

Course Rationale

From the eccentric Baroness Elsa Hildegard von Freytag-Loringhoven to Jean-Michel Basquiat, poet William Carlos Williams to Jay-Z, New York City may have been represented in modern literary, musical and art history more than any other. But what makes New York tick, and why has it been such an inspiration to writers, artists and musicians? How do native and recently-arrived New Yorkers express their identities? How has the city itself become part of artworks, such as the explosion of graffiti and site-specific experiments in the 1980s, and how might the loneliness of sharing space with 8 million people allow us to better understand intimate relationships and city life, wherever that might be?

'A New York State of Mind' Imagining Manhattan is an interdisciplinary course and will consider how twentieth-century writers and artists have represented New York City, allowing students to think about how urban space is understood, felt and imagined by various figures from different backgrounds and varied methodological approaches. We will explore poetry (read, spoken, listened to), visual arts (seen, perhaps touched) and a little music, and our focus will be to discuss and debate how those studied figures have responded to New York through their emotions and experience.

After examining a range of case studies – on the 'lonely' city, the Harlem Renaissance, abstract cityscapes, and art in/of/on the street – which will allow the class to gain confidence in negotiating disciplinary, interpretative and expressive challenges, students will be asked to complete an essay-based assignment on two or more works of their choice. Using the formal analysis and writing skills established in the sessions, students will develop critical thinking and gain an interpretative tool-kit that will introduce them to the kinds of exploratory and independent ways of discussing culture expected at university level.

