

Osher Institute for Lifelong Learning

Fantasies of Modern Russian Culture, Fall 2018

Instructor: Polina Dimova, Ph.D.

This interdisciplinary course studies the fascinating world of Modern Russian Culture through the prism of its utopias, science fiction, and fairy tales. Throughout the term, we will examine how supernatural dreams and revolutionary fantasies merged with social and scientific ideas so as to glorify technological progress, or critique Soviet society. We will thus trace the productive interplay between experimental aesthetics and utopian thinking before the Revolution and the artistic celebration, subversion, or negotiation of politics throughout the Soviet period. The lecture series will explore modernist and futuristic utopias and dystopias in late Imperial Russia and the early Soviet period (Bely, Blok, Scriabin, Stravinsky, Kandinsky, Malevich, Mayakovsky, Protazanov, and Zamiatin); fantastic narratives that intertwine black magic with politics at the height of Stalinism (Bulgakov); post-apocalyptic visions created during the stagnation (Strugatsky and Tarkovsky), and interplanetary voyages that mark the collapse of the USSR (Pelevin). Institute participants will sample representative works of twentieth-century Russian literature, visual art, music, dance, and film, as they reflected the dominant representational models of the time: modernism, primitivism, abstraction, socialist realism, and postmodernism. *All suggested readings are in English translation. No prior knowledge of Russian is required.*

Recommended Readings:

- Bely, Andrei. *Petersburg* (Maguire & Malmstad, trans.; Indiana UP).
- Bulgakov, Mikhail. *The Master and Margarita* (Pevear & Volokhonsky, trans.; Penguin Classics).
- Pelevin, Viktor. *Omon Ra* (Andrew Bromfield, trans.; Farrar, Straus & Giroux).
- Strugatsky, Arkady and Boris. *Roadside Picnic* (Olena Bormashenko, trans.; Chicago Review P).
- Zamiatin, Evgenii. *We* (Clarence Brown, trans.; Penguin).

Multimedia Electronic Reader:

- Dimova, Polina. <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/fantasies-of-modern-russian-culture>
- The reader offers videos and images, as well as alternative electronic translations of the texts.
- Note: The digital book for the course will be updated, as the course progresses.

Recommended Anthologies:

- Howell, Yvonne, ed. *Red Star Tales: A century of Russian and Soviet Science Fiction*.
- Levitsky, Alexander, ed. *Worlds Apart: An Anthology of Russian Fantasy and Science Fiction*.
- *Stray Dog Cabaret*. (Schmidt, trans.; New York Review).
- Brown, Clarence, ed. *The Portable Twentieth Century Russian Reader* (Penguin).
- Kutik, Ilya and Andrew Wachtel, eds. *From the Ends to the Beginnings: A Bilingual Anthology of Russian Verse*. <http://max.mmlc.northwestern.edu/mdenner>

Films:

- Protazanov, Yakov. “Aelita: Queen of Mars.”
- Tarkovsky, Andrei. “Solaris.”
- Tarkovsky, Andrei. “Stalker.”

Music and Art:

- Scriabin, “Prometheus: A Poem of Fire,” 1910, “Last Preludes,” op. 74, 1914.
- Stravinsky, “The Firebird,” 1910, “The Rite of Spring,” 1913.
- Kandinsky, “Concerning the Spiritual in Art,” “The Concert,” 1895, Impression III (Concert), 1911, “Light Picture,” 1913, Compositions VI, VII, and VIII, and “Several Circles,” 1926.
- Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism,” “The Woodcutter,” 1912, “Victory Over the Sun” (designs), 1913, “Black Square, Red Square,” 1915.

COURSE SCHEDULE

A. The Modernist Arts in Late Imperial Russia

Week 1. (10/11) Symbolist Utopias and Fairy Tales.

Blok, “A Girl Was Singing,” “The Stranger,” “Night.” Scriabin, “Prometheus.” Stravinsky, “The Firebird.” Bely, *Petersburg*.

Week 2. (10/18) Primitivism, Cubo-Futurism, Abstraction.

Bely, *Petersburg*. Kandinsky and Malevich. Khlebnikov, “Incantation by Laughter.” Stravinsky, “The Rite of Spring.”

B. The Russian Revolution and the Politics of the Arts

Week 3. (10/25) Early Soviet Utopias and Dystopias

Zamiatin, *We* and “The Cave.” Protazanov, “Aelita: Queen of Mars.”

Week 4. (11/1) The Black Magic of Stalinism

Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*.

Week 5. (11/8) The Science Fictions of the Cold War

Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*. Tarkovsky, “Solaris.” Tarkovsky, “Stalker.”

C. The Collapse of the USSR and Postmodern Deceptions

Week 6. (11/15) Post-Soviet Disillusionment, the Space Race, and Alternative Pasts

Pelevin, *Omon Ra*.

Biographical Information: Polina Dimova holds a doctorate in Comparative Literature from the University of California, Berkeley and is a scholar of Russian and European literature, music, and visual art with a special focus on comparative modernisms. Nearing completion, her book *The Synaesthetic Metaphor* studies how Modernist multimedia experiments stemmed from a fascination with synaesthesia, the figurative or neurological mixing of the senses—for instance, in the perception of sound as color. Dimova has published on Russian Symbolist and Early Soviet literature and the music of Alexander Scriabin, on Sergei Prokofiev’s early ballets and art songs, and on Oscar Wilde and Richard Strauss’s adaptations of the Salome legend. Before joining Vanderbilt as a Lecturer of Russian in 2017-18, Dimova taught a wide variety of courses in Russian and Comparative Literature at UC Berkeley and Oberlin College. Her other scholarly interests include cold war fantasy and science fiction, children’s literature, sensory studies, literature and science, theory of adaptation, and translation theory. Polina Dimova is currently a W. T. Bandy Fellow at the Center for Baudelaire and Modern French Studies and a Visiting Scholar of German, Russian and East European Studies at Vanderbilt University.