



## IFE course syllabus

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### Course title

**Belgium: A European crossroads, a unique culture**

### Course taught by

The course is team-taught by several members of the Museum and Archives of French Belgian Literature (AML). The AML is a center for documentation and research on the literary, theatrical and editorial heritage of French-speaking Belgium. The AML works within the Royal Library of Belgium and hosts a renowned international literary library, including a collection of archives dedicated to Central Africa. Its collections consist of manuscripts, correspondence, books, photographs, audiovisual documents, press clippings, posters, works of art, etc.

### Purpose of the course

The course is intended to impart an understanding of the specificity of Belgian culture and identity. The existence of a strong and relatively integrated cultural identity is particularly noteworthy in light of Belgian history. Throughout history the territory now comprising the state of Belgium was occupied by a series of nations due to its position as a buffer between the great European powers of France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. Starting at independence in 1830, the small nation of Belgium split into two linguistic regions (Dutch-speaking and French-speaking), while also rapidly becoming a significant political and economic actor in Western Europe. An industrial and colonial power, Belgium was also the first theater of war in both World Wars but also contributed centrally to the construction of post-WWII peace and stability, with Brussels now one of the two capitals of Europe.

### Description of the course

Students grasp the diversity and specificity of Belgian culture by examining cultural production from a series of overlapping vantage points:

- the riches of Belgian artistic creation in music, visual arts, literature, comics art, cinema;
- a narrative viewpoint looking at the construction of the national “story” through arts and culture;
- the anthropology of Belgian cultural specificity across linguistic lines;
- the historical and sociological context and implications of culture including Belgian cultural exchange with Central Africa;
- comparison with cultural phenomena in North America.

### Course format

The format of this course has been designed for maximum pedagogical effectiveness in light of the constraints of a course offered intensively over a short period of time. Accordingly, the course comprises two types of sessions, with lecture/seminar meetings alternating with discussion sections. Students are expected to participate in both informal debate and discussion as well as formal presentations (oral exposés, press reviews, and the like).

Each course of the preparatory session also includes appropriate site visits.

This course meets approximately 32 hours, including mandatory site visits.

### Course outline

#### 1. Cinema

Taught by: Christophe Meurée, AML research staff member, PhD in Literature.

- Representations of Brussels and Belgium in Belgian and international cinema;
- History and development of Belgian cinema styles.

Activities: Projection of cinema extracts, and suggestions of films to watch in entirety (*Le Tout Nouveau Testament* and *The Broken Circle Breakdown*).

## **2. Comics art**

Taught by: Luc Wanlin, Assistant Director of Archives and Informatics at the AML, with degrees in classical literature and languages.

- Definitions and analytic tools for comics art; formal characteristics of Belgian comics art;
- Analysis of specific passages and frames, chosen by students in the course.

Activities: Reading works, and a visit to the Belgian Center for Comics Art.

## **3. Visual arts and the emergence of a distinct Belgian French literature**

Taught by: Christophe Meurée.

- Belgian pictorial tradition (realism) and its importance in founding Belgian cultural identity, and the emergence of the first non-French Francophone literature through the works of several major figures;
- Comparison with the emergence of North American English literature (Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman compared to Emile Verhaeren, Ralph Waldo Emerson compared to Maurice Maeterlinck);
- Belgian forms of the surrealism movement in art and literature as a complement to Belgian cultural identity.

Activities: analysis of works of art (from Flemish primitivism to Wim Delvoye); reading of extracts of works, and a visit to the Royal Museum of Fine Arts.

## **4. Music and songs**

Taught by: Florence Huybrechts, AML research staff member, PhD in Literature.

- Applying specific analytical tools to the history of two centuries of Belgian music and songs;
- Exploration of the notion of Belgitude as found in this musical history.

Activities: Listening to music, suggestions of works to listen to, attendance at a concert.

## **5. Extremely contemporary Belgian literature (1989-today)**

Taught by: Christophe Meurée.

- Changes in Belgian literature and in the French language in a globalized, post-modern world, including comparisons between the Belgian and North-American literary situations.

Activities: reading of extracts of works, and an invitation to read in full a novel by Jean-Philippe Toussaint.

## **Grading**

Student work is evaluated on the basis of a mid-term essay and a written examination at the end of the course, the grades for which are averaged with the participation grade based on oral presentations, press reviews and discussion participation.

## **Equivalent in American university course offerings**

This is a course in Francophone Studies, or Belgian contemporary culture and its roots.