HC 421H:
The Emergence and Disappearance of the Modern City

From the middle of the 19th century forward, the modern metropolis assumes the role of a symbol, and an effective motor, of social transformation. Along the way it also becomes a new standard for perception and aesthetic evaluation. We will trace these developments as we explore the figuration of the city in modernity in a number of canonical works of literary and theoretical prose, as well as in cinema and photography. In the second half of the term, we will then go on to consider the impact of late 20th-century dynamics that promise—or threaten—a radical shift as the city ceases to function as a necessary point of social convergence and a physical basis for community. To what extent does the notion of the city become increasingly untethered from physical constraints as phenomena of virtuality abound, and how is literary expression affected by this? Among the foci of discussion will be European metropolitan cities such as London, Paris, and Berlin, as well as Los Angeles and Asian metropolitan regions such as the Pearl River Delta where some of precapts of European modernism are called into question. Authors to be read may include Poe, Baudelaire, Benjamin, Simmel, Weber, Aragon, Dublin, Steve Erickson, Virilio, Rem Koolhaas, or Calvino. Visual material to be discussed may include photographs by Atget and Weegee, as well as films by Fritz Lang and Walther Ruttmann. All course materials and class discussion will be in English. This class is open to all students!