Alternative Forms of Narration in Russian Fictional Literature (19th and 20th centuries)

In 1864 eminent Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky commences his acclaimed novel Notes from the Underground with a copious footnote that negates the author's agreement with and responsibility for the narrator's subsequent ideas. Seventy years later, Mikhail Bulgakov, a Russian writer of posthumous renown, induces similar narrative uncertainty into his novel The Master and Margarita through a series of allegedly insane authors who explicitly declare their own unreliability as storytellers. Despite the conspicuous difference between the temporal and sociopolitical contexts within which these two novels were written, they share a self-conscious textual subversion of meaning which permeates Russian fictional literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 marked the country's transition from an autocratic imperial monarchy to a communist political regime. The totalitarian grip of both these rulerships over every aspect of their subjects' existence prohibited the free and unfettered literary expression of ideas on topics ranging from religion to government to community. The literary offspring of this time period bore the burden of the uncomfortable textual dichotomy created by political censorship: the necessity of the author to deliberately nullify the meaning expressed within his text in order for his ideas to be disseminated and published at all. Russian fictional text, namely novels, written during these turbulent centuries, often subverts its own meaning through the expression of ideas in covert, encoded, and obscured ways.

Russian authors accomplished this feat of alternative literary expression by several means which will form the basis of my literary investigation next semester. In order to express otherwise incommunicable ideas the texts I will analyze employ the techniques of 1) implicit and self-proclaimed narrative unreliability produced by speaking through a mentally insane narrator (e.g. Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita); 2) defamiliarization, the description of familiar concepts,
objects, and ideas in “unfamiliar” ways (a technique which places the tools of encryption and allegory at the author’s disposal); 3) a disclaimer, the author’s negation of his fabrication or support of the “outlandish” ideas expressed by the work’s narrator (e.g. Dostoyevsky’s Notes from the Underground); 4) the nullification of credibility created by gossip and controversial reports; and 5) the use of the “double” (schizophrenia, impostor, doppelganger (physical double) etc.) to vocalize alternative ideas (e.g. Dostoyevsky’s “The Double”).

The subversiye narrative strategies of Russian totalitarian fiction of the eighteen- and nineteen-hundreds raise prolific questions as to what the origin of and necessity for such tactics was; these strategies’ chronological development during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and the implications they held for subsequent Russian fictional narratives. In addition to examining Russian primary texts (which works are enumerated in “List of Texts”) for common alternative forms of narration, my work will overlap the fiction with literary criticism written on the works and analyze them in the context of theory on totalitarian literature and narrative techniques to answer several questions: Do self-subversive narrative forms in Russian fictional literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries undergo an evolutionary process or do they simultaneously coexist? How did the governmental supervision imposed upon Russian fiction change in intensity, type, and strictness during this time period and how did narrative forms respond to this change? Are these narrative forms unique to Russian fictional literature or are they common to all the totalitarian literature produced during this time period? What social function did this literature perform in its contemporary and posthumous setting? How was twentieth-century Russian fictional literature affected by/how did it respond to the Communist regime’s ever-narrowing criteria for publication? What are the characteristics, features, and function of Socialist Realism?
Bibliography

Primary Texts


Secondary Texts


Avant-Gardism and the Performance of Ethnic Identity in Art and Literature

Both critics and theorists of the visual arts and literature have remarked upon the quickening of the pace at which avant-garde arts are recuperated into official institutions and how their radical elements are neutralised as they are reduced to signs of capital in an art market or commodities in an economy of official discourse that strips them of their subversive power. However, this analysis of the recuperation of ‘outside arts’ or ‘other arts’ does not fully address those arts that are engaged in constructing/deconstructing/performing marginalised social identities. I want to examine why this is: what critical or theoretical assumptions are made about outsider arts or radicalism in arts that cause this resistance to treating arts that are engaged in ethnic identity as performance as successfully radical (or unrecuperable by traditional means)? How does an engagement with identity affect how art and literature are seen in the context of avant-garde projects? Is an investment in ethnic identity necessarily prohibitive of a work being part of a trans-ethnic/trans-national avant-gardism? On the level of the evaluation made by critics and by arts institutions I will look at how evaluations of innovativeness and avant-gardism are used to read ethnically performative art and literature. Secondly, I want to look at the theoretical approaches that are used to understand and evaluate the performance of cultural identity in literature and the arts. This includes examining theoretical models that deny the possibility of a real or effective articulation of cultural identity.

A specific focus of my project will be contemporary Chicano/a art and literature. I want to look at models of Chicano arts as articulating subjectivities that may not fit within binarisms of outside/inside, Mexican/American, ethnic other/assimilated citizen, immigrant/native. How do contemporary criticism and theory address such subjectivities? Does the complication of a liminal subject as seen in Chicano arts problematise critical understandings of ‘outsider’ art?
There is a useful dialogue to be observed between these concepts of hybridity, used in the context of ethnic identity and historical circumstance, and hybridity as an aesthetic notion in post-modern art as well as in (traditionally conceived) avant-garde arts. The notion of hybridity is important for an historical understanding of Chicano identity. It is also foregrounded in formal aspects of Chicano arts and literature: such as in the mixings of popular and fine arts and of European and Latin American art traditions, and in code-switching in Chicano literature. I want to see how such mixings, as conceived and received, in Chicano art reflect upon the use of similar techniques in postmodern arts that are not overtly engaged in identity-construction. What can identity performance in radical art say about resistance to depth in postmodern art? Conversely, how can concepts of hybridity as articulated in postmodern theory affect our understanding of the construction of hybrid identities in Chicano art and literature? While postmodern art and literature may subvert traditional notions of the self, radical Chicano art that uses the same methods but is also engaged in constructing a political and ethnic subject, may challenge dominant conceptions of postmodern subjectivity and the relationship of the artistic and the political.

The model of art as an expression or performance of cultural identity has been central to the projects of Chicano/a artists and writers and to theorists of their work. While focusing on the works themselves, I will also use theoretical texts that address Chicano arts and Latino arts. The work of performance artist and writer Guillermo Gómez-Peña will especially useful here, because he theorises his own work, and his performance work comments upon contemporary criticism and theory.

Given my examination of cultural identity as articulated in the works and in criticism, I will also have to look at how such conceptions of identity relate to post-structuralist / post-ethnic paradigms. How do essentialist and anti-essentialist paradigms affect the way this artwork is conceived and interpreted? How have paradigms of avant-gardism that privilege a dissolution of the subject through a kind of free play prevented us from engaging those art works that are also
radically subversive but are engaged in constructing (not just dissolving) a subject? The idea of art as a means of identity construction of course raises questions, in a postmodern epoch, about intentionality, fixity of meaning, the death of the subject, etc. Looking at the possibility of impossibility of the work to communicate or perform a meaning is especially important here. I want to examine theoretical paradigms that take into account these questions raised by postmodernism, but also the existence of a dominant subjectivity in art criticism, one that perhaps includes theoretical paradigms that block the construction of new subjectivities, in the name of postmodern scepticism. I want to see how arguments about criticism/interpretation and recuperation of radical arts can be read alongside the discourse of primitivism and naive arts, when the art in question is engaged in minoritarian identity-performance.

My intention is not to prove that the engagement with multiple and possibly radicalised identities that is practised by Chicano art should enter more into the dialogue of mainstreamed avant-gardism. Rather, I want to see how this type of art may be able to offer new ways of seeing art as praxis, new possibilities for understanding art outside of the dialectic of newness/recuperation that has been used to hail the end of avant-gardism or the impossibility of simultaneous political and aesthetic engagement.


Critical Work on Gómez-Peña:


Critical Work on Cherrie Moraga:


Allatson, Paul. 'I May Create a Monster': Cherrie Moraga's Transcultural Conundrum Antipodas: Journal of Hispanic Studies of the University of Auckland & La Trobe University. 1999-2000, v.11-12,103-21.

The language and literature of mystical experience

The discourse of mysticism embodies in some ways an acute case of a more fundamental representational malaise - - that is, how might language ever offer a sufficient vehicle for embodied (much less disembodied, or ecstatic) experience? How can such a phenomenal infinity be filtered into the finitude of the page? I am curious about the relation of the multitude of literary questions posed by the (in particular, Christian) mystical tradition - - from prayer to typology to the theology of the eucharist - - to more recent issues of literary theory and philosophy. In particular, I am curious to compare these different modes of textuality, the deep investment evinced by each in the anxious oscillation between what they are saying and what they are doing. I am interested in what these traditions have to say to one another - - both historically and comparatively - - as each mystic seems to have established their own answers to some of the questions still most puzzling today: in particular the relation of language to experience, the place of the body (especially in relation to the self and its mortification and erasure), the way in which the absolute and the infinite weave into everyday life (or don’t).

My project has two facets - - one historical and another more literary. The more literary piece is a comparative analysis along essentially tropological grounds - - what figures and devices do these writers deploy to characterize the finite phenomenon of noumenal boundlessness? How does this affect the text in a more total sense? This allows me to recast what Pseudo-Dionysius coined almost 2000 years ago as a “mystical theology” within the terms of a “mystical textuality.” This has particular import in relation to allegory - - in the sense that the distinction argued by de Man, for instance, between allegory and symbol is one with deep theological content, especially for Christians. This forces me to address an interesting circularity in this discourse - - that is, the tropological content of theology, and the theological subtext to tropology. Prayer and the structure of address; experience and recollection; the renunciation of materiality and referentiality; interpretation and hermeneutic circularity.

My second way of approaching this question is a more historical excavation. If the twentieth century is infamous in some circles for its secularity, whatever happened to the spiritual and the religious? Where did they go? It seems almost a kind of repression of an embarrassingly dogmatic cultural past: but are we suffering from any symptoms in the aftermath of that hasty burial? This sort of questioning lends itself to particular genealogical inquiries - - such as the place of the Zohar for Walter Benjamin, or the import of Meister Eckhart for Martin Heidegger, St. Teresa of Avila for Jacques Lacan. My goal here is not a repatriation of theory to its theological origins (such as they are) - - nor is it to reinsert the spirit back into postmodernity, or to uncover some hidden divinity in poststructuralism. However, it offers what I hope is a productive entry into each of the modern writers, as attention to these “historical” personages forces one to consider the kind of “history” they figure in each text. This generates a troubling kind of historicity, with ecstacies standing in as vessels of the past.
These two facets of course are deeply related - - in many ways, it is the literary theories of each tradition that touch most closely upon each other. The Neoplatonic tradition of apophasis, for example, resonates in interesting ways with a Derridean conception of différencé. In both, language is, before anything else, a failure - - all successes, any possibility of redemption, follow from that premise. It is precisely this kind of paradox, of surrender to an essential imprisonment as the only possible soteriology, which brings both traditions to a peculiar ethical crossroads. This is also crucial to what I am interested in: what sort of ethical demands does the recognition of this situation make on us in relationship to writing? What sort of symbolic behavior does it lend itself to, and what then is the ethical content of linguistic practice (taken in a broad sense, from prayer to autobiography to meditative thought)? It is these questions - - the sense of urgency of the textual event, not just as a saying but as a doing and an undoing - - that makes me want to juxtapose these traditions. The intensity of personal investment (often precisely in the form of a divestment of the person) demands a particular kind of aesthetic engagement - - one with an intimate, and often destructive, relation with the ethical. Thus, to finally relate these historical and formal questions, I will need an aesthetics that can think ethically; here, the work on aesthetics of, for example, Theodor Adorno and Leo Bersani (both of whom are suggestive of new readings of mystical texts) will be helpful. This will be useful first in the basic project of considering the aesthetics of mystical experience, but it will also be more broadly productive in the attempt to think of aesthetic possibilities suggested by mysticism - - of experience that forgets itself, an aesthetics that renounces will, an art without persons.

Texts

Plotinus, *The Enneads*
St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*
St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle; The Way of Perfection*
Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*
Meister Eckhart, selections and sermons
*The Cloud of Unknowing*
The Zohar
Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism; Kabbalah*
Moshe Ideal, *Messianic Mystics*
Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, *Correspondence*
Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama;* selections from *Illuminations* and *Reflections*
Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking;* selections from *Poetry, Language, Thought*
Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death; Mémoires: For Paul de Man;*
Jacques Lacan, *Encore (Séminaire XX); The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*
Paul Ricoeur, various theological writings
Michel de Certeau, *La Fable Mystique*
Michael Sells, *Mystical Ways of Unsaying*
Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*
Leo Bersani, *Arts of Improverishment; “Is the Rectum a Grave?”; The Culture of Redemption*
Soren Kiekegaard, *Fear and Trembling*
René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*
Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*
John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida; The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought*
Multilingualism and Textual Self Awareness in the Twentieth Century

Ernest Hemingway is known for his tight prose to describe war, bullfighting, and the expatriate experience of the “lost generation.” Though the dialogue may at first appear to be straightforward, language complexities hide behind the simple sentences; in Spain and Cuba, his characters would speak Spanish, though the dialogue is presented in English. In a different part of the globe, in Brian Friel’s play, Translations, Irish dialogue is deliberately presented in English to underscore the British takeover of Irish traditions, and more importantly, their destruction of the Irish language. Saul Bellow and Vladimir Nabokov leave foreign language phrases in “the original.” When English and foreign languages coexist on the page, and when the foreign languages are represented in English, the reader is constantly reminded of the text as an intermediary or possible barrier between the “real” action or dialogue and what is finally conveyed to the reader. In the cases of Hemingway and Friel, the reader may miss the meaning associated with the original language that has been lost in the English, and for any novel where another language looms among the lines in italics, a reader who did not speak the language would lose the meaning of the phrase. Is there a difference between the varying portrayals of foreign language in dialogue and in narration? For my special field, I am interested in exploring the effects of different portrayals of foreign languages (specifically Spanish and French) in English language literature on the representation of one’s own culture, or that of another, and the ways in which these portrayals can render a text self-aware and force it to call attention to itself as a text.
There are many ways that a text can be metatextual, reminding the reader of its existence as a text and breaking the suspension of disbelief: there can be a symbol on the page instead of a word, the text can be arranged in a strange way, words can be omitted or censored, etc. I am interested in representation of foreign language as metatextuality because I would like to better understand the ways in which it calls attention to the text, and whether the different representations of foreign are metatextual in different ways.

In the cases where English stands in for a foreign tongue, yet was written purposefully in English, can the text be called a translation? The English dialogue is not exactly a translation because there does not exist an original text with which to compare it. Can something be “lost in translation” if there was never anything to be lost? Is the lack of an original related to a loss of identity for speakers of the original language? Furthermore, must a language be tied to the culture that speaks it? Does a representation of one language in another symbolize a cultural appropriation of ideas, or perhaps a form of imperialism? Is the reader purposefully being held at a distance from the native language of the characters, and if so, what is the purpose?

When foreign language segments are interspersed into the English sections, two languages stand side by side in contrast to one another. Does this mixing heighten the differences between the languages, and as a result heighten the differences between cultures, or can the mixing be seen as a unifying action between the languages and cultures? Why would a narrator present something that his reader is likely not to understand (at least upon first glance)? Is the content of the foreign language important, or is it more important that something is foreign to begin with?
In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, much of the English is written in a style that sounds like Spanish. For example, Robert Jordan asks, “‘You have that many years?’” (11). This sentence construction is not the standard way that one would ask an age in English; “‘You are that old?’” sounds more appropriate. The sentence, however, resonates with the word for word translation of the Spanish phrasing of this question: “¿Tu tienes tantos años?” Can this form of English then be considered foreign to the reader as well? In the same novel, though, Hemingway also uses Spanish phrases in the original language. I would like to investigate whether there is a difference between the moments when the anglicized Spanish is used, and moments when the original remains. If there is a difference, is it created by the varying portrayals of a foreign language in a mainly English text?

Finally, I am interested in exploring how these findings affect the conception of the narrator and narration. Can the narrator be seen as a translator, a person who must interpret the foreign events for the reader? Does a change from a foreign language into English put the narrator in a position of power or even censorship, as one is forced to see the text from the narrator’s “translations”? If an incomprehensible foreign language was left in the original, would the narrator be hiding more or less information?

Through these explorations of a foreign language presence in English literature, I hope to gain a better understanding of a language in its relation to culture, and also the way in which foreign language makes a text more self-aware.

**PRIMARY TEXTS**

Bellow, Saul. *Herzog*.

Chamoiscau, Patrick. *Texaco*

Davies, Robertson. *Fifth Business*. 
The circus and modernist aesthetics

I plan to study the relationship between the circus and modernist aesthetics in fin de siècle European literatures. My special field will have a historical and cultural dimension—the place of the circus in fin de siècle Europe, and a literary dimension—the relationship between what I will call circus writing and its translation into other media, such as plays, films or operas.

My work will be structured on two levels. Firstly, I will look at the history of the circus as one of the very popular “live arts” in turn of the century Europe. The circus, as it was established in late 18th century London by Philip Astley, is a modern phenomenon that encompasses past traditions (e.g. the Roman circus, commedia dell’arte) and new discoveries (e.g. complex props for acrobatic acts, exotic animals brought from the colonies). As an artistic phenomenon, the circus is thus part of the bourgeois modernity that Matei Călinescu differentiates from aesthetic modernity (41-46). What is the place of the circus in this fin de siècle bourgeois modernity? Is it merely a marginal kitsch phenomenon or a different kind of spectacle, the aesthetics of which is incorporated into that of various modernist literary movements?

This brings up the problem of representation: there is a radical difference between the real clown and his depiction in fiction, panting, and film (Bouissac, 152). While the clown is always surrounded by people in real life, he became one of the symbols of solitude in literary and iconographic works. Taking into account Bouissac’s remarks about the difficulties of representing a real clown in artistic works, I will turn to a much
discussed theme: the identification of the artist with the solitary, decrepit clown. Instead of interpreting the interest of fin de siècle artists in the circus and its clowns as a mere projection of their own image, I will argue that the dynamics between the circus and modernism is more complex. I will thus rearticulate the problem from the perspective of the importance of the circus space and symbols for modernism.

Secondly, I will ask a series of formal questions in order to define circus writing, its themes and main stylistic features, in a varied selection of fin de siècle literary texts. How do modernist texts develop such themes as the correspondences between emblematic figures of modernity (dandy, flâneur, and gambler) and autonomous circus figures (Pierrot, Lulu), the circus as a privileged topos for the theme of double or multiple identities, the urban circus versus the traveling circus, the place of the circus arena and show in a city, and the status of the circus spectator?

In 1879, when Edmond de Goncourt published Les Frères Zemganno, a Bildungsroman about two acrobat brothers who become clowns, he faced the unusual accusation of giving up naturalism for becoming “a gymnast of words” (Pontmartin, in Basch, 282), trying “to acquaint the French language with the complicated secrets of the trapeze” (Basch, 282). This critique of Goncourt’s circus novel points at what can be termed as circus writing: a text that integrates “the multimedia language of the circus” (Bouissac, 10-27). How does a modern literary text use this multimedia language? Félicien Champsaur’s novel Lulu (1901), which he describes as a roman clownsque, serves as a good example of circus writing. It is not only the theme of the novel—the apparition of a modern clown, the feminine, seductive Lulu—that makes it clownsque,
but also the way it is structured, bringing together different genres, such as pantomime poetry and illustrations.

In defining circus writing as a genre, I will also study the multiple possibilities of translation into other media offered by texts about the circus. Lulu was at first written by Félicien Champsaur as a pantomime (1888) and then developed into a novel (1901). The same character shows up in Frank Wedekind’s plays Erdgeist (1895) and Die Büchse der Pandora (1903). His two plays were the inspiration for the silent film Büchse der Pandora (Pabst, 1929) and for the opera Lulu (Berg, 1935). Likewise, the Russian play He who gets slapped by Leonid Andreyev (1914) became not only an opera (Ward, 1956) but also the inspiration for the first production filmed by MGM, He Who Gets Slapped (Sjöström, 1924). How does the narrative change when it is represented in a different medium? This issue is more complicated in the case of the representation of a circus, which is a performative event in itself.

Histories of the circus and various literary texts about the circus will thus help me interpret the role of this form of art in fin de siècle Europe and its status in both bourgeois and aesthetic modernity. I will look at translations from one medium into another, and in some cases from one language and cultural context into another and analyze the impact on the narrative and themes of the circus. My aim is to understand the intersections and mutual influences of circus aesthetics and modernism.
Bibliography

Primary sources:

Die Büchse der Pandora [Pandora's Box]. Dir. G.W. Pabst. 1929.


Paris: Charpentier, 1890.


Secondary sources:


The Uncanny Experience: Ghostly Persistence in 20th Century Chinese Literature

The “ghost” of literature—the trouble begins when one tries to define it. Is “ghost” purely a trope for the persistence of memory, a metaphorical haunting? Or, is “ghost” a natural phenomenon, a “real” thing? Derrida introduced the term “hauntology” and suggested that haunting is not something from the past but actually something very present. In modern Chinese literature, the “ghost” has been an especially powerful symbol of wandering, lost, and displacement in a time of change and turmoil. The writers that I hope to study all have written stories that may not invoke the supernatural but invoke the unseen ghost at every turn, leaving but a trace, the ghost of a ghost.

This study is meant to situate some “strange” modern Chinese literary texts in their historical context. The May 4th movement in 1919 had introduced realism as a means to enlightenment, rationality, transparency, and so on, but these later texts characterized a departure from the rationalistic discourse, producing ghostly discourses in which madness and repetitions abound. They do not separate the “human” from the “ghost,” instead choosing to depict the “ghostly human,” and in that depiction, to accentuate the lost and the mad.

Is realism, then, challenged or reinforced by the persistence of this kind of ghostly discourse? How is realism to be redefined in the context of the uncanny? What role does madness and trauma play in these texts? Do these texts emphasize the irrational or irrelevant, and to what end? Or, do they release the silenced “feminine,” the non-identity in identity, the “other”? How can various texts be seen as members of a haunted intertextual network?
I hope to direct my study to some of the more outstanding modern works of Chinese literature by mainland and overseas writers. For many of the writers that I hope to read, uncanniness might have been the best vehicle for expressing their sensibility. Many of these works are available in translation and most are influenced by Western literature. Here is where I hope to find some grounds for comparative study, since one can hardly talk about purely “Chinese” literature anymore when the meaning of “Chineseness” has been in such a state of flux. For example, a collection of stories by Bai Xianyong called *Taipei People* reminds one of *Dubliners*, and Zhu Tianxin’s *Old Capital* uses the technique of stream of consciousness reminiscent of both Joyce and Faulkner, but with a twist—it is written in the second person.

At the center of this study perhaps is one of the recently established canonical figures in modern Chinese literature, Eileen Chang—a female writer who wrote her most famous stories during the Japanese occupation of Shanghai in the 40’s. Her case is especially interesting because she challenges the very concept of phonocentrism, or the existence of a perceptible Chineseness—a singular voice—in Chinese literature. Her writings display a tension between the elite and the popular, the male and female, always residing on the margins of any literary origin, as she drew her inspirations from both traditional Chinese vernacular fictions and Victorian prose. It may be argued that Chang wrote on the borderline of legitimacy and illegitimacy, herself never considering her works of any lasting value, believing instead that they should be written, erased, and re-written. Those writers that follow her have perhaps revived her sensibility, choosing a desolate view of history and its repetitions, instead of one of reason and progress.
Bibliography

Primary texts:


Secondary texts:


