

Syllabus of Record

Program: CET Florence

Course Code /Title: FL/CLTR 355 Narrating the Italian Mafia: Beyond the Godfather

Contact Hours: 45

Recommended Credits: 3

Primary Discipline / Suggested Cross Listings: Cultural Studies / History, Italian Studies, Literature

Language of Instruction: English

Prerequisites / Requirements: None

Description

This course offers an interdisciplinary examination of the literary, historical, and cultural narratives surrounding the Italian mafia. It examines how Italian and international authors, journalists, and filmmakers have represented mafia organizations and how these representations have shaped public perceptions over time. The course combines literary analysis with historical and sociological perspectives, placing particular emphasis on works that have contributed to raising cultural awareness in the anti-mafia struggle. Students will engage critically with novels, essays, films, and photography, developing a deeper understanding of how literature and cultural narratives interpret and reframe organized crime in Italy.

Content warning:

At times, this course intentionally invites students to engage with readings and content that are controversial. Students might find this disturbing. The intention is not to endorse perspectives but rigorously engage with them. If certain material is emotionally challenging, students can discuss it with the faculty before or after class. Students may also leave the classroom without academic penalty, if the discussion becomes too emotionally challenging. Students are, however, responsible for all missed material, and so should arrange to get notes from another student or see the faculty member individually.

Objectives

Through their participation in this course, students will:

- Analyze and compare literary and cultural representations of the mafia.
- Identify rhetorical and narrative strategies used by authors to portray organized crime.
- Recognize the historical and social contexts in which the mafia and its narratives developed
- Evaluate the relationship between mafia fictional narratives and other types of representations of the anti-mafia struggle.
- Develop critical thinking and writing skills in relation to cultural texts and social issues.

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Requirements

Active participation is essential in this course. Students are expected to attend each class and field study course component as outlined in the CET Attendance Policy. Students are expected to read all assigned materials before the relevant class session and come prepared to participate thoughtfully in class discussions. Reading assignments are generally 20–30 pages per class session. All assignments must be submitted via Canvas unless otherwise noted.

Films are an integral part of the course, as they provide a cultural lens to understanding how mafia organizations are represented and perceived. Screenings such as *The Godfather*, *One Hundred Steps*, and *The Mafia Kills Only in Summer* are used to illustrate different narrative strategies, stereotypes, and cultural responses to organized crime. Students are expected to engage critically with these films, connecting them to assigned readings and class discussions, and to reflect on how cinematic narratives influence public imagination and social attitudes toward mafias.

Assigned narrative texts are equally central to the course. Works by authors such as Giovanni Verga, Leonardo Sciascia, and Roberto Saviano serve as the foundation for understanding literary portrayals of the mafia across time. Students are expected not only to complete the assigned readings but also to come prepared to analyze them in depth and to contribute actively to classroom discussions. Critical engagement with the narratives—through interpretation, comparison, and debates - is a key component of the learning process.

Graded assignments include:

- **Participation:** Students are expected to contribute actively to class discussions, linking the concepts and terms from the readings, lectures, and presentations with their own comments and observations.
- **Quizzes:** 3 short quizzes (multiple-choice and open questions) to test students' comprehension of readings and movies assigned.
- **Presentation:** 10-minute presentation, with 5 minutes for questions, using an element of the local context to illustrate concepts discussed in an assigned reading.
- **Mid-term Exam:** Short answer questions covering key concepts, readings and discussions.
- **Final Essay and Presentation:** Short essay on a topic agreed with the professor, presented and discussed in class.

Grading

The final grade is determined as follows:

Participation (<i>see rubric below</i>)	10%
Quizzes (3 at 10%)	30%
Presentation	15%

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Midterm Exam	20%
Final Essay and presentation	25%
○ Essay: 15%	
○ Presentation: 10%	

Class Participation Grading Rubric

	A – 90-100% Exemplary	B – 80-89% Proficient	C – 70-79% Developing	D – 60-69% Unacceptable	F – 0-59% Missing
Frequency of class participation	Actively contributes 2+ times per meeting	Actively contributes at least 1 time per meeting	Actively contributes at least half of the time during term	Actively contributes less than half of the time during term	Does not contribute
Quality of class participation*	Contribution is always thoughtful, accurate, and constructive, frequently interacting with peers	Contribution is mostly thoughtful, accurate, and constructive, usually interacting with peers	Contribution is somewhat thoughtful, accurate, and constructive, sometimes interacting with peers	Contribution is rarely thoughtful, accurate, and constructive, rarely interacting with peers	Does not contribute or interact with peers
Level of class preparation	Always fully prepared and on task	Mostly prepared and on task	Somewhat prepared and on task	Rarely prepared and on task	Consistently unprepared and not on task

Readings / Resources

Bestler, Anita. *The Sicilian Mafia: The Armed Wind of Politics*. Heidelberg: Springer, 2023.

Dalla Chiesa, Nando, and Christina Jerne (eds.). *Against The Mafia: The Classic Italian Writings*. Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2024.

Dickie, John. *Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian Mafia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Musotto, Roberto. *Understanding Mafia Networks*. London: Routledge, 2022.

Paoli, Letizia. *Mafia Brotherhoods: Organized Crime, Italian Style*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Pickering-Iazzi, Robin (ed.). *Mafia and Outlaw Stories from Italian Life and Literature*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007.

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Pickering-lazzi, Robin (ed.). *The Italian Antimafia, New Media, and the Culture of Legality*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017.

Rakopoulos, Theodoros. "The shared boundary: Sicilian mafia and antimafia land". *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, vol.25, no.5, 2020, pp. 528–544.

Santino, Umberto. *Mafia and Antimafia: A Brief History*. London: Tauris, 2015.

Saviano, Roberto. *Gomorra: A Personal Journey into the Violent International Empire of Naples' Organized Crime System*. New York: Picador, 2007.

Schneider, Jane & Schneider, Peter. *Reversible Destiny: Mafia, Antimafia and the Struggle for Palermo*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Sciascia, Leonardo. *The Day of the Owl*. New York: NYRB Classics, 2003.

Sergi, Anna. *Chasing the Mafia: 'Ndrangheta, Memories and Journeys*. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022.

Sergi, Anna, and Alberto Vannucci. "The Secret Nexus. A case study of deviant masons, mafia and corruption in Italy". *The British Journal of Criminology*, vol.63, no.5, 2023, pp.1165 - 1183.

Movies:

Hands Over the City (Le mani sulla città, Francesco Rosi, 1963)

The Godfather (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972)

One Hundred Steps (I cento passi, Marco Tullio Giordana, 2000)

The Mafia Kills Only in Summer (La mafia uccide solo d'estate, Pif, 2013)

Photography: Letizia Battaglia; Tony Gentile.

Content

Topic 1 – Introduction to Italian Mafias

- Definitions of mafia as a criminal and cultural phenomenon
- Common stereotypes vs. historical realities
- Italian history and politics as context (regionalism, North/South, Fascism, post-WWII)
- Literature and society as mirrors of organized crime

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Topic 2 – Literary Foundations and Early Narratives

- Giovanni Verga and 19th-century depictions of Southern Italy
- Short stories highlighting social structures and early mafia behavior
- Comparing immediate narrative descriptions vs. later reinterpretations

Topic 3 – Leonardo Sciascia and the Rural Mafia

- *The Day of the Owl* as a noir-style novel about power and silence
- Themes in Leonardo Sciascia’s work: omertà, mistrust in the state, blurred boundaries between legality and illegality
- Literary and political context of Leonardo Sciascia’s works
- Narrative strategies: ambiguity, irony, realism

Topic 4 – Roberto Saviano and the “New Italian Epic”

- Gomorrah as contemporary mafia narration
- Hybrid style: blending journalism, fiction, and personal testimony
- Literature as civil resistance: risks for authors and journalists
- Connections to broader literary trends

Topic 5 – Mafias in Historical and Sociological Perspective

- Post-war reorganization of the Sicilian mafia and the Portella della Ginestra massacre
- Mafias and the economic boom of the 1960s–70s: urban expansion, construction industry
- The rise of the Corleonesi and the mafia wars of the 1980s
- The maxi-trial and the struggle of magistrates Falcone and Borsellino
- Global dimensions of Italian mafias: drugs, finance, international connections

Topic 6 – Cultural Responses and Civil Society

- Cinema as representation: *The Godfather* vs. Italian anti-mafia films (*Hands Over the City*, *One Hundred Steps*, *The Mafia Kills Only in Summer*)
- Photography as testimony: Letizia Battaglia, Tony Gentile
- Literature as resistance: testimonies and activist writings
- Civil society movements, monuments (e.g., *Via dei Georgofili* in Florence), and collective memory
- Schools, associations, and NGOs in shaping anti-mafia culture

Topic 7 – Contemporary Perspectives and Globalization

- Mafias in Northern Italy: migration of criminal networks and new geographies of power
- Academic research and sociological debates (e.g., Moro & Villa on Northern mafias)
- Media and press representations in the 21st century
- Transnational dimensions: mafias as global enterprises

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Field study and experiential learning components may include:

- Visit to via De' Georgofili
- Meeting with activists from anti-mafia organizations (such as Libera)
- Guest lectures by recognized experts in the field

Syllabus of Record is subject to minor changes in Term-specific Syllabus at faculty's discretion.