Late Modernism

Reports of modernism's death by 1939, writers, critics and theorists have argued, were greatly exaggerated. This course will consider the trajectories of literary modernism from the 1930s through World War II into the post-1945 era. Reading in a transatlantic frame, we will explore how modernist, avant garde and realist aesthetics mutated in the face of imperialism, war culture, mass media, and decolonization, as well as the institutionalization and commodification of modernism. The course will extend students' knowledge of high modernism, and explore works by both canonical and lesser known late modernists from the 1930s and 1940s. How did modernists respond to the dominance of advertising, radio, avant garde film and photography, sound cinema, the dominance of Hollywood, or the documentary film movement, all of which lay claim to artistic experimentation? How did late or belated modernisms lay the ground for the literary, artistic or political responses of neo-realist, anti-modernist, or “postmodern” writers, intellectuals, and critical theorists after 1945? We will also ask to what degree the afterlives of literary modernism continued to shape the era of postmodernism and Cold War.

Literary texts will be read in an expanded cultural field including film, popular music, art, visual and material culture. Readings may be drawn from the work of: Eliot, Woolf, Joyce, Lewis, Orwell, Djuna Barnes, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Nathaniel West, W.H. Auden, Mass Observation, Jean Rhys, Greene, Green, H.D., Desani, Pound, Beckett, and Selvon. Films may include the work of Humphrey Jennings, the British Documentary Movement, Hitchcock, and Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. Critical and theoretical readings may include the work of: Adorno, Benjamin, Brecht, Lukacs, Foucault, Derrida, Jameson, Fanon, Williams, Said, Nancy Fraser, Tyrus Miller, and Jed Esty.