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Realism and the Documentary throughout the Long 20th Century

The incorporation of real-life documents into fictitious narratives has a long tradition in the Russian canon. Lev Tolstoy, for one, reveals repeatedly in his diaries that he was tormented by the challenge of writing all that he could see, sharing with the reader what stands before him. Such an “objective” way of seeing, however, is not entirely possible even with the aid of technology. With the aid of the camera, during the quest for “mechanical objectivity” that began c. 1880 in scientific inquiry, scientists had found that not even modern technologies could render an objective portrayal of raw material. Decades later, the document-in-literature movement, as advocated by the Russian Factographers in the 1920s, arose out of various problems and new demands. For one, the traditional novel (namely the novel written by Tolstoy) was criticized by the Factographers’ as too subjective—readers received an impression of the author’s style, but not facts from life. The Factographers thus developed tropes and rhetorical devices to make writing and the writing process more “scientific” – backed by ethnographic investigation, clarity, and written in media res of life’s unfolding. Some of these writing techniques invented in the 1920’s permeate documentary fiction from Russia and Eurasia in the 21st-century.

Drawing on various shades of realism – from Tolstoy to psychological realism to socialist realism – in combination with scientific treatises about mechanical reproduction – this course will examine how interactions between literature and documentary fact served to define and defy boundaries between authorial perspective, social critique, and ethnography. At the same time we will have the opportunity to come close to the original styles of Russian literature’s most profound authors.

Week 1. Introduction and Naturalism of Nikolai Gogol.

The first lecture draws from Western European realism because realism in literature was largely a European invention that spread to Russia. Then this lecture will discuss naturalism in Gogol’s prose as an important moment in Russian literature to represent, in detail, common and even vulgar sides of humanity. Gogol’s protagonists were from the lower strata of society. His writing includes colloquial speech representative of these social groups, for instance, in the story “The Overcoat.” After highlighting Gogol’s text, this lecture will offer an overview of the course: lectures will focus on Russian authors’ unique styles of realism. Recurrent themes that unite the lectures are: the common and “deheroized” protagonist, a profusion of observed detail that makes the narrative seem to advance as if in real time, and authors simulating colloquial speech and also recording real speech (Svetlana Aleksievich, for instance). Lectures will also include historical background of this literature: the Crimean War, 1905 Revolution, technologies of modernism, Soviet ideology and socialist realism, and World War II. While what is typically taught about Russian Realism is usually mid- and late- 19th- c. prose, this course will also examine its afterlife in the writings of 1920’s Factographers, Socialist Realism, docudrama, and journalistic prose of Svetlana Aleksievich.

Week 2-Week 3. Lev Tolstoy, the Constant Observer, and also the Constant Outsider.

This lecture will focus on Tolstoy’s Crimean War Sketches, the short stories of 1854, “Sevastopol in December” & “Sevastopol in August,” sketches that formed the basis of several episodes in *War and Peace*. Tolstoy uses his fiction as a transaction between literature and reality. Specifically, these two

stories attempt to replace the frame of the narrator's perspective with its opposite: the view from nowhere. Tolstoy experiments with replacing the *rasskaz* (a product within a narrator's frame) with an all-encompassing visual account, *zrimaia kartina*, of a war operating room. "Sevastopol in December" focuses on physical details of the body undergoing surgery, and death – portrayals are unmotivated by either the psychological experience of the author or the victims in the stories. Unlike his predecessors (Gogol and Turgenev), Tolstoy does not shy away from attention to details of disease and death. Students who read Russian are invited to read Ilya Kalinin, "Sevastopol' v avguste 1855: Voina, Photographiia i khirurgiia: Rozhdenia poetika moderna," *NLO* #1116 (4/12)

Week 4 - Week 5. Psychological Realism of Anton Chekhov's dramas.

While Tolstoy's style of realism places an emphasis on physical circumstances, Anton Chekhov's style of writing sheds a spotlight on characters' emotions. Chekhov published over 600 short stories, while only a handful of his dramas were staged. This lecture teaches dramatic analysis of Chekhov's plays, offering an interpretation of Chekhov's style of psychological realism. While some scholars (including Tolstoy) have remarked that "nothing happens" in Chekhov's plays, this lecture explains how noticeable changes in Chekhov's plays occur on the level of characters' intuitions about the future and realizations about the past. I would begin this lecture by asking students what major changes happen to characters in *The Seagull* (1896). After students answer with the obvious events – Nina's pregnancy and Kostia's suicide – I would ask, "Where did these events take place?" I anticipate silence in answer to this question because these events happen behind the curtain. "Main events" are conspicuously absent in Chekhov's plays. In the place of ostensible actions there are "indirect actions," a term the Chekhov biographer David Magarshack coined to describe the prevalence of scenes in which characters release their emotions unintentionally. This quality creates a kind of action that is internal, rather than externally portrayed. Chekhov once said, "The meaning and the whole drama in a person's life is located inside, and not in external matter or events."

Week 6. Realist Prose of Maksim Gorky.

Maksim Gorky wrote at a time when accelerated modernity was tearing apart Russia's social fabric: there was a divide between the bourgeoisie and the emerging proletariat, between family life and communal life. His dramas, *Children of the Sun* and *Lower Depths*, not only address these issues but also bring an engaged class optic to them. His realism, however, is most palpably felt in his novel, *Mother* (1906), which is based on events connected to the 1905 Revolution, about which this lecture will focus. The novel's heroine is based on the life of a woman whom Gorky knew, and who, like many women of her time, worked manual jobs in factories. This lecture will include short clips from the film adaptation of *Mother* (1926) by Vsevolod Pudovkin.

Week 7. Mechanical Reproduction and Second Sight Knowledge.

We will study inventions in photography, drawing on excerpts from Peter Galison and Lorraine Daston, *Objectivity*; Aleksandr Rodchenko, "The Paths of Modern Photography," trans. John E. Bowlt, in *Photography in the Modern Era*, ed. Christopher Phillips (NY: Metropolitan Museum of art, 1989), 256-263. We will look at the influence of photography on Russia's great writers by reading excerpts from Kat Hill Reischl *Photographic Literacy: Cameras in the Hands of Russian Authors* (Cornell UP, 2018). Then we will study the rise of the movie camera and proto-surveillance in Russian

culture by reading Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera* and “WE: Variant of a Manifesto” (5-10); “Kinoglaz” (38-40); “Kino-Eye” (60-79) in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, UC Berkeley, 1984.

Week 8. The Factographers.

With the emergence of newspaper reportage and a new means of recording reality rendered through film and photography in the 1920’s, several writers and artists, known as the Factographers, became ambitious to create a locus of exchange between real-life and literature. Despite their classification as avant-gardists (the avant-garde was usually contrasted to realism), Factographers pursued the same concerns as Realists, but with the addition of new writing strategies to bring real-life into literature. This lecture will address three essays, Boris Eikhenbaum’s “The Literary Environment” and Sergei Tretiakov’s “The New Leo Tolstoi” and “Biography of the Object,” which employ new writing strategies for bringing the document-into-literature. These strategies turned out to be mainly ethnographical owing to their insistence on erasing the author’s stylized hand and integrating the writer into the topic of real-life analysis.

Week 9. Socialist Realism.

The erasure of the author’s stylization occurred again in Russian and Soviet literature – under the State-implemented “official method of Soviet art,” Socialist Realism, which sought to subsume authors’ and artists’ unique styles under a new aesthetic, whose main categories were: *partiinosť* (a storyline supportive of the aims of the State party), *klasovost’* (glorification of communist values), *ideinosť* (State ideology) and *narodnost’* (art relevant to workers and understood by them). This lecture will introduce the socialist realist novel through the depiction of the hero. Fedor Gladkov’s *Cement* (1926), for instance, was ‘deheroized,’ as Katerina Clark explains, because the author focused not on the protagonist but on the future society of production. This development had its counterpart in propaganda poster art and easel art. Visual images from recent exhibitions at the Tate Modern and the British Library for the anniversary of the 1917 Revolution will be shown during the lecture. After the Stalin era, Socialist Realism relaxes its hold on Russian literature.

Week 10. Mikhail Shatrov and the First Russian Docudrama.

Shatrov wrote dramas after Stalin’s purges were revealed and as a response to the purges. His dramas try to find a way back to Lenin’s path through archival sources and even minutes of party meetings. This lecture focuses on Shatrov’s “dramas of fact,” such as *Onward...Onward...Onward!* (1988), which is based on archival sources.

Week 11. The Journalist Prose of Svetlana Aleksievich.

Svetlana Aleksievich (Nobel Prize Laureate, 2015) combines journalistic writing with recorded oral histories to document life after world cataclysmic events — WWII, the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl—through the voices of ordinary individuals, many of whom are women. This lecture will focus on passages from *War’s Un-Womanly Face* (1983), in which recorded stories describe how gender identity of the female body gets troubled in war time. One female veteran’s oral history describes how, after fighting in combat in WWII, her body was mutilated. Upon returning home to her village, she hides from her family because she is ashamed of what has happened to her body. While a leap in Soviet women’s history is made by women joining the armies of their male comrades, the wounded female veteran in Aleksievich’s book does not gain the same

heroic status as the wounded male veteran in, for instance, the social realistic novel, Boris Polevoi's *A Story about a Real Man* (1946).

Week 12. T.V. Series and Documentary Film.

We will analyze documentary films of Sergei Loznitsa (*Blockade*, 2005 and *DonBass*, 2018) accompanied by the readings: Serguei Alex. Oushakine, "Totality Decomposed: Objectalizing Late Socialism in Post-Soviet Biochronicles," *The Russian Review* 69 (October 2010): 638-69 and Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, "Ethnographies of Television: Filmed Interviews," trans. Jennifer Bajorek.

Week 13. Realism v. Melodrama.

Mikhail Durnenkov's documentary dramas based on archive notes of Konstantin Stanislavsky's correspondences at the Moscow Art Theatre, "His Life in Art" (2011, in Russian and English) and "Outside the System" (in Russian and translated into English 2014)

Week 14. Docudrama in Russia and East Europe.

We will read plays of one of the leading movements in contemporary culture, Russian docudrama. We will focus on the rhetoric and writing strategies that are unique to this contemporary movement and also discuss what strategies can be profitably compared to realism of Tolstoy, the experiments of the Factographers, and the dramas of fact of Mikhail Shatrov. Our readings include: Gremina, Elena and Mikhail Ugarov. "September.doc" in *Russian New Drama: An Anthology*. Columbia UP, 2019 [August]. Eds. Maksim Hanukai & Susanna Weygandt. We will also read excerpts from Papzian, Elizabeth, *Manufacturing Truth: The Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, 2009.