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Michigan State University
MC 395 – Spring 2006

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Hours: M, W 2:45-3:45
Tuesday 1-

2:30

(and by appointment)

Encounters with Post-Communism

Course description: With the events of 1989, the once “impenetrable” and monochrome “Cold War Other” exploded into visibility. Post-communist sites initially entered the American cultural and political landscape via the television screen as newsworthy places where “history is happening”; subsequently, they became newsworthy spectacles of crisis (orphans, ethnic violence, poverty, nationalism); and, as of late, they have receded into partial visibility. This course investigates the post-Cold war re-articulations of the Cold war other. We will examine a wide range of narratives about post-communism, including television news coverage, travel guides, literary narratives of travel and return to “Eastern Europe,” and scholarly essays.

Some scholars remind us that in many ways the countries of the former Soviet Bloc continue to remain the subaltern and other. This course means to offer students the tools and strategies to inquire into how post-communist countries are represented, how knowledge about them is produced, how we are positioned towards them, and what the real consequences of this representation, knowledge production and positioning are.

Our course starts with television images of the Fall of communism and with readings of brief excerpts from some of the most popular 1990s travel guides to “Eastern Europe.” It concludes with texts that attempt to make sense of the revolutions of 1989 and of gender relations in “Eastern Europe” a decade after the “fall of communism.” However, our journey will not be strictly chronological, and our viewing and analysis of television clips will be woven into our investigation of travel guides and narratives of travel and return.

Television is, beyond any doubt, one of the main sites for encountering “other” cultures, and it is “the principal way by which most people today learn about history...” (Edgerton). From the coverage of the Berlin Wall to the Romanian revolution, television news claimed to offer American viewers the opportunity to watch the end of the Cold War as “history happening.” And, from images of Romanian orphans to images of wars in the former Yugoslavia, television news offered its viewers overwhelming representations of “post-communism.” Televisual representations of the “fall of communism,” the end of the Cold war, and the problems of post-communism will be key sites of our investigation. We will screen television news clips throughout the semester as we query how television news made sense of the “end of the Cold War” and

how it presented and redefined post-cold war geography and identities in a “new world order.”

Travel writing (ranging from travel guides to travel journalism) is the most popularly read “non-fiction” genre. Shaped by larger cultural beliefs and ideological inflexions, travel writing has and will continue to have a crucial role in shaping cultural encounters. This is why travel writing occupies a central role in this course. Narratives of return are a hybrid form of travel writing; they are a specific genre of the post-Cold War era in which Cold war immigrants reflect on their return to their native countries and attempt to translate what they see for their American audiences. Eva Hoffman’s *Exit Into History*, Petru Popescu’s *The Return* offer us the opportunity to consider the personal and rhetorical struggles involved in remembering a communist past, understanding the post-communist present, and translating this experience for an American audience.

We will be guided in our queries by crucial theoretical texts. The work of Edward Said, Maria Todorova, and Larry Wolff will help us understand the more recent representations of post-communism from a historical perspective. These texts will also offer us a critical understanding of the “Balkans” and “Eastern Europe” as concepts/ideas with a lengthy history and heavy political/ideological weight. Our discussions of the relationship between the concepts of “Eastern Europe” and “Central Europe” (How are they used? Why? By Whom?) will further uncover the political weight of these concepts. Additionally, the cultural studies work of McKenzie Wark on televisual geographies and telesthesia, the essays of Slavoj Zizek on the ideological dimension of the encounters between East/West, and articles on tourist sites will help us both analyze the visual representations of post-communism and reflect on their impact.

Required Texts (all to be purchased by you from Student Book Store):

Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*

Eva Hoffman, *Exit Into History*

Petru Popescu, *The Return* (available at SBS in reprint form)

Slavenka Drakulic, *How we Survived Communism and Even Laughed*

Course Pack(Includes excerpts from Said, Wolff, Zizek, Wark, Verdery, and others)

Other texts (I will provide):

archival footage of television coverage of events in “Eastern Europe”; *Videogrammes of a Revolution, Nobody’s Children*; excerpts from travel guides; handouts of additional essays

Expectations:

This course will be conducted as a seminar, which means that although there will be occasional lecturing and a good amount of guidance for systematic inquiry by the professor, students will have the responsibility to shape discussions around the questions, problems, themes and issues they find most interesting in the assigned readings. A successful seminar requires a shared commitment on the part of students to making class discussions as lively, probing, and stimulating as possible through informed, thoughtful, and respectful participation.

This brings us to the three main challenges you can expect to face in this class. Our class will be a collaborative intellectual journey. You will have to be prepared for each class

and to actively contribute to the learning process each step of the way. The insights we gain and the progress we make depends on each one of you. Second, our journey is an interdisciplinary one, and on this journey you will encounter unfamiliar territories: for some of you, the theoretical readings might be unlike any other texts you have looked at before; for some of you, the region that the texts refer to is completely unfamiliar; and, finally, some of you might have never been introduced to the recent history that our texts uncover. Third, on this intellectual journey, we have travelers with different sorts of expertise and strengths. These challenges have been noted by students before, and they have ultimately been the very reason for which the course has been highly rewarding for them.

Assignments:

In order to fulfill the requirements for each assignment, you must fulfill all the required steps for each assignment by the assigned date. And, in order to pass the course, you must participate in the course and complete all the assignments. At the end of the semester, you will submit all the work you have done for this class (graded and revised) in a portfolio:

1. Class participation and collaborative learning: 20%

You are expected to be active participants in the learning process, and thus you will participate in (and hopefully initiate) different types of activities, which include (but are not limited to): large class and small group discussions and presentations; evaluations of your colleagues; and, possibly, email prompts and responses.

You are expected to engage consistently, thoughtfully and respectfully with your colleagues, your instructor, and our readings. Lack of engagement, inconsistent class participation, and/or disruptive behavior will have a negative impact on your overall grade.

Here is what I expect of you:

a) Good class participation means, but is not limited to, informed, consistent and positive **contribution to daily discussions and in-class activities**. Thus, you should read and think about the assignments before class and come prepared to discuss the assigned readings. In order to be prepared for each class, you should take good notes at home. Please pay attention to assigned questions in addition to your regular notes. *The work you have done to prepare for class needs to be visible.* During class time, I expect you to stay focused on the questions/texts/issues at hand. You should be active and helpful in your small group activities; in reporting the reflections of your group to the class; and in the larger class discussions. You should also take good notes in class and look over them carefully before the following class. Occasionally, you may be asked to sum up and provide charts of our previous discussions for your colleagues.

If you are inconsistent in your preparation, contribution to class discussion, and in-class group activities, you will receive a grade lower than a 2.0. for Class participation and Collaborative learning.

b) You will **lead discussions** as part of a group for a one or a number of assigned readings. In order to do so, you will meet with me and with your group members outside of regularly scheduled class time. Be prepared to make room in your schedule for these meetings, and make sure you come well prepared to the meetings so that this time can be used to successfully discuss and plan the

group discussion leading. I will give you further guidelines for discussions. As a group, you will have to turn in an agenda (including questions and strategy). You will have to provide your colleagues with all necessary material (charts, hand outs; questions, etc.) that will aid their learning; and you will lead discussions. You will be evaluated for all these different aspects of your discussion leading.

- c) You will give feedback to others on their papers and take their suggestions and feedback to your writing into account. Finally, you will participate in any other kinds of activities that we might generate in order to facilitate learning, such as: occasional email prompts, note sharing, etc.

2) Two short (5-6 pages) papers (40% of grade; 20% each)

A "perspectives essay" synthesizing, examining and/ or evaluating the usefulness of concepts, definitions and strategies presented in our secondary sources through their application to an analysis of travel guides; 2) An analysis of one of our literary narratives (of travel/return) employing at least two other texts. There will be a different deadline for each corresponding text (Hoffman, Popescu or Drakulic). You will bring the drafts on the assigned dates and workshop them; submit each essay at the assigned deadline for a grade; and resubmit them at the end of the semester in a portfolio.

Additional revisions or rewrites: You may be asked to revise the "final" draft for a final grade on a paper. Your paper will not receive a grade if you do not do so. On the other hand, if your grade on the essay was not lowered for late work or poor group work, you may choose to revise one of the essays for a higher grade. Your grade on this latter, i.e. voluntary, revision will be averaged with the original paper grade to result in a final paper grade. (So a 2.0 paper revised to a 3.0 paper would yield a final grade of 2.5.) Both types of revision need to be discussed in detail with me. You are responsible for making the necessary appointments.

3) Final paper (analytical/interpretative) with strong research component (30%) (including a "mini" proposal; draft and final draft; short presentation); proposal and presentation count for 10% of the 30%

4) Quizzes (10%)

In order to ensure that you are reading carefully and critically and to facilitate class discussions, you will be quizzed in class. You should expect **frequent quizzes** on assigned readings, and you can make up one quiz (if you missed the class when the quiz was given/taken). You are required to contact me in order to make up the respective quiz. If you fail to do so by the end of the second class following the quiz, you will receive a 0.0 grade for that quiz. The quizzes will range from 1-3 questions requiring short answers, which will test that you have read the text carefully, to questions that will demonstrate a serious, sustained reflection on the text(s). I will not generally announce the quizzes, so you should be prepared for each and every class.

5) Reading Notes: You are expected to keep good **reading notes** in which you: record and systematize key points of the readings; identify and attempt to respond to your own questions; brainstorm for topics; and respond to the occasional questions I ask you to reflect on. While at times there might be overlap between assigned questions and in-class quizzes, this will not be the rule. However, your notes will definitely prepare you

for discussions, quizzes, papers, and the research project. They will also provide a record of the consistency of your efforts in the class. In order to encourage you to keep notes, while I will not assign a specific grade or grade percentage for these notes, I will take into consideration systematic and thoughtful notes when deciding on your final grade for this course.

Attendance

You may miss up to two classes for any reason without penalty. I will not grant additional absences beyond these two (except in the most extreme and documented circumstances). More than two absences will negatively impact your class participation grade. With four absences, you cannot earn a course grade higher than a 2.0; with five absences, no higher than a 1.0. With six or more absences, you automatically fail.

Late Work

You must notify me as soon as possible if you cannot or did not meet the deadline for an assignment. Extensions may be granted if requested in advance of the due date and only for serious and compelling reasons. Unless we agree on changing a deadline, any work that does not meet the assigned deadline will not get full credit. Final drafts of assignments will be penalized one full letter grade for each day (not each class period) they are late. Late preliminary work or draft work as well as late responses to the work of your colleagues will bring down the grade for that respective assignment one half point for each day they are late. Your work is on time if it is completed by the beginning of the class period it is due. Please remember to talk to me asap if you have not finished an assignment so that we make the necessary arrangements for the assignment to reach me asap. And, please note that you cannot pass the course unless you complete all the assignments.

Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty

You should be aware that presenting the work of others so that it appears to be your own is a violation of moral and professional standards, one that the College and University treat very seriously.

You must acknowledge any assistance received in writing your assignments. By "assistance" I mean any help you receive from a tutor, colleague, friend, etc. and any information you draw on from other sources (another paper, an article or book, an Internet source, etc.). Failure to acknowledge assistance constitutes plagiarism. Plagiarism is the act of submitting work by another (either a fellow student or a published author) and claiming it is one's own.

Please consider the following useful definition: "In minor cases, it [plagiarism] can be the quotation of a sentence or two, without quotation marks and without a citation (e.g., footnote) to the true author. In the most serious cases, a significant fraction of the entire work was written by someone else: the plagiarist removed the true author(s) names(s) and substituted the plagiarist's name, perhaps did some re-formatting of the text, then submitted the work for credit in a class (e.g., term paper or essay) or as part of the requirements for a degree (e.g., thesis or dissertation)." (Ronald B. Sandler, "Plagiarism in Colleges in USA")

Plagiarism is subject to sanctions ranging from a grade of 0.0 for the assignment to failure in the course and to further academic censure, which may include dismissal from

the college and the university. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please do not hesitate to ask.

Help

From time to time, I may schedule mandatory conferences with individual students or small groups. In addition to the conferences I initiate, I encourage you to come and see me with any questions about the course, assignments or your progress in the class.