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CDIPS Final Project
2021-22

“Life as Art: Slavic Modernism and Life Experiments in the Russophone 20th century”
An Experiment in Canon Critique and Expansion

Part I: Executive Summary

Russian Modernism courses at Goldendoodle University currently seek to familiarize students with some of the formal elements and philosophical principles of modernism in general, along with a handful of canonical writers and artists, most of whom are Russian men who worked out of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Yet modernism as a movement spanned a much larger and more diverse group of people working in the Russian language who are rarely studied, and as a movement constitutes much more than formal innovations. Modernist experiments in art went hand in hand with modernist experiments in life, in which artists and individuals interrogated established identities, behaviors, and modes of knowledge and tried to envision new ones for the new age. My project seeks to expand our understanding of modernism by including these other Russophone voices and situating them within this broader context of “reinventing life” in modern times. Students will come away with a broader understanding not only of modernism’s formal characteristics, but with an understanding of how this movement intersected with language politics, geopolitical realities, ethnic and national concerns, gender identities, and the lived experience of artists and writers in a variety of Russian-speaking locations. It also invites students to take a more active role in their own learning by developing a research topic and finding new figures of modernism to study. In this way the course provides students an opportunity to dive deep into the material in meaningful ways. In developing their projects they will also gain skills in information literacy and research. Finally, in framing the course as an exploration of invention of new forms of living and their expression in and through art, the course offers students ideas and strategies for inventing their own forms of life in a time of great upheaval and change.

Reference List

The following resources inform my approach to this project and provide me with background materials to support student learning.

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- Luckyj, George S. N. *Ukrainian Literature in the Twentieth Century: A Reader's Guide*. University of Toronto Press, 1992.
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Swalwell, Katy, and Daniel Spikes, editors. *Anti-Oppressive Education in “Elite” Schools: Promising Practices and Cautionary Tales from the Field*. Teachers College Press, 2021.

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Part II: Analysis

We are currently teaching a very small slice of what modernism was. Furthermore, our current emphasis on formal and philosophical concerns runs the risk of seeming disconnected from student’s lives and interests, and our canonical selections reproduce biases which are harmful to students’ educational experience. My project seeks to provide students with a fuller picture of what modernism was, connect it to their own experiences, and give them tools to develop and research their own questions and interests about experimental arts and lifestyles of the past.

I’m envisioning this modernism course as an upper-division course targeted to Slavic majors. In this I am assuming at least Intermediate knowledge of one or more Slavic languages. Though the course will be taught in English and all class materials supplied in English, students may need some ability in other languages in order to complete their research projects. If such a course is unfeasible, I can find workarounds for a group that only reads in English.

Goldendoodle University is a public institution with a diverse student population. 54% of students at Goldendoodle University identify as Black, Hispanic or Latino/a, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native, or multiple ethnicities. 39% of students speak a language other than English with their families, and 26% of them are from different countries. More than 70% of our students receive some form of financial aid, 40% come from families that have experienced or are experiencing poverty. Goldendoodle University values culturally-relevant pedagogies in order to support all of our students.

Goldendoodle University is a medium-sized public institution, but the Slavic major is a small one, so I expect class sizes of 10-15 students. This will be good for them, as we can have ample time for discussion and foster a supportive and collaborative group dynamic. Taking a CSP approach to teaching modernism will help us support the school’s mission statement of creating a diverse and inclusive classroom and innovative, relevant teaching.

Proposed Content:

Since the course is geared for majors, I assume some prior knowledge of Slavic political or art history. The course will begin with students pooling their existing knowledge of what is going on in the world at the turn of the 20th century - both in the Slavic world and beyond. From there, I will introduce the necessary background information and history, through primary material as much as possible. We will do a brief introduction of “canonical” modernism, in order to lay some of the groundwork for how modernism is currently understood, learn to critique some of the perspectives and assumptions that inform that canon, and set the stage for expanding what modernism can mean. The course will then be organized not chronologically or by modernist school but by forms of life experimentation. I hope to discuss with students, either in class or by written reflection and surveys, what kinds of topics they are most interested in and tailor the content to those interests. Some ideas of sample units include:

- A unit on cultural/ethnic forms of modernism - the rehabilitation of folk arts, the inclusion of national cultures/languages/arts, etc, focused on artists and writers of Ukrainian, Polish, Bulgarian, Serbian, Croatian, Georgian, Tatar, Kalmyk, etc. as well as Russian heritage.
- A unit on religious/experience impulses in modernism - new conceptions of the divine, of man’s place in the universe, or attempts to dispense with God and discover and mobilize humanity’s own creative powers (bogostroitel’stvo, etc)
- A unit on neurodiverse or phenomenological innovations in modernism - the ways artists and writers were rethinking the powers of the human mind, the role of emotions, the modes of knowing and perceiving the world, and the notion of madness.
- A unit on transhumanist/technohumanist elements of life experimentation - different ways writers and artists were trying to sublimate machinery and technology into human lives and bodies.
- A unit focused on class-based experiments - the elevation of the working class or peasant, inclusion of “street” language or slang in poetry, the depiction of urban spaces, the expansion of what counts as “culture” and its production.
- A unit on experiments in gender identity - including women’s forms of life, women artists/writers as well as queer and transgender experiments in art and life.
- A unit on colonial and nationalistic impulses in modernism - the elevation of order, the vilification of Others (racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, etc), and other totalitarian impulses that were intertwined with these other life experiments. We include this unit in order to offer a balanced and nuanced view of all the diverse strains of experiments in life and art and to learn to identify and critique oppressive forms of art and life.

There is obviously overlap in many of these categories, but hopefully I can get a feel of what students want to study and select the materials and topics that will best foster their interests and development. In this way students will come out of the course with a greater understanding of the liberatory as well as the problematic elements of modernism, understood as a wide set of experimentation in art and life at the turn of the century.

In all of this I plan to use as much primary material as possible, including manifestos, declarations, essays by the artists and writers to acquaint students with the artists' own voices and help conceptualize their experimentations in their own terms; works of art and literature, in order to analyze the intersection of art and life experimentation and develop analytical reading skills; and secondary literature, in order to gain a broader understanding of how our examples fit into larger narratives of modernism as well as model research and criticism.

The first half of the course will culminate in a creative assignment, in which students can interact with the material in ways that sustain their own cultures, identities, and modes of knowing. These may be traditional papers if students desire, though they may also produce a poem, painting, photo etc. reflecting one of the experimentations we have studied. They may write a manifesto or produce a work of art envisioning what modernist-inspired art/life experiments may look like in our own world or an imagined future world. They may make a documentary or other type of short film, a rap, a song, etc. The point is to have them engage the material in ways that draw on their own competences, cultures, and ways of knowing and interacting with the world.

The second half of the course will be organized around a capstone research project, in which students will identify a lesser-known writer or artist from this period to research and present to the class in a form of their choosing. Class time in this portion of the course will be dedicated to designing, planning, and implementing a research plan, including tours of the library, meetings with librarians, or tutorials of helpful research tools. Goldendoodle University has an excellent library and a team of knowledgeable Slavic and Art librarians who will be instrumental in this work. We might collate the final projects into a blog/website/booklet of lesser-known modernists if that makes sense.

My goals for students in this course are

- 1) To deepen their understanding of forms of life/art experiments in a place and time different from their own, while also making connections between that context and their own
- 2) To apply the principles and strategies of modernist art/life experiments in a creative assignment
- 3) To develop critical and analytic skills reading a wide variety of media (historical documents, manifestos, poems, short stories, paintings, film, etc).
- 4) To conduct a research project about a lesser-known modernist figure and present their findings in a clear and meaningful way

Part III: Design

Performance Objectives: In this course, learners will

- Develop an understanding of modernism that sustains the richness and diversity of the movement: as an attitude of experimentation which includes many forms of life, identities, nationalities, cultures, and languages.
- Make connections between forms of experimentation in the modernist period and their own ways of being and knowing in the 21st century.
- Produce a creative project that expresses or translates into contemporary culture some of the principles of modernist life/art experimentation
- Learn ways of critiquing and expanding the idea of a canon, to identify gaps and unjust perspectives and to amend a canon to make it more diverse and just
- Conduct a research project, using various online and in-person research tools, about a relatively unknown modernist writer or artist that would expand our understanding of one of the forms of life/art experimentation and diversify our understanding of the modernist canon.
- Prepare a write-up or essay detailing their research process and findings
- Present their research to the class in an engaging and informative way

Learning Assessments

- Students will occasionally complete quizzes, self-assessments, and written reflections in order for both them and myself to assess their learning
- Students will produce a creative assignment in order to engage with the material in original, creative, and culturally-sustaining ways. I will ask for a written reflection on the process as evaluation.
- Students will assess one another's research presentations.

Strategies, Activities, Methods

- Students will be asked to complete regular self-reflections in whatever format in which they are most comfortable reflecting and expressing themselves (CSP, anti-oppressive pedagogy). I may not even collect many of them.
- Student research will be guided by and informed by class tours of available campus and online resources to support students who may not have a background understanding of these things and will provide peer feedback in periodic workshops to help one another strengthen their research skills
- Discussions, evaluations, and assignments will be informed by equity literacy, ie the recognition and redressing of biases and inequities in the educational setting and seeking to “create and sustain a bias-free and equitable learning environment for all students” (Gorski 20).

- I aim to deemphasize test scores and evaluative grading in favor of assessment methods that more adequately and more justly indicate students' development and sustain their own identities, cultures, and ways of knowing, such as written reflections, self-assessments, and peer evaluations.

Alignment

Objective	Assessments	Strategies/Activities/Methods
Develop an understanding of modernism that sustains the richness and diversity of the movement	Self-assessment “quizzes” (done on pass/fail grading)	Written reflections, discussions, CSP
Make connections between forms of experimentation in the modernist period and their own ways of being and knowing in the 21st century	Creative assignment	Written reflections, CSP strategies
Learn ways of critiquing and expanding canons	Research project	Written reflections, class discussions, anti-oppressive pedagogy strategies
Conduct a research project using online and in-person tools and resources	Research project; research project write-up	Tours/tutorials of available on-campus resources, workshopping the design of projects with classmates, equity literacy strategies (Gorski), “checkpoints” along the way
Present their research to the class	Presentation	Peer-evaluated

Grading

- I will ask for written reflections about the creative assignment, asking students to reflect on the process of connecting the material to their lives, what ideas or strategies most interested them, what they might have gained from the exercise.
- For the written research project I will use a rubric to assess their research
- The presentation of research will be peer-graded with a set of questions
- Any other self assessments/quizzes or reflections will be pass/fail (ie if there is evidence of learning they pass)

Part IV: Development

- Class will include assigned readings, regular written reflections, period self-assessments about the material in lieu of traditional quizzes
- We'll have a class platform (eg Canvas) where readings and resources (such as presentation applications, research how-to's, research starting points, etc.) can be found, students can communicate with one another, and see the results of their assessments and evaluations in real time (so they always know where they stand in the class)
- I have discussed this project with my department chair and they have expressed their support.
- Goldendoodle University has policies in place to protect the teaching of content some may consider controversial. It also has established procedures for students to express concern about course content, including speaking with the professor, the department chair, their advisors, or various campus offices which can facilitate solutions if necessary. I will make explicit in my syllabus and in my course introduction that we will address such topics, and hopefully students will discuss any misgivings and we can come to a solution together before a problem arises. In the case of pushback from colleagues, I have sufficient pedagogical research to demonstrate the appropriateness of my methods and a network of supportive colleagues, including the department head to support my practices.

Part V: Implementation

Policies and Procedures

- I will expect students to adhere to the university's code of conduct as laid out in the student handbook. Other policies I'll implement on my own, informed by my experience in the CDIPS program
- I will call office hours "Student hours" - to undo some of the authoritative oppressive encounters students of color or experiencing poverty may have experienced in schooling settings, and making this explicit on the syllabus so 1st gen student know what it is
- Fewer grades and more qualitative - combats the "deficit" approach and encourages me and my students to see their resources and strengths.
- Creative assignment tries to mobilize and sustain student's own cultural identities and practices by allowing them opportunities to engage with the material in ways that align with their own values, identities, and modes of knowing (Paris & Alim).
- Research project admits that I am not the expert, gives power and authority to the students, and invites them to become active collaborators in their own education
- Guiding students through the use of research tools and giving them classes off for research time will hopefully ameliorate some of the difficulties students experiencing poverty might face in accessing the library or online research tools reliably or outside of

class. (Gorski) And will help with 1st generation students feeling comfortable and equipped to do the work.

- I'll allow technology in the classroom, to facilitate learners who may need accommodations (resources to support learning disabilities, or dictionaries etc as ESL students.)

Part VI: Evaluation

From students

- Occasional formative surveys/polls about the material/class experience to monitor the needs and experience of students as we go, so that I can make adjustments if necessary.
- A larger survey at the end of the course to assess what worked, what didn't, and gather students' ideas about how to improve the experience.

Reflective Practice

- I will keep my own written reflections throughout the semester to note the success of various materials, activities, methods, and strategies as we go, so that I can review it at the end of the semester.
- I will use Action Research steps to assess the data collected from the student surveys and my written reflections
- Based on the conclusions from my data assessment, I will adjust my course plan for the next time I get to teach it.