Western Culture: Literature and the Arts, Renaissance to Contemporary
UW Course Number: ILS 204
Professor Mike Vanden Heuvel (UW-Madison)
Department of Theatre and Drama/Integrated Liberal Studies Program

This course doesn’t presume any special background or training in the arts and literature, and is introductory in scope and method. Unlike a survey of a single art form, ILS 204 does not emphasize close readings of individual works of art and literature, nor is the emphasis on memorization of the titles, dates, and creators of specific artworks; instead, you are asked to frame individual works of art within larger cultural and historical contexts. For the Sesto Program, additional focus is given to Italy’s substantial contributions to the story of Western art and culture.

Course objectives include providing students with a broad overview of the major trends and periods in Western literature and the arts, as well as the contexts in which these movements occur, that is, within the history of ideas and culture from the West’s early modern period to the present. Examples of painting, sculpture, architecture, drama, poetry, fiction, music, intermedia art, and other art forms are placed in the historical context of prevailing and/or resistant cultural values and ideas.

Overall, the focus of the course will not be on “art appreciation” but on how cultural contexts – the ideas and values regarding religion, philosophy, political thought, social practices, aesthetics, and related fields – shape and make possible the various expressions of Western art and literature during this period. Students will be encouraged to look critically at the results of Western civilization even as they are invited to admire its many achievements. As well, projects are designed so that students can work independently and creatively with the material learned in class.

Some specific course themes include:
- the idea of “culture” as an ongoing site of struggle, conflict and contested symbolic meanings and values, rather than a collection of static monuments
- evolving attitudes and constructions of what is meant by “nature,” and the Western relationship to it
- the manner by which Western culture measures time, space and the world in order to have knowledge and power over it, and the “shape” it gives to its knowledge and values
- the discovery of “Others” (whatever is different, strange and exotic from Western norms and expectations), both within and external to the individual, and the social, cultural and psychological effects these may produce
- the evolution of a peculiarly “Western” sense of Self/Identity based in particular ways of seeing and conceptualizing the world
- Some relations between the knowledge we associate with art and with science

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Although the image of Italian art usually brings to mind venerable masterpieces from the Renaissance and Baroque, Italian culture was heavily invested in Modernism and artistic innovation. Beginning in the early twentieth century, the peninsula became a hotbed of experimental art, architecture, design, fashion and literature, often as a reaction against its museum culture and what were perceived as the shackles of tradition. Today, “Italian design” connotes modernity, sleek and functional engineering, design, clothing, architecture, and visual culture.

Tracing the complex relations between Futurism and Fascism, we will see how Futurist ideas were incorporated into both the rise of Mussolini’s party and post-war Italy’s resurgence (even as Fascist politics were left behind). We will move forward chronologically to look at Bragaglia’s, Salvinio’s and Pirandello’s teatro metafisico (a precursor of The Theatre of the Absurd) and its parallel in the visual arts. This will lead us to the general revolution in fashion and design known as “Il Modo” that dominated post-war Italy in terms of high fashion, urban design, domestic architecture and interior design, automotive engineering, and so on.

This material sets up interesting resonances with the movements that responded to the excesses of Il Modo, such as Arte Povera from the 1970s. To summarize the achievements of Italian experimental art, we close the term looking at the stunning performances of Romeo Castelluci/Chiara Guidi and the theatre company Societas Raffaello Sanzio - it’s even possible the company may be performing at their home base in Cesare and elsewhere during the Spring 2014 term.