BEYOND THE LOOKING GLASS: Nonsense and Absurd in Russian and European Literature and Visual Arts
Tuesday-Thursday – 1:00 – 4:15PM

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This course investigates anti-rational currents in 20th Century avant-garde movements such as Futurism and Alogism (including ZAUM, the “Beyond Mind” language of Russian futurists), DADA, Surrealism, absurdism in Russia and the French Theatre of the Absurd. The authors and artists include Franz Kafka, Aleksey Kruchenykh, Velimir Khlebnikov, Kazimir Malevich, Vassily Kandinsky, Marc Chagall, Daniil Kharms, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and others. We will trace the connections between these currents and their 19th Century predecessors including English Nonsense of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, while also giving special attention to the unsurpassed Russian absurdist genius of Nikolai Gogol. The discussions will be accompanied by several film screenings.

LITERATURE:

Fiction and Poetry

Nikolai Gogol. The Nose (1835); The Marriage (1835)
Edward Lear. Selected poetry, songs, and prose
Lewis Carroll. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (1865); Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There (1872); The Hunting of the Snark (1876)
Franz Kafka. Description of a Struggle (1904-05); The Judgement (1913)
Guillaume Apollinaire. Zone (1913)
Vladimir Mayakovskiy. Selected poems
Velimir Khlebnikov. Selected poems
Aleksey Kruchenykh. Victory Over the Sun (1913); selected poems
Vladimir Mayakovskii. Selected poems
Elena Guro. Selected poems.
Vassily Kamenskii. Selected poems.
Tristan Tzara. Selected poems.
Daniil Kharms. Elizabeth Bam (1927); selected prose
Aleksandr Vvedensky. Christmas at the Ivanovs’ (1938)
Eugene Ionesco. The Bald Soprano (1950), The Lesson (1950)
Samuel Beckett. Waiting for Godot (1953)

Non-fiction

G.K. Chesterton. “A Defense of Nonsense” (1901)
Carolyn Wells. Introduction to A Nonsense Anthology (1902)
David Burliuk, “Cubism (Surface – Plane) (1912)
Vassily Kandinsky. Concerning the Spiritual in Art (1912) – selections
Kazimir Malevich. “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism” (1915); selections from writings on art.
Tristan Tzara. *Monsieur Antipyrine’s Manifesto* (1918) and *Dada Manifesto* 1918
Selected Russian Futurist manifestoes
  André Breton. *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1928)
Emile Cammaerts. *The Poetry of Nonsense* (1925) – selections
Vladimir Nabokov. *Nikolai Gogol* (1944) – selections
Jeffrey Stern. “Lewis Carroll the Surrealist” (1982)

**Films:**

*Entrac’te* (1924) Directed by René Clair  
*Un chien Andalou* (1928) Directed by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali  
*The Trial* (1962) Directed by Orson Welles  
*Alice in Wonderland* (1966) Directed by Jonathan Miller  
Monty Python’s *And Now for Something Completely Different* (1971) Directed by Ian MacNaughton  
*Le fantôme de la liberté (The Phantom of Liberty)* (1974) Directed by Luis Buñuel  
*Victory Over the Sun*. Vassar student and faculty production of the 1913 Russian Futurist Opera (May 3, 2007). Directed by Katherine Marvin’ 07.

**COURSE STRUCTURE:** While the class will include introductory lectures, the rest of the time will be devoted to discussion. Please attend all classes and be prepared for active participation in discussion.

**COURSE GRADE** will be determined according to the following formula:

Regular attendance and participation in discussion: 10% of the grade  
Short presentations: 15%  
One ID exam: 35%  
Final project/paper: 40%  

• **ID EXAM** is a closed-books / closed-notes timed on Canvas exam (60-75 min) which will include ID questions and a short commentary. The exam will be scheduled for Thursday, July 8.

• There are several possible formats of the **FINAL PROJECT.** One option is to write an **ESSAY** (5-6 pages) on the topics of your own choice, which are to be discussed in advance with the instructor. Another option is a **CREATIVE PROJECT.** For example, you can produce a photo/video essay with commentary on a chosen subject pertaining to Russian culture, including literature, history, visual arts, architecture, etc. Please make sure that you discuss such projects with me in advance. There is no requirement concerning the use of outside sources.
ATTENDANCE POLICY:

Your regular presence in class and attendance at all course related tours and excursions is required. Unjustified absences will lower your grade. If you fail to turn in an exam or the final project on time without a valid excuse, you may receive a zero for this assignment. Please notify your instructor IN ADVANCE if you need to miss class or reschedule a test because of a RELIGIOUS HOLIDAY not taken into account by the general class schedule.

Academic accommodations are available for STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES who are registered with the Office of Disability and Support Services. Students in need of disability accommodations should schedule an appointment with me early in the semester to discuss any accommodations for this course, which have been approved by the Office of Disability and Support Services, as indicated in your DSS accommodation letter.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY STATEMENT:

You must document all of your source material. If you take any text from somebody else, you must make it clear the text is being quoted and where the text comes from. You must also cite any sources from which you obtain numbers, ideas, or other material. If you have any questions about what does or does not constitute plagiarism, ask! Plagiarism is a serious offense and will not be treated lightly. Fortunately, it is also easy to avoid and if you are the least bit careful about giving credit where credit is due you should not run into any problems.

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS OR NEED HELP PLEASE DO NOT HESITATE TO CONTACT ME!

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

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| 6/8   | T   | 1. Introduction:  
Nonsense and Absurd in Russian and European Literature and Visual Arts of the 19th and 20th centuries.  
The Absurdist Vision of Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852)  
Reading:  
Nikolai Gogol, How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich (1834); The Nose (1836); Diary of a Madman (1835); The Marriage (1835).  
Vladimir Nabokov, Nikolai Gogol (1944) – selections  
Victor Erlich, Gogol (1969) – selections |
| 6/10  | TH  | 2. The Artist of Nonsense: Edward Lear (1812-1888)  
Reading:  
Edward Lear, selected poetry and prose  
G.K. Chesterton, “A Defense of Nonsense” (1901)  
Carolyn Wells, Introduction to A Nonsense Anthology (1902)  
Emile Cammaerts, The Poetry of Nonsense (1925) – selections  
| 6/15  | T   | 3. The Logician of Nonsense: Lewis Carroll (1832-1898)  
Reading:  
Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865) |
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| 6/17 | TH  | 4.  | Lewis Carroll Continued | Reading: 
*Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1872); *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876) 
| 6/22 | T   | 5.  | The Existential Absurd of Franz Kafka (1883-1924) | Reading: 
“Description of a Struggle” (1904-05); “The Judgment” (1913) 
“Unmasking a Confidence Trickster” (1913); “The Metamorphosis” (1915); “First Sorrow” (1921); “A Little Woman” (1923) 
Victor Erlich, “Gogol and Kafka: A Note on Realism and Surrealism” (1956) 
Roman Karst, “The Reality of the Absurd and the Absurdity of the Real: Kafka and Gogol” (1975) |
| 6/24 | TH  | 6.  | Russian Futurism: Absurd, Alogism and ZAUM, the transrational (“Beyond-Mind”) Language | Reading: 
A. Kruchenykh, V. Khlebnikov, “The Word as Such” (1913) 
A. Kruchenykh, “The New Paths of the Word” (1913) 
A. Kruchenykh, *Victory Over the Sun* (1913) 
Selected poems by Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, Mayakovskii, Guro, and Kamenskii 
Nikolai Firtich. “WORLDBACKWARDS: Lewis Carroll, Aleksei Kruchenykh and Russian Alogism” (2004); “‘Adieu Adieu Soleil Coupé’: Victory Over The Sun, Guillaume Apollinaire and Aleksei Kruchenykh’s Alogism (2009) |
| 6/29 | T   | 7.  | Absurd and Alogism in Russian Painting: Vassily Kandinsky, Marc Chagall, David Burliuk, Kazimir Malevich. | Reading: 
Selections from Vassily Kandinsky’s *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911) 
David Burliuk, “Cubism (Surface – Plane)” (1912); 
Kazimir Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism” (1915), selection from writings on art. |
| 7/1  | TH  | 8.  | The Birth of DADA in Zurich in 1916 and Tristan Tzara | Reading: 
Selected manifoes and poems by Tristan Tzara 
in class screening and discussion of *Entrac’te* (1924) |
|      |     |     | Surrealist Revolution: Literature and Visual Arts | Reading: 
Guillaume Apollinaire, *Zone* (1913) 
André Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1928); poetry selections 
Jeffrey Stern, “Lewis Carroll the Surrealist” (1982) |
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| 7/6  | T   | 9    | **Russian Theatre of the Absurd:**  
|      |     |      | OBERIU (Association of Real Art)  
|      |     |      | Reading:  
|      |     |      | **Daniil Kharms.** *Elizabeth Bam* (1927), selected prose  
|      |     |      | **Aleksandr Vvedensky.** *Christmas at the Ivanovs’* (1938)  
|      |     |      | Selected readings on Kharms and Vvedenskii |
| 7/8  | TH  | 10   | **French Theatre of the Absurd:**  
|      |     |      | Eugène Ionesco (1909-1994) and Samuel Beckett (1906-1989)  
|      |     |      | Reading:  
|      |     |      | Selected readings on Ionesco and Beckett |
| 7/15 | TH  | 11   | **Absurd, Nonsense, and Surrealism in Cinema**  
|      |     |      | Luis Buñuel (1900-1983), Federico Fellini (1920-1993), Jean –Luc Godard (b.1930), Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-1986)  
|      |     |      | Reading:  
|      |     |      | Selected readings on the above directors  
|      |     |      | **The Return of the English Nonsense:** *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* (1969-1983)  
|      |     |      | Reading:  
|      |     |      | *Monty Python and philosophy: nudge nudge, think think!* / edited by Gary L. Hardcastle and George A. Reisch – selections  
|      |     |      | *Monty Python: complete and utter theory of the grotesque* / edited by John O. Thompson – selections  
|      |     |      | **Timed on Canvas ID exam** |

**Books to be purchased by students:**


The rest of the reading materials will be distributed electronically in PDF format.