Modern Russian Culture: Socialist Realism in the Visual Arts

The literature on socialism realism has changed dramatically over the past decade as totalitarian interpretations of cultural politics (“the state made me do it”) have given way to a variety of approaches drawing on revisionist and empirical historiography and structuralist, psychoanalytical, and post-modern theory. This literature explores the origins of socialist realism in pre-revolutionary and Marxist aesthetic theories, the agency of artists, the complexity of utopianism, the survival of the avant-garde in socialist realism, the importance of the audience, and the constant, high-stakes political negotiations that occurred between artists and state agents.

The purpose of this seminar is two-fold. First is to familiarize students with the various ways that historians have conceptualized socialist realism; to examine the ways in which the visual arts were enlisted to serve state ends in the Soviet Union; to examine the various roles played by the arts in political and social life; and more broadly to learn to use visual materials in historical research, to think about the differences between visual and textual documents, and to place the arts in political and historical context. Secondly, to read ever more critically; to articulate a work’s argument lucidly and analyze its evidence effectively; in other words to write and speak in the language of professional historians.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS:**
Careful, critical reading of assigned materials and active participation in class discussions. Weekly essays on the assigned reading(s). Critical essays of approximately 700 words will focus on identifying the author’s main arguments and the evidence used to support that argument. Essays must be sent to me via e-mail, no later than noon on the Monday before the relevant Tuesday class. Periodic verbal introductions to the weekly discussions.

**Grading:** Class participation = 25%. Weekly essays = 75%.
Books to purchase:

Abram Terts, *The Trial Begins* and *On Socialist Realism*
Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*
Evgeny Dobrenko & Eric Naiman, *The Landscape of Stalinism*
Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Political Economy of Socialist Realism*

Books on Reserve:
(some of these books are available for steep discounts on-line)

Nicholas Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*
Liz Wells, *Photography: a Critical Introduction*
Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting*
Margarita Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph*
David King, *The Commissar Vanishes*,
Leah BenDavid-Val, *Propaganda and Dreams*

Copies of other articles and documents will be passed out in class
Articles available for download via JSTOR or UTNetCat are so marked

Schedule:

1. **Jan 15. Introduction**

If you are unfamiliar with the history of Russian/USSR from 1861-1945, please read any basic textbook: Nicholas Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia* will be on reserve.

2. **Jan 22. Issues**

What do we want to know about Socialist Realism? About politics and art? About the history of cultural policy? About the differences between literary and visual arts? About the ways socialist realism has been conceptualized? Read the following overviews and introductions and be prepared to discuss the fundamental **historical, political, cultural & historiographical** issues


Czeslaw Milosz, Introduction to “On Socialist Realism,” 131-45

Abram Terts (Andrei Siniavsky), *On Socialist Realism*, 147-21


Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Writer*, xi-xxi (xerox)


Vladimir Papernyi, *Kul'tura Dva* (excerpt) (Xerox)

Matthew C. Bown, *Art Under Stalin*, 35-139 (Xerox)

3. **Jan 29. NO CLASS**
4. Feb 5. Origins

Herman Ermolaev, *Soviet Literary Theories*, 1-7, 139-206
Boris Groys, *Total Art of Stalinism*, 3-75
Irina Gutkin, *Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic*, 1-80
(download from JSTOR)
Visarion Belinskii’s “Letter to Gogol”
Nikolai Chernyshevsky, “The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality”

5. Feb 12 Socialist Realism in Literature: History as Ritual
What are the conventions of socialist realism in literature? Do they help us understand the visual arts? How does Clark characterize socialist realism as a historical phenomenon? As a political phenomenon?

Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel*

6. Feb 19 Socialist Realism in Painting
How do these authors characterize socialist realism: culturally, aesthetically, stylistically, politically, historically? What are the main issues emphasized? To what extent are “narrative” elements emphasized? And to what extent visual elements: aesthetics, style, composition, color, form?

Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting*, 3-301 (on reserve)
(many of these pages contain reproductions of paintings, you are expected to “read” the paintings as well as the text)


7. Feb 26 Socialist Realism in Photography: truth
Discussions about the malleability of photographs began long before Photoshop made them familiar. How did Soviet photography (as an institution) conceptualize its ability and responsibility to capture reality? What was the role of art photography? And documentary photography? How did the implementation of socialist realism affect the kinds of work done by photographers? How did various Soviet photographers prioritize craft, aesthetics, technique, and subject matter, politics, documentation?

Margarita Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph* (xerox)
David King, *The Commissar Vanishes* (on reserve)
Leah Dickerman, “Camera Obscura: Socialist Realism in the Shadow of Photography”
*October* 93 (Summer 2000) 138-53 (JSTOR)

Recommended:

8. **Mar 4 Socialist Realism in Photography: labor**

Erika Wolf, “Icons of Forced Labor”
Victor Margolin, “Representing the Regime: Lissitzky and Rodchenko, 1930-1941” in *The Struggle for Utopia* (Xerox)
Alexander Rodchenko, [documents]
*Propaganda and Dreams* (on reserve)
Max Alpert, “Viktor Kalmikov at Magnitogorsk”
[http://www.schicklerart.com/auto_exh/MAlp_001](http://www.schicklerart.com/auto_exh/MAlp_001)

Recommended:
Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization*
James Agee and Walker Evans: *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*

9. **Mar 18 Socialist Realism in Architecture**
Dobrenko & Naiman, *Landscapes of Stalinism*
Greg Castillo, “Peoples at an Exhibition: Soviet Architecture and the National Question” in *Socialist Realism without Shores*, 91-119 (Xerox)

**Mar 25:** screening: *Man with a Movie Camera, Three Songs of Lenin,*
**Apr 1:**
Dziga Vertov: *Three Songs of Lenin*
Julian Graffy, “Cinema,” *Russian Cultural Studies*, 165-91 (Xerox)
Jeremy Hicks, “Documentary or Hagiography: Three Songs of Lenin” in *Dziga Vertov: Defining Documentary Film*, 90-105, 158-62
Lilya Kaganovsky, “The Voice of Technology and the End of Soviet Silent Film” *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* (Xerox)


Dziga Vertov, “from diaries” in Kino-Eye, Ed Annette Michelson (Xerox)

12-13 Apr 8-15: Socialist Realism in Cinema: The Stalinist Musical
April 8 screening: Grigory Aleksandrov, Circus (1936)
April 15:
Grigory Aleksandrov, Circus (film)
Richard Taylor, “But Eastward Look the Land is Brighter, Towards a Topography of Utopia in the Stalinist Musical” Landscapes of Stalinism
Oksana Bulgakowa, “Spatial Figures of Soviet Cinema of the 30s,” Landscapes of Stalinism
Beth Holmgren, “The Blue Angel and Blackface: Redeeming Entertainment in Aleksandrov’s Circus” The Russian Review 66:1 (Jan 2007), 5-22 (JSTOR)
Maya Turovskaya, “Films of the 1930s and 1940s” in Stalinism and Soviet Cinema

14.-15 April 22-29 Rethinking Socialist Realism, Rethinking Socialism
Evgeny Dobrenko, Political Economy of Socialist Realism
David Hoffmann, “Was There a "Great Retreat" from Soviet Socialism? Stalinist Culture Reconsidered”, Kritika 5:4 (Fall 2004) (UTNetCat)