



Study abroad.

SYLLABUS

ITALIAN CINEMA AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Instructor: Professor Randall C. Jimerson

Contact Hrs: 45

Language of Instruction: English

SIENA, ITALY

Course Description

One of the quickest ways to glimpse the culture of a country is through its films. This course focuses on Italian films depicting the critical era of Mussolini and the Second World War, using films as lenses through which we can understand Italian culture, art, and history. The context for understanding these films comes from writings about Italian cinema, essays about Italian history, and memoirs of personal experience from those who experienced fascism, war, and the Holocaust.

Italian cinema came of age in the years following the Second World War, as directors addressed the human toll of Mussolini's fascism and the impact of invasion and defeat. From *Paisà* ("Paisan", 1946) to *La Vita è Bella* ("Life is Beautiful", 1997), motion pictures depict varied aspects of Italian experience in the war era. Memoirs of civilians caught up in war (Iris Origo) and of concentration camp survivors (Piera Sonnino) add non-fictional perspectives. Class sessions will include lectures, film viewings, discussion of films and readings, student-led panel group presentations, and student reports. Through these methods, we will examine the "truth" of historical events, the nature of personal experience, and the process of understanding the past.

Course Objectives

- To learn about Italian culture, artistic expression, and modern (20th century) history;
- To gain an understanding of major issues and events in the era of Italian fascism under Mussolini, the Second World War, and the Holocaust;
- To learn about the ways in which films convey meaning, and how they are structured and presented;
- To understand how memoirs and fiction contribute to our understanding of political and social issues, as well as of personal experience; and
- To gain an appreciation for Italian life through the experiences and artistic expressions of Italy's people.

Method of Evaluation (Grading)

Attendance and discussion: Don't miss class unless absolutely necessary. Active participation in class discussions is expected for all students. This is an essential part of the learning experience. Class attendance is mandatory, except for illness or pre-approved absences. Notify the instructor as soon as possible if you will miss class, or if you have missed class due to illness. Class attendance and participation will count for part of your final grade, so contributing to class discussions is in your own best interest. Note: **assigned readings** must be completed prior to class meetings.

Mid-term exam: The mid-term exam will be held during week 6. Exam questions will include short-answer and essay questions, focusing on

- 1) **Student journal:** Each student will keep a weekly journal, including comments, questions, and opinions regarding films, readings, class discussions, and excursions. You should write at least a full, substantial paragraph each week. Journal comments on possible class excursions to Rome, Florence, and/or other nearby sites (to be arranged as circumstances permit) should focus on how visiting these sites adds to understanding the films, literature, and history of Italy, particularly during the Mussolini era. Journals must be submitted for review at the end of weeks 3, 7, and 10.
- 2) **Film analysis paper:** Each student will complete a detailed analysis of a feature film, evaluating it in terms of its interpretation of Italy during the Second World War era, its relation to another related book or film, and its usefulness as an historical source. The paper should be 4-5 pages (800-1000 words, typed or handwritten). Due at first class meeting of week 9. See Film Analysis assignment sheet for a detailed explanation of this assignment.
- 3) **Final exam:** The final exam will be given on the last day of class.

Grading: Your grade for this course will be calculated as follows:

- Class attendance, 10 %;
- Discussion participation, 10 %;
- Mid-term exam, 20 %;
- Student journal, 10 %;
- Film analysis paper, 25 %;
- Final exam, 25 %.

Film Analysis Paper - Guidelines

1. **Plot summary** (approx. 150- 200 words)
 - ◆ Major characters
 - ◆ Summary of action, major events
2. **Director's point of view/interpretation** (100-150 words)
 - ◆ The film's explanation of the Italian experience during this era
 - ◆ What issues does the film discuss?

3. Scene analysis (approx. 150- 200 words)

Analyze one pivotal scene that presents the director's interpretation. Consider the following elements for this one scene:

- ◆ Dialogue: What do the characters (or narrator) actually say?
- ◆ Music and sound effects: How do they influence the mood or ambience?
- ◆ Camera angles and movement: Does film use high, low or tilted angles? Does the camera pan, track, dolly, crane, tilt, or vary in movement?
- ◆ Field size: Distance of action from the camera: long shot, medium shot, close up.
- ◆ Editing: Use of fade, dissolve, wipe, and cut between camera shots and scenes.
- ◆ Props and costumes: Are they authentic? How do they suggest realism, abstraction, or point of view?
- ◆ Symbolism: Use of visual symbols, imagery, and metaphors.

4. Contemporary reviews (approx. 100-150 words)

- ◆ Summarize 2-3 critical or historical reviews of the film

5. Comparative critique (approx. 100-150 words)

- ◆ Compare this to a related book, essay, or another film.
- ◆ If comparing a film to a book on which it was based, how do the two differ?
- ◆ If comparing a film to another film, how do they approach a similar aspect of the war?

6. This film as an historical source (approx. 100-150 words)

- ◆ How accurately does it depict its subject matter?
- ◆ Are the characters and their actions believable?
- ◆ What are the director's biases and perspective?
- ◆ What does it tell us about Italy and the Italian experience during this era?

Course Readings

- Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*, 3rd edition
- Iris Origo, *War in Val D'Orcia*
- Piera Sonnino, *This Has Happened: An Italian Family in Auschwitz*

Course Schedule

Week 1 Welcome and course introduction
 Italian history from unification to Mussolini
 Read: Italo Calvino, "A Cinema-Goer's Autobiography," in *The Road to San Giovanni* (1993), chapter 2
 Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, chapter 1

- Week 2 Italian cinema and neorealism
Film screening: *Paisà* (“Paisan”, dir. Rossellini, 1946)
Read: Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, chapter 2-3
- Week 3 Mussolini and Italian fascism
Film screening: *Il conformista* (“The Conformist”; dir. Bertolucci, 1970)
Read: Jonathan Dunnage, “The Experience of Fascism, 1925-39,” in *Twentieth Century Italy: A Social History* (2002), chapter 3
Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, chapter 4-5
- Week 4 Totalitarianism and the rise of Hitler
Film screening: *Amarcord* (dir. Fellini, 1974)
Read: Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, chapter 6
- Week 5 Film and politics
Film screening: *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (“Christ Stopped at Eboli”; dir. Rosi, 1979)
Read: Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, chapter 8-9
Spencer M. Di Scala, “Mussolini’s Italy,” in *Italy: From Revolution to Republic, 1700 to the Present* (1995), chapter 16.
- Week 6 Mid-term exam
Excursion to Val D’Orcia and San Martino
Read: Origo, *War in Val D’Orcia*, to p. 125
- Week 7 Italy in the Second World War
Film screening: *La notte di San Lorenzo* (“The Night of the Shooting Stars”; dir. Taviani & Taviani, 1982)
Read: Origo, *War in Val D’Orcia* (finish)
- Week 8 Anti-Semitism in European life
Film screening: *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (“The Garden of the Finzi-Continis”; dir. De Sica, 1970)
Read: Sonnino, *This Has Happened*, to p. 91
- Week 9 The holocaust
Film screening: *La vita è bella* (“Life is Beautiful”, dir. Benigni, 1997)
Read: Sonnino, *This Has Happened* (finish)
John Alcorn, ed., “Symposium on Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 7:2 (Summer 2002), 215-268.
- Week 10 The impact of the war on the Italian people
Film screening: “Tea with Mussolini”; dir. Zeffirelli, 1999
Read: Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, chapter 11

Week 11

Cinema: history or myth?, art or emotion?

Read: Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, chapter 12

Martin Clark, "The Great Cultural Revolution: Italy in the 1970s"
in *Modern Italy 1871-1995* 2nd ed. (1996), chapter 18.