UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Comparative Literature

2425-2-F0101R017

Course title

Calvino essayist: toward an anthropological idea of literature

Topics and course structure

An approach to the study of literature understood as cultural criticism (criticism of culture(s)), without predetermined linguistic or chronological boundaries. The analysis and interpretation of texts, themes, poetics is intended to contribute to reflection on the relationship between words and things, reality and discourse, worda and power, socio-historical conditions and symbolic forms.

The main focus of the course is an approach to texts that highlights the importance of literature in cultural dynamics. This is done in different ways.

1. On the thematic level, the topics chosen by literary representation: moral values, interpersonal relationships, social roles, norms and transgressions, with a focus on the different declinations of similar themes, situations, characters within different literary cultures.

2. On the aesthetic level, the emphasis of the ability to simulate experiences and propose models of meaning, and thus as an exceptionally broad and diverse repertoire of human models and destinies, i.e. psychological constellations, paradigms of behaviour, social and cultural contexts.

3. At the linguistic level, attention to the ways in which subjects (narrators, characters, poetic voices) speak about themselves and others, about internal and external events, private and public matters, facts and ideas; the recognition of the different communicative contexts represented, of the appropriateness and effectiveness of the expressive choices made by the interlocutors, of the existential and social significance of the different verbal interactions.

This year's course will focus on reflections on literature by Italo Calvino, one of the most celebrated writers of the Italian 20th century, which together represent a very relevant example of dialogue and confrontation with the anthropological dimension. Growing up in the school of Cesare Pavese – co-founder, with Ernesto de Martino, of the Einaudi "purple series" (Religious, ethnological, and psychological studies) – concerned since the 1950s onwards in the study of fairy tales, attentive in every phase of his activity to the relations between literature and other fields of knowledge, Calvino moved more and more clearly towards a conception of literature as an experience that questions anthropological categories. The study of the various aspects of Calvino's concept of literature can thus make an important contribution to a complex idea of the cultural system.

Objectives

The teaching objective is to promote and consolidate the ability to read, understand and re-elaborate texts, also in relation to different cultural contexts and to intercultural dynamics. Through the exercise of interpretation the student will learn to grasp the formal and thematic aspects of the works, the characters of the experiences represented, their organisation; and at the same time to question the relative motivations and implications. In addition, they will have the opportunity to delve into issues of great importance, which are the subject of the literary works tackled from time to time: be they historical events, psychological issues, moral problems, relational and communicative situations.

Through the exercise of interpreting literary texts, students will learn to gauge the depth and complexity of the universe of discourse and the dynamics underlying the work, and thus appreciate the potential of a conscious use of the word. In this way, they will be able to corroborate both their communicative skills and their autonomy of judgement. A conscious and trained ability to read enables one to transform aesthetic experience into a way of extending one's own existential experience, improving and refining one's understanding of discourse, choices, and the point of view of one's fellow human beings. Ultimately, literature is a tool that aims to increase the flexibility and pliability of responses (emotional, intellectual, pragmatic) to new situations: and, consequently, to intensify social interaction skills.

This teaching is intended to promote familiarity with the forms and languages of literature, and the ability to appreciate its semantic richness, cultural poignancy and intrinsic dynamism. Furthermore, it is intended to corroborate the ability to apply the acquired knowledge both to the interpretation of different cultural contexts and to the related possibilities of communication, dialogue and intervention. In general, it is intended to develop the skills of analysis and synthesis, as a part of a critical approach to cultural situations and phenomena.

Methodologies

The course consists of 19 three-hour lectures, which are usually held in face-to-face mode. However, space will be given as often as possible for interaction with students, who will be involved in defining concepts and categories (starting with that of "literature"), interpreting texts, and discussing the relationship between literary theory and anthropological reflection.

Online and offline teaching materials

Supplementary materials and resources for further study of the topics covered will be provided on the course's e-learning platform. Attending and non-attending students are strongly encouraged to register.

Programme and references

**Italo Calvino:

- *Introduction* to *Italian Folktales*
- *The Literature Machine*
- *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*
- *Why Read the Classics?* da *Why Read the Classics?*
- *Under the Jaguar Sun*, da*Under the Jaguar Sun*
- *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (chapters I and VIII)

Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Johns Hopkins U.P.)
Martin McLaughlin, *Italo Calvino* (Edinburgh U.P.)

Although this course is held in Italian, for Erasmus students, course material can also be available in English, and students can take the exam in English if they wish to do so.

Assessment methods

Oral test. Evaluation is based on the following factors: pertinence and complexity, text comprehension, familiarity with the literary texts in programme, capacity for argumentation and interpretation, interaction, clarity of exposition, linguistic appropriateness, competence in technical terminology.

Office hours

Student reception by appointment: contact the professor by email (mario.barenghi@unimib.it).

Programme validity

Two academic years (until February 2027).

Course tutors and assistants

Sustainable Development Goals

QUALITY EDUCATION