

Contemporary Russian Literature and Media

Dr. Susanna Weygandt

The aim of this course is to introduce students to signature literary and cultural texts from roughly the post-Stalin era to the present. One major focus will be the relation between canon formation of contemporary “Russian” literature and culture, on one hand, and the history of the post-Soviet period. To this end we will study contemporary writers’ and scholars’ methods of historicizing the present. This process has been generated by the collapse of Soviet identity, and it finds expression in such diverse phenomena as the reassessment of history and the rising awareness of real problems in society, the labor force, and the status and meaning of citizenship, a growing religiousness, nostalgia for the great empire, racism, and the recognition of the effects of globalization. Throughout our work, we will be particularly attentive to the literary and cultural peripheries. This means an expanded geography, the inclusion of non-Russian Soviet and émigré writers before and after 1991. This is an interdisciplinary course: in it, the emphasis will be on late-Soviet or post-Soviet culture and literature.

Towards the end of this course we will focus on environmental studies in Russian literature because environmental and ecological symbolism is prevalent in contemporary prose fiction and documentary literature. Forest, water, farm, labor, disaster are constants in the shifting conceptions of subjectivity, national identity, and the environment. The magic of the forest will be a guiding light as we study the perception and representation of nature, labor, and progress and pollution.

Week 1. Course Introduction. Lecture about Russia’s Cyclical History: Revolution, Oppression, Thaw, and Stagnation.

Polly Jones, *Myth, Memory, and Trauma: Re-thinking the Stalinist Past in the Soviet Union, 1953-1970*. New

Haven: Yale UP (2013). *Excerpts*.

Week 2. Pointing the Blame, But Not Announcing It Directly

Mikhail Shatrov, *Onward...Onward...Onward* (drama, 1988)

Liudmila Petrushevskaya, *Three Girls in Blue* (drama, 1984)

Week 3. Narratives of Trauma

Svetlana Alexievich, *The Last Eyewitnesses (From the Book Unchildlike Stories)* 1985.

Week 4. Nostalgia for Empire and Footprints in the Snow

Serguei Oushakine, “In the State of Post-Soviet Aphasia: Symbolic Development in Contemporary

Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 6 (Sept 2000), pp. 991-1016.

---, “We’re Nostalgic but We’re not Crazy: Retrofitting the Past in Russia,” *The Russian Review* 66

(July 2007): 451–82.

Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, *excerpts*.

Week 5. Is the 'Post' in Post Colonialism the Same as in Post-Soviet?

David Chioni Moore, "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Towards a Global Postcolonial Critique," *PMLA* Special Topic: Globalizing Literary Studies (Jan 2001), Vol. 116

No.1, p. 111-128.

Sharad Chary and Katherine Verdery, "Thinking Between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Post Socialist and Ethnography after the Cold War." 2009.

Week 6. Transitional People: Adolescents in Russia's 1990s and New Millennia

Vasily Sigarev, *Plasticine* (drama, 2001)

Film screenings: *Plasticine*, dir. Kirill Serebrennikov, Tekstura Film Festival (2013).

Alive / Zhit' (film, 2012) written and directed by Vasily Sigarev

Week 7. Russia after the Collapse of the Soviet Union

Viktor Pelevin Generation 'P' (Russian)/ *Homo Zapiens* (English). Translated by Andrew Bromfield, New York: Penguin Books, 2006 [cf. the UK edition: *Babylon*, London : Faber and Faber, 2000].

Week 8. The New Apocalypse

Vladimir Sorokin: *Day of the Oprichnik: A Novel*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.

Week 9. Our Mad House is Voting for Putin

Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russian Public*

Affairs, (2014); 1-76.

Ilya Budraitskis, "The Weakest Link of Managed Democracy: How Parliament Gave Birth to Non

Parliamentary Politics," *South Atlantic Quarterly* (Duke UP), Winter 2014.

Arkady Kots (Kirill Medvedev's band): "Walls"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3X36Xqd9cw>,

and "Nothing Will Work out without Love":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFYLYTUxu4U>

Week 10. Alexander Sokurov and New Surrealism

"The History of an Artist's Soul is a Very Sad History: Interview with Aleksandr Sokurov," by Paul

Schrader, *Film Comment* (1997) 33:6

Mikhail Iampolski. "Representation--Mimicry--Death: The Latest Films of Alexander Sokurov," in

Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema. Ed. Birgit Beumers. London: I.B. Tauris, 1999.

Film screening:

The Sun, dir. Alexander Sokurov, (2005)

Week 11. Ivan Vyrypaev and New Sincerity

Susanna Weygandt, “The Rhythms and Sounds of Postdramatic Rap: Revisiting Skaz in the Cinema and Theatre of Ivan Vyrypaev,” forthcoming in *Studies in Soviet and Russian Cinema*
Film screenings:

Dance Delhi (Tanets Deli, 2012) dir. Ivan Vyrypaev

Euphoria (Eiforiia, 2006) dir. Ivan Vyrypaev

Week 12. Standing up to Unforgiving Power

Hobbes’s *Leviathan*

Edith Clowers, Chapter 2: “Postmodernist Empire Meets Holy Rus” in *Russia on the Edge: Imagined Geographies and Post-Socialist Identity* (Cornell UP, 2011). This chapter discusses the re-emergence of the term *sobornost*’ and the warping of its meaning as ‘conciliatory authoritarianism’, or people giving into authoritarian structure of rule.

Film screening: Andrey Zvyagintsev: *Leviathan* (2014). (Online, with English subtitles: <https://my-hit.org/film/361934/>)

Week 13. The Export of Violence: Ukraine

Marvin Kalb, *Imperial Gamble: Putin, Ukraine, and the New Cold War*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings

Institution Press, 2015 (“Crimea : from Catherine the Great to Vladimir the Gambler”, “A Very

Certain Future”, “The War in Ukraine”, “The Tragedy of a Malaysian Airliner”, “Masters of the taiga!”, “Whither Ukraine? Whither Russia?”)

Film screening: Shakhida Tulaganova, dir., *Airport Donetsk* (documentary film) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjAhdcotqwx>

Week 14. The Peripheries of the Former Soviet Empire

German Sadulaev, *I am Chechen* (2006)

Alisa Ganieva, “Salam Tebe, Dalgat!” In *Squaring the Circle: Short Stories by Winners of the Debut Prize*

(Evanston: Northwestern UP), 2010.



Week 15. Magical Realism and New Ecologies

Aleksei Ivanov, *Heart of the Taiga* (excerpts)

Screening: *Silent Souls / Ovsyanki* (film, 2010), dir. Aleksey Fedorchenko and written by Denis Osokin

Additional recommended (but not required) material

Roman Senchin, “Idzhim,” translated by Lisa Hayden Espenschade in *Read. Russia! An Anthology of New Voices*, ed. Elena Schubin. New York: Overlook Press, 2012.

Marc Bennetts, *Kicking the Kremlin: Russia’s New Dissidents and the Battle to Topple Putin*, London:

Oneworld, 2014.

Oral Presentations

Each student will be expected to present on two of the assigned cultural works at some point during the course of the semester (thus, giving two presentations).

Mid-term

Write a summary of featured article (one per student) from Alexander Etkind’s *Memory at War*

Project Site: <http://www.memoryatwar.org/mawprofiles/profile-alexander-etkind.html>

Final Assignment

A research paper of ca. 15 pages (double-spaced) due at the end of the term.