

Sarah Chao, University of Kansas

“Today I Wrote [Some]thing”: Narrative Co-construction and the Kharmsian Genre

What is a narrative? This seemingly simple question has been the center of narratological discourse for decades. Labov and Waletzky’s famous study, published in 1966, sparked a discussion among literary theorists as to what the exact limits of narrative may be. Mapping the thematic and stylistic components that make up various genres became a popular approach, resulting in numerous taxonomies and formulaic explanations of narrative structures. Just a few years later, George Gibian uncovered the lost literature of early Soviet Russian writer Daniil Kharms (first published in English translation in 1971). Since its re-discovery, Kharms’s work has confounded scholars and readers alike. In particular, Kharms’s “Sluchai” (often translated as “Incidents”) consists of thirty short works of prose that scholars have found difficult to label as “narrative” due to their fragmented structure and, more importantly, their unidentifiable genre. While Neil Cornwell refers to Kharms’s work as subversive, experimental prose which he deems the “anti-story”, Jean-Phillipe Jaccard insists that it should not be called *anti*-literature, but *non*-literature. Neil Carrick concedes that Kharms’s writing “defies ready categorization” and Branislav Jakovljevic states outright that Kharms’s texts are “not narratives or arguments, but simple, unambitious traces of lead or ink on paper.” On their own, individual stories seem nonsensical and even non-narrative; as a collection, however, I argue that “Sluchai” and its “absurd” texts constitute a corpus of narratives, definable as such by their common adherence to a unique, Kharmsian literary genre. The creation and acquisition of this distinct genre comes from the inevitable process of narrative co-construction, wherein readers participate in a narrative event, lending their own subjectivity and commentary to “complete” a work. Using “Sluchai” as my example, I postulate that readers can and do acclimate to experimental narrative environments by recognizing recurring components and assigning them to a new literary genre.