



CITY COLLEGE of NEW YORK
City University of New York

Semester: Fall 2014

Course: Honors College Seminar 1 The Arts In New York City

Room and time: Monday 9:30 am-12:15 pm in NAC 6/304

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Office hours: Thursday 11:30 am – 4:30 pm

Seminar description and general policy:

It is quite clear to most of us that we need good architects and engineers to live in habitable cities. Well-trained and responsible educators to teach our young and doctors and nurses to care for our old and sick. We'd probably agree on aspirations, duties and rewards of scientists and policemen, plumbers, bankers, airspace engineers, restaurant managers and merchants. But what about artists? What is their role and place in our society? What do they offer us and what are our expectations, if any, regarding their work? What is your own understanding of the arts?

What do musicians really do? What are actors good for, except as overpaid entertainers and distracting "celebrities"? Why are public funds used to support museums, these boring depositories of old relics? If I pay \$100 for a night at the theatre, what am I paying for, and is it worth so much money? In any case, how am I supposed to know what to see, when there is an endless jumble of confusing offers? How to evaluate what is really good and what is not so good? In fact, is there such a thing as "good" vs. "bad" art?

Seminar 1 has several objectives, including providing at least partial answers to such questions. We'll be covering a lot of ground exploring the diverse arts in New York City and talking about what we read, see, and think. Our discussion will address some basics: different genres; their specific qualities and histories; their special appeal and limitations; standards by which different artworks and forms of artistic activities are judged. We will also aim to address some broader issues and points of controversy in on-going debates about the arts and their role in society.

A few words about this particular section of Seminar 1:

1) The content of the course is partially shaped by the intense rhythm of cultural life in New York: the exuberant opening of the opera and concert season at the end of September; the celebration of classical and modern dance in October; the explosion of theatrical premiers in mid-fall; tectonic changes in the museums and galleries when major spring/summer shows are supplanted in October/November by the opening of new fall/winter exhibitions.

2) You should treat each session as a building bloc in a larger puzzle-picture. There is no overriding order in the sequence of our class activities, but there is a general progression in our work: from impressions and free explorations in the first part of the course (September), through a more focused and rigorous analysis during the second part (October-November), towards a better informed encounter with the practice of the arts – as shown by your response to the work of the artists, by your questions and interpretation (December). This progression is paralleled by the shift from artworks determined by the instructor to performances/ exhibits chosen by the students.

3) Each unit of the seminar: on opera, dance, music, theatre, literature and visual arts, is based on a specific literary work, live performance, film screening or art exhibit. The essential rule is that you talk and write about what you see/ hear/ experience, and that you use our discussion – in class and on our blog – to help you situate yourself vis-à-vis the artworks and articulate your own responses. This is not a lecture course. There is no big textbook to be purchased, no final exam nor one all-deciding term paper. But there is a new task to be completed before each class session and an evening outing almost every week throughout the term. How you'll do in the course – and how well you'll use the opportunities this course presents – depends on your active and continuous engagement throughout the semester.

4) We use poems as a "kick-off" to each class session. Poems require close reading, and often repeated re-reading. They are a bit like mental "pull-ups," exercises in focused attention, imagination, and risk-taking. When you begin to understand how poetry works, you begin to understand better other art and, perhaps, also the world and yourself.

I hope you'll enjoy this invitation to explore the cultural riches of the amazing, complex city which is NYC, and your relationship to it.

Learning Goals:

In this seminar, students will:

1. Discuss the role of artists and cultural institutions in the lives of New York's diverse citizens and the city itself.
2. Identify the key features and formal qualities of the different artistic genres studied in class.
3. Construct clearly written and well-reasoned analyses of various art forms.
4. Prepare well-organized oral reports on various cultural events.
5. Articulate questions about social responsibility and different visions of public space.
6. Formulate their own individual aesthetic values after having studied a wide range of artistic expressions.
7. Demonstrate that they got to know better New York and its various cultural institutions.

Requirements:

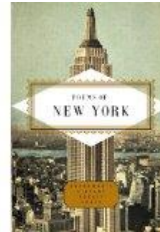
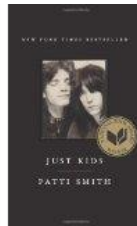
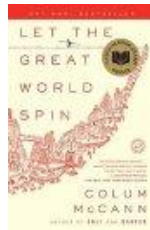
Note: The pace of the course is intense: a new book/ performance/ screening/ exhibit every week. Organize yourself well. Plan wisely. Come to class with an open mind and many questions.

- Regular attendance. Since this course combines experiential learning and discussion, attendance is a critical factor. Any absence from class or any event scheduled outside class has to be explained in writing and made-up on your own.
- Film screenings & field trips – scheduled as a class and in small groups.
- Participation in class activities: discussions about the readings, artworks and events; regular blog postings; oral and written reports; work on the class website; contribution to a student curated photo exhibit.
- The class blog is your forum – an extension of our class sessions and a chance to communicate with each other. If used well, it should help you transform your fleeting impressions into more informed opinions.
- Three written assignments – one completed on your own and two as small group projects, together with your colleagues. Preparing these projects, aim to combine analytical, critical and creative work. Any home assignment should be typed and presented on time. No late work will be accepted.
- Grading policy: the final grade is cumulative, weighted as follows: attendance & discussions (in class and on blog) 40%; first written project 10%; second written project 10%, third written project 30%; work on website 10%.

- Required readings:

Elizabeth Schmidt, ed. *Poems of New York* (Everyman's Pocket Classics).
Colum McCann, *Let the Great World Spin* (Random House).
Patti Smith, *Just Kids* (Ecco Press).

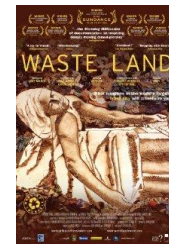
Recommended: John Berger, *The Ways of Seeing*.



- Required films:

Man on the Wire (2008), doc. dir. by James Marsh
Dancemaker (1998), doc. dir. by Matthew Diamond
American Journey: In Robert Frank's Footsteps (2008), doc. by Philippe Séclier
The Waste Land (2010), doc. by Lucy Walker with Vik Muniz and catadores

Recommended films: *Imagine* (2012), dir. by Andrzej Jakimowski &
Searching for Sugar Man (2012), doc.dir. by Malik Bendjelloul



Academic honesty:

It's hard to imagine anyone wanting to use someone else's words to describe one's own response to a film, a performance, or a poem. I trust you'll search honestly to express how you see, hear, feel, i.e. how you experience a work of art; how you are getting to know New York better and your place in it. Nevertheless, let it be stated explicitly: rely on your own judgment and use your own words in preparing writing assignments. Any research sources and quotes must be acknowledged and properly documented. Plagiarism is a serious offense; it is a form of theft. It is prohibited and will result in an "F".

For full description of CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity (definitions and examples of cheating and plagiarism as well as presentation of procedures for imposition of academic

and disciplinary sanctions see <http://web.cuny.edu/academics/info-central/policies/academic-integrity.pdf>