The course will introduce students to some of the major experimental works and movements that defined the historical avant-garde in the 20th century: from the modernist poetry of Guillaume Apollinaire and Gertrude Stein, to Marinetti’s Futurist manifesto, the Soviet Constructivists, Dada, André Breton’s Surrealism, and end with the contestatory pronouncements and practices of the Situationists. The great historical upheavals of the 20th century—the Great War, the Soviet Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, World War II—were powerful forces that had a profound impact on these avant-garde figures and movements. Our major aim is to analyze the poetics and politics of these different movements or anti-movements from a comparative and transnational perspective. We will also examine the relation of cinema to other arts, and in particular, architecture, music, painting, photography, and poetry. We will also pay particular attention to the historiographic, stylistic, aesthetic and political dimension of cinema in order to explore the potential of cinema as a radical agent of defamiliarization that relies on non-narrative, non-psychological strategies of representation. Throughout the semester, we will see how these radical experimentations with different media and techniques, sound recording, assemblage, verbal montage, etc., reveal the way these artists, writers, and filmmakers imagined the place and role of the modern subject in the world.

Readings will include poetry, essays, manifestos and declarations, as well as theoretical texts on art, cinema, literature, photography and mass media by critics such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Clement Greenberg, Robert Motherwell, and many others. Short films by Man Ray, Hans Richter, Marcel Duchamp, Fernand Léger, Dudley Murphy, Paul Strand, Joris Ivens, Jean Epstein, Sergei Eisenstein, Dimitri Kirsanoff, and many others, will be screened in class.

Gustav Klucis, Maquette for Radio-Announcer (1922).