



SYLLABUS

The Middle Ages Meets Popular Culture in Siena: “Reading” the Signs of Italy with Umberto Eco

Instructor: Carl Bybee

Language of Instruction: English

UO Credits: 4

Contact Hours*: 40

SIENA, ITALY

COURSE DESCRIPTION

“My way of being involved in politics consists of telling others how I see daily life, political events, sometimes the way I look at a movie. I believe that it is my job as a scholar and citizen to show how we are surrounded by ‘messages,’ products of political power, of economic power, of the entertainment industry and the revolution industry, and to say that we must know how to analyze and criticize them.” --- Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*.

Umberto Eco (1932-2016) was a world-renowned Italian media theorist and bestselling novelist who loved to explore and interpret how cultures make sense of themselves through language and symbols. From the study of James Bond to Superman to James Joyce and Thomas Aquinas, from the Monasteries in the Middle Ages to California’s Hearst Castle, Eco was a cultural detective. He studied how we make meaning in popular culture as well as high art. In the academic world his name is most famously associated with the field of “semiotics,” sometimes known as the science of signs and wonderfully defined by Eco as “the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie.” Eco’s work has become important to everyone from politicians, to social activists to advertisers. Eco’s playful collection of essays, *Travels in Hyperreality*, is a surreal road trip across America, trying to make sense of what is the ‘real’ American Dream based on everything from roadside wax museums, to Disneyland, to Las Vegas to Sea World. In the world of popular culture, he is probably best known for his novel *The Name of the Rose*, in which a Sherlock Holmes-like monk investigates an apparent suicide and a series of murders in a 14th-century monastery and along the way explores both the method of semiotics and the meaning of truth. After becoming a world-wide best seller, it inspired a Hollywood movie, computer games, plays and so many questions from engaged readers that Eco wrote *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, in which he reflects on the craft of writing.

Through both Eco’s academic and popular writing this course provides an introduction to semiotics---the study of signs--- and the work of cultural interpretation focusing on popular as well as high Italian culture. Students, following Eco’s lead, will engage in the work of interpreting high art, advertisements, public spaces, local rituals---formal and informal, and more in the quest to read the signs of Italy.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

This course examines the works of Umberto Eco to understand the science and politics of how meaning is created through signs and symbols to create cultural order as well as create openings in our imaginations for how the world might otherwise be.

Student Outcomes. Students who successfully complete this course will:

- Improve research and writing skills
- Improve individual and group presentation skills
- Understand Umberto Eco's contribution to cultural interpretation and to generating imaginative thinking
- Develop interdisciplinary thinking and problem solving skills
- Be introduced to the political, ethical and aesthetic issues surrounding meaning making in the contemporary world

INSTRUCTIONAL METHODOLOGY

This course will be conducted through readings, outdoor discussions, excursions, films, mini-lectures, journaling, guest lectures and creative writing. While we will read additional material on semiotics and cultural interpretation, the works of Umberto Eco will provide our primary texts. These include selections from the essay collections *Travels in Hyperreality* and *How to Travel with a Salmon*, readings including "How to take an intelligent vacation" to "How to Eat Ice Cream"; *The Name of the Rose*; to essays including "The Myth of Superman" and "Living in the New Middle Ages." Readings will also include his novel *The Name of the Rose* and excerpts from *Turning Back the Clock*, *Hot Wars and Media Populism*. We will have at least one guest lecture on semiotics from a representative of the Department of Semiotics at the University of Siena and view Eco discussing art and realism in our own times. Excursions to include sites related to Eco's writing, including a trip to a monastery (perhaps Bobbio Abbey), and visits to street markets, museums, as well as walks through the streets to observe graffiti and billboards.

SELECTED COURSE READINGS (Tentative)

- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies: The Complete Edition, in a New Translation*. Translated by Richard Howard and Annette Lavers. 2 edition. Hill and Wang, 2013. (Excerpts).
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Television Series*. 1 edition. London: Penguin Books, 1990. (Excerpts)
- Chandler, Daniel. *Semiotics: The Basics*. 3 edition. New York, NY: Routledge, 2017. (Excerpts).
- Eco, Umberto. *Travels in Hyperreality*. 1 edition. Mariner Books, 1990. (Excerpts).
- Eco, Umberto, Diane Sterling, and William Weaver. *How to Travel with a Salmon & Other Essays*. San Diego, CA: Mariner Books, 1995. (Excerpts).
- Eco, Umberto. *Turning Back the Clock: Hot Wars and Media Populism*. Translated by Alastair McEwen. 1 edition. Mariner Books, 2008. (Excerpts).
- Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*. Reprint edition. Boston: Mariner Books, 2014. (Excerpts).

METHOD OF EVALUATION (GRADING)

Shared journal writing [weekly topics]	25%
Creative writing assignments [3]	25%
Class presentations and discussion of assigned readings	25%
Final essay/research paper	25%

COURSE OUTLINE (tentative and under development)

Week 1	Ways of Seeing
Week 2	The Middle Ages Are Back: The Middle Ages in Today's Pop Culture
Week 3	The Name of the Rose, The Culture Detective and the Study of Signs
Week 4	Reading the City: Streets, Piazzas, Murals, and Tourists
Week 5	The Fake and the Real and other Mysteries
Week 6	Reading Things: Films, Advertisements, Photographs, and Fashion
Week 7	Living in the New Middle Ages
Week 8	Global Pop Culture, the Internet and Italian-ness
Week 9	Roundtable on Umberto Eco and Semiotics Today
Week 10	Review/Summary/ <i>Our own Travels in Hyperreality</i>