Cultures and Contexts: Italy

Professor Scott Palmer
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Spring 2012 Tu 4:30-7:15
Office Hours by Appointment

Course Description & Objectives

Although the Italian peninsula has been the site of some of the oldest and most significant civilizations in Western history, the modern Italian state is relatively young, having been established only in 1861. Italy’s geographical and cultural complexities have ensured that regional identities throughout the country remain strong, to the extent that many Italians still identify closely with their more immediate social, cultural, and political traditions. Furthermore, Italy is positioned as a gateway of the Mediterranean world, making it both the center (if one views it from the shores of North Africa) and the periphery (if one views it from the countries bordering the North Sea) of Europe. This course will focus on the tensions and ambiguities present in post-unification Italian society, using the rich cultural and social heritage of Florence as a starting point for the study of the delicate mixture of regional and national elements that make up contemporary Italy.

The influence of foreign visitors to a country that welcomes nearly as many tourists each year (over 43 million in 2010) as its entire population (roughly 60 million) and which regularly ranks as a top destination for immigrants coming to Europe also exerts a significant influence on Italian society. In the tradition of the Grand Tour, this course will reference the region’s rich Classical, Renaissance, and Baroque histories, using the rise of modern tourism to frame the shaping of the economics, politics, culture, and social mores of Italy. Through the study of primary texts, we will examine how Italians registered their own similarities and differences within a national context, and how they regarded the tourists, students, soldiers, and immigrants who came in increasing numbers to Italy. At the same time, we will also consider the accounts of foreign visitors to Italy from the eighteenth-century until today, both from the perspective of western tourists seeking “culture” and through the eyes of immigrants from Eastern Europe, North Africa, and beyond.

The Italian city, and in particular Florence, will serve as our primary unit of measurement for investigating Italy during the semester. By treating the city as the most immediate conceptual and physical context for the study of Italian culture, we will be able to link the textual and visual material studied in the classroom with the world beyond the boundaries of the La Pietra campus. To this end, we will visit a number of sites in Florence and in Tuscany in order to conduct fieldwork that will structure and inform our scholarly conversations and written work throughout the semester.
Course Materials

Primary Texts
Lucy Riall  *Risorgimento: The History of Italy from Napoleon to Nation State*
Italo Calvino  *Invisible Cities*
Amara Lakhous  *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*
Online Course Packet

*The texts for this class can be bought at the Paperback Exchange, an independent bookstore just a few steps from the Duomo on Via delle Oche 4R.*

Suggested readings and films are available in the Villa Ulivi library.

Academic Policies

All work submitted in this course must be original and written exclusively for this course. The use of sources (ideas, quotations, etc.) in coursework must be properly documented. Please see me for any questions about the use of sources, or refer to NYU’s official policy on academic integrity for more information. Students with disabilities (physical or learning) should visit the office of academic support and then see me early in the semester so that we can discuss whatever accommodations may be available.

Attendance and participation are crucial to the successful completion of this course. Because of the concentrated format, missing more than one class during the semester will lower this grade. *Active engagement in class discussions is mandatory.* Reading assignments should be completed for the day indicated for that particular class session (i.e. if a reading assignment is scheduled for 5/10, read it before 5/10). Assigned readings form the basis for class discussion, so it is essential that you have read each week’s assigned texts and come to class prepared to discuss them. Likewise, films listed in the course schedule should be viewed before class. *Participation and Attendance are worth 20% of the final course grade.*

Written Requirements

I will assign a series of fieldwork assignments over the course of the semester. Each student is responsible for completing four of these. Each submission will consist of no less than three typewritten pages (750 words) and will be posted online no later than 9PM the evening before the class session on which the assignment appears. *These written pieces should engage directly with course readings, bringing the texts we read for in class into direct contact with the Italian context within which we are living and studying.* All assignments will be posted to the appropriate assignment discussion thread. See course schedule for further information. Students are encouraged to write creatively and to use other forms of media (images, video, music) in their analyses. *The fieldwork assignments are worth 20% of the final course grade.*
There will be one exam for this course due on March 27. This exam will cover material from roughly the first half of the semester. The exam is worth 25% of the final course grade.

Semester Project

Students will design an extended fieldwork project that engages with the texts, concepts, and, conversations studied over the course of semester and apply them to a particular social or cultural structure, event, tradition, etc. in Tuscany. This project will take the form of a written portfolio consisting of a project findings report of no less than five pages and a full set of fieldwork notes taken over the course of the project. The results of this report will be discussed orally at the end of the semester in a presentation of roughly 15-20 minutes. Students are encouraged to use various forms of media, including video and audio footage of sites, activities, and contexts specific to the project theme. The final project is worth 35% of the final course grade.

Grading Summary

Final Project 35%, Field Work 20%, Midterm Exam 25%, Participation and Attendance 20%

Respect and Diversity

This course will engage with a wide range of social and cultural issues. Please be aware and respectful of differences in age, class, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and gender as we work together. If we are lucky, we’ll have many animated discussions this semester and keeping these perspectives in mind will ensure an environment where all of us can feel free to contribute.
Tentative Course Schedule

Week 1 (January 31): Defining Italy
An introduction to a number of key concepts and terms that we’ll use over the course of the semester.
Required Reading: Dickie “Imagined Italies,” “The Notion of Italy” (distributed in class)
Mumford “What is a City?”
Draw a map of your own route to La Pietra (local and/or global) and write a short explanation.

Week 2 (February 7): Conducting Fieldwork in the Bel Paese
What is ethnographic fieldwork? Viewing Italy through the lens of ethnography.
Fieldwork: Market Day

Week 3 (February 14): Invisible Cities I
Using Calvino’s novel as a starting point, we will discuss how movement in the city can be represented in language and in images.
Required Reading: Invisible Cities 1-84, Pratt “Introduction to Imperial Eyes, “Travels of Marco Polo,” Coleridge “Kubla Khan”

Week 4 (February 21): Invisible Cities II
Using Calvino’s novel as a starting point, we will discuss how movement in the city can be represented in language and in images.
Required Reading: Finish Invisible Cities, Sassen “A New Geography”
Website: Global Cities: Tate Modern
http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/globalcities/
Website: Invincible Cities: Camilo Jose Vergara
http://invinciblcities.camden.rutgers.edu/intro.html
Fieldwork: Florentine urban geography: the Italian piazza

Week 5 (February 28): Grand Tours
A short history of tourism in Italy
Required Reading: Black “Italy and the Grand Tour,” Chaney “Quo Vadis?: Travel as Education and the Impact of Italy in the Sixteenth Century,” Sweet “Cities of the Grand Tour: Changing Perceptions of Italian Cities in the long Eighteenth Century”
Goethe “Naples” 179-216, Selection of Letters
Fieldwork: Tracking Tourism in Florence

Week 6 (March 6): Risorgimento-Italy as Nation-State
A look at the political and social origins of the modern Italian state.
**Required Reading:** Riall pp. 1-52, 117-145 Anderson 5-7, 37-46  
**Viewing:** *Noi Credevamo* (2010)

Spring Break (March 12-18)

**Week 7 (March 20):** Fascist Italy: Aesthetics and Empire  
Fascism as an aesthetic reconstruction of Roman and Italian history  
**Required Reading:** Lasansky “Love Affair with Tuscany” pp. 19-55, Ginsbourg 8-38  
**Viewing:** *Lion of the Desert* (1979)

**Week 8 (March 27):** **Midterm exam**

**Week 9 (April 3):** The Stendhal Syndrome  
Looking more closely at art museums as cultural arguments  
**Required Reading:** Stendhal “Florence”, Berger “Ways of Seeing”  
Fyfe “Decoding the Visitor’s Gaze”  
Fieldwork: Museum Studies – Visit to a Florentine State Museum

**Week 10 (April 10):** Site Visit to Orsigna  
**Required Reading:** Terzani “A Death that Failed,” “The Body Snatchers of Bangkok”  
Zampini “L’Orsigna ultimo amore” 1-15  
**Semester Project Proposals Due**

**Week 11 (April 17):** Immigrant Italy: Realities  
**Required Reading:** Gatti “I, Illegal Immigrant” Nathan “Mimic-Nation, Mimic-Men: Contextualizing Italy’s Migration Culture through Bhabha,” Maher “Immigration and Social Identities”  
Fieldwork: Immigrant Tuscany

**Week 12 (April 24):** Immigrant Italy: Narratives  
**Required Reading:** Lakhous *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*

**Week 13 (May 4):** Semester Project Presentations

**Week 14 (May 8):** Semester Project Presentations