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GBLD 194.03: Identity in Focus - Russian and American Perspectives

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Russian & American Perspectives on Identity
GBLD 194, fall 2016
Tuesday 8-10:50am in NAC 009

Identity in Focus: Russian and American Perspectives

There are at the present time two great nations in the world, which started from different points, but seem to tend towards the same end. I allude to the Russians and the Americans. Both of them have grown up unnoticed; and whilst the attention of mankind was directed elsewhere, they have suddenly placed themselves in the front rank among the nations, and the world learned of their existence and their greatness at almost the same time.

-- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. I, 1835, ch. 18

Who am I? Who are we? How are we and I related to one another? These simple yet perplexing questions are at the heart of any attempt to grapple with identity, whether on an individual, local, regional, national or global scale. Indeed, the very seal of the United States, *e pluribus unum*, “out of many one,” reflects the contradictions inherent in any attempt to define who we are as a unified, “indivisible” and diverse nation. How can a “melting pot” of disparate cultures and ethnicities come together to form one whole body politic and yet still manage to retain and respect each person’s individuality? Moreover, how can modern human beings maintain and nourish a sense of self amidst the plethora of often conflicting personalities and personae we are expected to don on a daily basis?

Few nations in the modern era have been as obsessed with such questions of personal and national identity as the Russians and the Americans. This course will take two separate but related approaches to grappling with uniquely Russian and American formulations of these questions. The first will involve reading classic works of Russian and American fiction and watching three key films that implicitly or explicitly explore issues related to personal, group, ethnic and national identity. The second will provide students with the tools and training to produce a video short in which they will give artistic expression to their own understanding of a certain aspect of identity related to one or both of these two countries.

I. National Identity in Literature and Film

A. Russia

Geographically situated between Europe and Asia, Russia has continued to be characterized as the great expanse seemingly caught “in between” two vague but ideologically powerful geographical imaginaries known as East and West. Intellectual debate about the “true” nature of

Russia's past and its "best path" for development in the future became so intense in the 19th century that it gave rise to two powerful and often antagonistic camps known as the Slavophiles and the Westernizers. Westernizers emphasized Russia's historical isolation from Western Europe and its so-called backwardness and lack of genuine enlightenment prior to the Westernizing reforms set in motion by Peter the Great. As a result, Westernizers argued that Russia must continue the path initiated by Peter the Great and Catherine the Great and become fully integrated with Europe if Russia ever hoped to realize its tremendous raw potential. In opposition to the Westernizers, the Slavophiles tended to highlight Russia's agrarian roots, communal tendencies, and the rich spiritual heritage that existed prior to the massive reforms begun by Peter the Great. Rather than emphasizing the accomplishments of European secular culture and the ostensible civilizing influence that Europe exerted on the rest of the world, the Slavophiles instead underlined Europe's moral decline and spiritual decay that they felt had begun to reach a critical point by the mid-19th century. In fact, many of their negative pronouncements about Europe anticipate conclusions drawn by Spengler in his infamous *Decline of the West*. The lightning rod figure for the Slavophile-Westernizer split quickly became Peter the Great, the Russian tsar and self-crowned Emperor that Westernizers upheld as the beginning of Russia's only viable future as a powerful European nation. The Slavophiles, on the other hand, went so far as to label Peter an "Anti-Christ" and his Westernizing program a malignant disease from which spiritually rich Russia needed to cure itself.

Arguably, one cannot fully appreciate any of the great novels of Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, understand the cultural climate that led to the Bolshevik Revolution, or even comprehend modern Russian society under the rule of Vladimir Putin without at least basic familiarity with the Slavophile-Westernizer debate. Countless prominent historians and cultural commentators on Russia including Nicholas Riasanovsky, Martin Malia and the US Librarian of Congress, James Billington, have characterized modern Russian history as a continual shifting between these two poles, with cycles of acceptance of Russian identity as essentially Western European (e.g., the reigns of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great; the era of Alexander I's victory over Napoleon) alternating with periods advocating a rejection of the West and a withdrawal from Europe that at times has verged on xenophobia (e.g., the later years of Stalin's rule).

B. The United States

The historical trajectory of the United States has been very different from that of Russia, but there are also substantial points of congruence. Voltaire viewed Russia after Peter the Great's Westernizing reforms as a macrocosmic experiment in Enlightenment thinking; in fact, his admiration for Peter the Great as cultural and social reformer was so great that he even wrote the first full-length biography of the great Russia tsar. Similarly, the United States can also be seen as an ongoing experiment inspired by Enlightenment ideals but tempered by a European cultural heritage and religious convictions that predated those secular values. If Peter the Great's break

with the past was intended to result in Russia becoming more civilized, European and modern, the American Revolution has traditionally been viewed as a radical break with European roots in order to form a new society based on democratic principles and belief in individual freedom.

This course will compare representative Russian and American works focusing on identity during three main periods: 1) the 1820s-1830s, when Russian writers were attempting to come to terms with the aftermath and meaning of the cultural revolution initiated by Peter the Great, and American writers like Washington Irving were reflecting in a similar vein on the significance of the American Revolution for American identity; 2) the 1920s, when Yevgeny Zamiatin's classic dystopian novel *We* was written but not published due to state censorship in the young Soviet Union and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* appeared in the United States. Both of these works can be viewed as extended meditations on the respective national dreams, American and Soviet, and how these dreams were fatally flawed. 3) Finally, we will explore issues related to more contemporary Russian and American identity as reflected in two full-length feature films produced in Russia and the US respectively. These films will help us transition to the second half of the course in which students will work to write and produce their own video short focusing on issues related to Russian and/or American identity.

II. Identity-Centered Video Productions

Understanding any cultural mindset, including our own, is always a challenge – and one that serious students generally meet by reading history, literature, and/or works in sociology and psychology that address the issue at hand. Another effective but less traveled road involves students in the active writing and production of their own media (in this instance, a dramatic video short) that expresses and likely extends their grasp of at least one aspect of that mindset – in this case, the issues and challenges related to identity formation in an increasingly more diverse, complex, and global culture.

Students will be required to choose a dramatic “moment” from one Russian and one American literary work assigned in class, adapt each of these moments for the visual media (i.e., write a script that captures “the essence” of each), and produce two video-short based on these scripts.

The hope and the expectation here is that by interpreting and visualizing character and situation through the process of adapting and directing a script, students will deepen their understanding and appreciation of the complexity of identity-related issues and challenges facing both individuals and nations in the world today.

COURSE GOALS and LEARNING OUTCOMES:

Identity is a messy and often controversial topic but one that is nonetheless a vital consideration for human beings in the modern world. How can we develop strategies to help us define ourselves as individuals and simultaneously as members of larger social groups, such as family, region, religion, ethnicity and nation? A comparative look at the past struggles of Russians and Americans to define and delineate themselves at the individual, national and global level during crucial transitional periods can provide a uniquely rich and multifaceted lens for students struggling with their own identities in the context of globalization today. Russian and American historical perspectives on identity can provide a rich backdrop of past experience to help students better define and delineate their own place, their own space, and their own “face” in today’s ever more globalized, interconnected, and yet often fundamentally fragmented and factional world.

Students will also learn valuable video skills (shooting, editing, script writing) while learning to give artistic expression to fairly complex social and psychological issues.

GENERAL COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Regular attendance and active participation in class discussion
Timely reading of assigned works and adequate preparation for discussion
2-3 pages of typed notes on several daily assignments (due at the start of class)
Response papers on selected readings (x2, 4-5 pages each, typed)
Script, Treatment, Story Board for two video shorts adapting two literary moments
from works read in class.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Available from your instructor for \$26:

Washington Irving, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow and Other Stories*
Nikolai Gogol, *The Overcoat and Other Short Stories*
Herman Melville, *Bartleby and Benito Cereno*
Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*
F Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*
Occasional photocopies

Available in the University Bookstore

Tom Schroepel, *The Bare Bones Camera Course for Film and Video*

GRADING:

- 15% Attendance and Class Participation
- 15% Daily Writing Assignments: (typically 2-3 pages of typed notes on the assigned works)
- 30% Response papers of 4-5 pages in length (x2 at 15% each)
- 20% Video Production Component
- 20% Written Final Exam

GRADING SCALE

A = 93-100	B- = 80-82	D+ = 68-69
A- = 90-92	C+ = 78-79	D = 64-67
B+ = 88-89	C = 77-73	F = 63 and below
B = 83-87	C- = 70-72	

PAPER GUIDELINES:

Unless otherwise noted, any assigned work for this class should be typed or done on a computer and conform to MLA standards for citation of secondary sources whenever this is appropriate. Use a standard 12 point font and double-space. Proofread assignments for typos, poor wording, mechanics, etc. Late work will be penalized one letter grade per class day (except for in-class writing, which cannot be made up).

Plagiarism will not be tolerated in any form. Please ask if you have a question about what constitutes plagiarism, but on the whole, if you consult another work for ideas, copy or paraphrase from another source, etc., then you need to acknowledge the source (including the work you consulted, the publication information, and the page number/s) in your paper with a footnote.

Syllabus

****Work listed under each date on the syllabus is the work that is due for that class period. For the class meeting on Tuesday, Sept. 13, you need to have already read *The Bronze Horseman*, “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and you should come to class with 3 pages of typed notes on these three works and be ready to discuss and work with them in class.**

August

- Tues 30 Discussion of Syllabus, Course Overview, Distribution of Course Materials
- Mini-Lecture and Discussion: Approaches to Identity (individual, group, national)
- Peter the Great and his Cultural Revolution: Russia and «the West»
- A Glimpse into Identity in the USSR: Cheburashka and Crocodile Gena

September

- Tues 6 **Watch before class today:** *Ex Machina* directed by Alex Garland (2015)
- Due in Class: A two-page essay on the film.** We will discuss the film and your essays in class. Pay particular attention to how the film explores themes and issues related to identity (including gender identity).
- Tues 13 Russian Identity after Peter the Great through the Lens of Pushkin’s Masterpiece
- Europe and American Identity after the Revolution: Irving’s *Sketch Book*
- Read for Today:** *The Bronze Horseman* by Alexander Pushkin
“Rip Van Winkle” by Washington Irving
“The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” by W. Irving
- Due in class: 3 pages of typed notes on the readings for today**
I suggest devoting one page of notes to each story
- 1) Who are the main characters in Pushkin’s poem? How are they characterized? What major events occur in the poem? How can *The Bronze Horseman* be viewed as a meditation on Russian identity?
 - 2) Who are Rip Van Winkle and Ichabod Crane? How are they characterized in the respective works? What major events occur in each work? What themes are raised in each work? How could these works be viewed as explorations of American identity?

Tues 20 Gogol, Europeanization, and the Fragmentation of Russian Identity
Melville, "Occupational" Capitalism, and the Haunting of American Identity
In-Class Mini-Lecture on Marxist Theory (and a Few Words on Leninist Practice)

Read for Today: Gogol, "The Nose," "The Overcoat"
Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener"

Due in class: 2 pages of typed notes on the readings for today
I suggest devoting a page to Gogol and a page to Melville

Who are Kovalyov, Akakii Akakievich and Bartleby? How are they characterized in the respective works? What major events occur in each work? How could these works be viewed as explorations of Russian and American identity?

Tues 27 Mini-Lecture: The Russian Revolution and Identity in the Soviet Union
In Class: Nikita Mikhalkov's film *Anna from 6-18* (and discussion)

Response Paper ONE (4-5 pages) due today in class

Choose TWO of the works we have read and discussed thus far in class (by Pushkin, Irving, Gogol and Melville) and write an analysis of these works in which you consider how they explore issues related to identity. What seems to be the main theme or themes in the works? How does the author explore each theme? How do the works explore aspects of individual identity? National identity? Can the works be viewed as a kind of message or warning to future generations?

I strongly recommend comparing and contrasting the two works and the respective main characters in the two works. For example, you may wish to focus on Akakii in Gogol's "The Overcoat" and Bartleby in Melville's story. Or you may wish to compare and contrast The Headless Horseman and The Bronze Horseman in the works by Irving and Pushkin. Note that you do not need to answer every question I have posed above—just provide a comparative analysis of the two works and focus on issues related to identity.

October

Tues 4 Soviet Socialism, Communal Culture, and the Problem of Individuality
Revolution and the Returns of the Past: Brave New Worlds and Old Values

Read for Today: Zamyatin, *We* (the entire novel)

Due in class: 2 pages of typed notes on the novel assigned for today

Questions to consider: Who are D-503, I-330, O-90, the Guardians, and the Benefactor? What is the One State and how is it organized? What are major elements that make up the society described in Zamyatin's novel? List them and provide a short characterization – for example, what is the Integral? What are pink tickets? The Green Wall? The Ancient House? What major events occur in the novel? For example, what is Unanimity Day? The Great Operation? How does D-503 change over the course of the novel? How does the novel end?

Tues 11 World War I, the Roaring 1920s, & American Identity up to the Great Depression
Fitzgerald's Critique of the So-Called "American Dream"

Read for Today: Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (the entire novel)

Due in class: Write a 2-3 sentence summary of what happens in EACH chapter of the novel (Suggestion: it will be easier if you do this as you are reading the novel)

Tues 18 **Before Today's Class:** Watch the Coen Brothers' film *No Country for Old Men* based on Cormac McCarthy's 2005 novel

Crossing into the Postmodern Wild West: Joel and Ethan Coen's Film
No Country for Old Men (2007)

Identity, Capitalism & Consumer Culture in Anna Melikyan's *Mermaid* (2008)

Response Paper TWO (3-4 pages) due today in class

Choose ONE of the novels or films assigned in class (*We*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Anna from 6-18*, *No Country for Old Men*) and write an analysis of this work as an exploration of identity (individual, group, and/or national). Who are the main characters of the novel or film? What seems to be the main theme or themes in the work? How does the author/director explore each theme? How does the work explore aspects of individual identity? How does it explore elements of national identity? Can the work be viewed as a kind of warning to future generations about issues related to identity?

Tues 25 Adapting the Identity-Centered Literary Moment

Read for Today: Script Writing reading on Moodle
The first half of *Bare Bones*

November

Tues 1 Production and Script Workshop

For Today: Bring your script, treatment and storyboard
Read the second half of *Bare Bones*

Tues 8 **ELECTION DAY – No Class**

Tues 15 Critique of Production #1 and Workshopping Script #2

For Today: Production #1 due
Bring script, treatment and storyboard for production #2

Tues 22 Critique of production #2

For Today: Production #2 due

Tues 29 Wrapping up Identity: *Her* vs. *Ex Machina*

For Today: Watch *Her*
Write a 3-pg. essay comparing *Her* and *Ex Machina*
focusing on identity-related themes discussed in class.

December

Tues 6 Summary and Review

The **FINAL EXAM** for this class will be on **Friday, Dec 16**
from **10:10am-12:10pm** in NAC 009.