on the interdisciplinary field of futures studies, and more specifically critical futures studies “involving the exploration and interrogation of ways in which society thinks, imagines and talks about the future – not the future singular, but possible futures” (Godhe & Goode 2018), this conference, supported by two scientific societies, the SFEE and the CRECIB, and by the Centre for Anglophone Studies (CAS) of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès University, proposes to study the ways in which the future of the United Kingdom and its constituent nations has been imagined over time, in fictional and non-fictional modes. We will be looking at both representations of the future of the United Kingdom as a whole (the future of the British State, society and Union), and representations of the future of the various constituent territories of the United Kingdom, either within the Union and the Empire or outside of it.

Specialists of British studies, history, political science and sociology are invited to examine the actors, discourses, agendas and representations of centrifugal and centripetal forces within the United Kingdom, a multinational state that is the result of a long process of unification, and which is increasingly described as being progressively disunited, particularly since the 2010s which saw the organisation of a first referendum on Scottish independence followed by the referendum on the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union, the latter showing very contrasting results from one territory to another. From a historical perspective, for the various nations of the British Isles, projecting a future within or outside the United Kingdom has also been intimately linked to their role in the constitution of the British Empire. How has the representation of the future of the British Union been linked to that of the future of the British Empire – or of a future outside the British Empire – in the context of resistance from colonised societies and imperial rivalries with other powers, particularly European ones? Proposed papers are encouraged to study the various constitutional, political, economic, social and cultural projects that have been devised to ensure the future of the Union and the Empire – or their demise. From a political standpoint, this conference proposes to analyse the visions of the future promoted in Scotland, Wales and Ireland/Northern Ireland by nationalists and independence supporters or by unionists. Brexit, meanwhile, calls for new models of foreign and defence policy: how is the UK’s future place in Europe and the world now envisaged? Papers can also look at alternative futures for British democracy, whether through participatory democracy, the feminisation of politics, or the abolition of the monarchy or the House of Lords. Alternative models of society (both past and present), in relation to multiculturalism, the welfare state, energy, education and housing policies, or more generally the neoliberal economic model, are all areas to be investigated in conjunction with different types of collective mobilisation to bring about the desired future.

These issues (political, economic and social) have often been addressed in fiction. Papers exploring the role and place of the arts – literature, film, photography, the visual arts – in shaping the future of the UK are welcome. However realistic it may claim to be, literary fiction always proceeds from a “what if” that allows, through referential disconnection, a construction of the world situated between the possible and the probable. Of course, the genre of utopia, as an optimistic projection of a perfect society (*Utopia*, Thomas More, 1516) is

situated in a nowhere detached from historical time. However, in Great Britain, utopia always involves a critique of the institutions and mores of the time, a trait which may grow and turn into satire, as in the works of Jonathan Swift (*Gulliver's Travels*, 1726) and Samuel Butler (*Erewhon*, 1872).

Science fiction and speculative works depicting the uncertain future of the United Kingdom could also be studied. In the field of film studies, more specifically, papers could study films such as *Things to Come* (1936), directed by William Cameron Menzies based on the novel by H.G. Wells, which imagines the future of the country in the midst of a thirty-year war and the reconstruction that followed, between 1940 and 2036. From the 1960s onwards, a number of works reflecting the growing fear of the British people in relation to the atomic threat were produced, such as Peter Watkins's docudrama *The War Game* (1966), or the films *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (Val Guest, 1961), *The Damned* (Joseph Losey, 1963), *1984* (Michael Anderson, 1956) and *Threads* (Mick Jackson, 1984). More recently, speculative films and series, whether British or foreign productions, have depicted the UK's dystopian future, linked to the advent of new technologies, epidemics, the consumer society and the rise of nationalism and populist ideologies. Recent productions include *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002), *V for Vendetta* (James McTeigue, 2005), *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006), *Never Let Me Go* (Mark Romanek, 2010), *Black Mirror* (Charlie Brooker, 2011-), *Years and Years* (2019-) and *Little Joe* (Jessica Hausner, 2019). The speculative genre is most often accompanied by social criticism – towards the failings of consumer society or the excesses of artificial intelligence – and/or political criticism – towards totalitarian and populist regimes, control of thought and the press, and so on. However, doubts about the future of the United Kingdom and British society in the context of austerity policies, cuts in public services and the rise of populism are also expressed in works in the vein of social realism, with directors questioning the possibility of a bright future for the most disadvantaged Britons or the future of the British welfare state.

Anticipation literature opens up a space for experimentation and the testing of new societal projects, while being more or less explicitly a critique of society as already exists. The concerns raised by technical modernity in the 19th century have given rise to “the fiction of catastrophe” that H. G. Wells adopted in his social novel projecting the disastrous consequences of progress (*The Time Machine*, 1895). If modernity imposes the reign of prediction and the regulation of life by technical reason, then the ambition to grasp the future is first and foremost a historical fact, long before it becomes the programme of science fiction. Among these genres, dystopia, which many British novelists have tried their hand at, has prevailed. From E.M. Forster (“The Machine Stops”, 1909), Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*, 1932) and George Orwell (*1984*, 1949) to Anthony Burgess (*A Clockwork Orange*, 1962), Doris Lessing (*Memoirs of a Survivor*, 1974 as well as the five novels in the *Canopus in Argos* series, 1974-1983) and J. G. Ballard (*The Drowned World*, 1962, *The Burning World*, 1964, *Millenium People*, 2003), prediction has always been associated with forewarning.

Papers may address – but are not limited to – the following topics:

- the future of the four nations within or outside the United Kingdom

- the future of the UK outside the European Union
- the links between the future of the British Union and the future of the British Empire
- the conception of alternative models for British society (through social, environmental, energy, education and health policies)
- the role and place of the arts in imagining the future of the United Kingdom.

Proposals for papers (in English or French), 500 words in length, should be accompanied by a short biographical note and sent by Monday 17 November 2025 to the following addresses:

- philippe.birgy@univ-tlse2.fr
- nathalie.duclos@univ-tlse2.fr
- anita.jorge@univ-tlse2.fr
- myriam.yakoubi@univ-tlse2.fr

Scientific Committee:

- Philippe Birgy (CAS, UT2J)
- Nathalie Duclos (CAS, UT2J and SFEE)
- Anita Jorge (CAS, UT2J and CRECIB)
- Myriam Yakoubi (CAS, UT2J)

Organising Committee:

- Nathalie Duclos (CAS, UT2J and SFEE)
- Anita Jorge (CAS, UT2J and CRECIB)
- Myriam Yakoubi (CAS, UT2J)

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