

COM LIT 404
The East European Novel of the 20th century
(Polish, Czech, Croatian, Serbian)

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Meeting time: Mon & Wed 11:00-12:20

Place: 127 East Pyne

Caught between Russia and the West, traded off among European and Eurasian empires, the peoples of East Europe came late to political independence—and early to cultural awareness. Their literature tells unsentimental and sophisticated stories about how not to disappear. After a brief geopolitical introduction to the region, we will read modern prose works from the Polish, Czech, and South Slavic traditions. Our themes include epic accounts of total war (Andrzejewski, Kosinski, Hašek, Andrić), dystopic science fiction (the different approaches to futuristic fantasy by Stanisław Lem and Karel Čapek), tension between Immaturity and Form (Gombrowicz), and the sexual disasters and tragi-comedies of everyday life (Hrabal, Kundera, and the self-ironizing "woman's prose" of the Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić).

Crucial will be such questions as: are "small peoples" destined to have their art "prefixed"? (e.g. Bach is a composer, Shakespeare is a writer, but Dvořák is a "nationalist composer" and Andrzejewski a "Polish writer.") At what point do literatures begin to belong to the world? Are national stereotypes (Poles are self-pitying, Czechs are lighthearted, South Slavs are pugnacious) reflected in these novels—or created by them? What makes an East European novel? The language it is written in? The subject matter (that is, events taking place on home terrain, in history)? But what then of Lem's *His Master's Voice*, set among American astrophysicists in the Nevada desert (or his *Solaris*, set in outer space), Kosinski's *Painted Bird*, written in New York City in a mix of Polish and English, Gombrowicz's *Trans-Atlantyk*, set in Argentina, or Čapek's *War with the Newts*, which takes place—like much science fiction—in a recognizable but impossibly altered world? How does the glint of empire shine through these national sagas: the Austro-German and Russian Big Brothers for Czechs and Poles; the Turkish, Italian, and Austro-Hungarian empires for the South Slavs? With those histories and that bloodshed, can writers ever be non-political? How does one fight one's way to a private life? Is it ethical to do so? When measured against national suffering and self-determination, must private life become "trivial"?

Six prizewinning films built off these novels will be screened during the term (also digitized on Reserve). Part of our task will be to ask what is gained, and lost, by these adaptations.

Format, prerequisites and requirements of the course

Seminar format. Between 150 and 250 pages of fiction reading per week, + brief bios and critical articles. The key to doing well in the course is to *be there* (discussion, critiques).

The Weekly Critique: Each participant will e-mail in [cemerson@princeton.edu] a brief one-paragraph critique on some aspect of the reading, due the night before one of the two class meetings (that is, either by midnight Sunday, or by midnight Tuesday—but the sooner you submit, the more attentive can be my response). These critiques will be answered and integrated into our discussion.

No midterm exam.

Final takehome (two-day) exercise: Brief interpretive essay contrasting two or more fictional works (wide choice of topics provided).

As always, no incompletes.

Texts. The following novels (all in paperback) should be purchased at the **U-Store**:

Jerzy Andrzejewski, <i>Ashes and Diamonds</i>	(Northwestern UP)
Jerzy Kosinski, <i>The Painted Bird</i>	(Grove Press)
Witold Gombrowicz, <i>Ferdydurke</i>	(Yale UP)
Stanisław Lem, <i>Solaris</i>	(Harcourt Brace/Harvest)
Karel Čapek, <i>War with the Newts</i>	(Northwestern UP)
Karel Čapek, <i>Hordubal</i> [in <i>Three Novels</i> by Karel Čapek]	(Catbird Press)
Jaroslav Hašek, <i>The Good Soldier Švejk</i>	(Penguin Books)
Bohumil Hrabal, <i>Closely Watched Trains</i>	(Northwestern UP)
Milan Kundera, <i>The Joke</i>	(HarperPerennial)
Ivo Andrić, <i>The Bridge on the Drina</i>	(U of Chicago P)
Dubravka Ugrešić, <i>In the Jaws of Life and Other Stories</i>	(Northwestern UP)

Packets of background **Readings** (one each for Polish, Czech, and Serbian-Croatian novels) are available for purchase at **Pequod** (U-Store 3rd floor). Pronunciation guides, maps, and journalistic essays will be distributed in class. On-line sites for these authors are overall thin, gossipy, and of unscholarly quality; beyond looking at the pictures, don't waste your time.

Sequence of readings and topics

Wk 1 ... Jan 31-Feb 2:	Introductions; maps, geopolitical background. Is it Eastern Europe, Central Europe, Mitteleuropa? Why does it matter?
Wk 2 ... Feb 7-9:	Jerzy Andrzejewski, <i>Ashes and Diamonds</i> (+ Wajda film)
Wk 3 ... Feb. 14-16:	Jerzy Kosinski, <i>The Painted Bird</i>
Wk 4 ... Feb. 21-23:	Witold Gombrowicz, <i>Ferdydurke</i>
Wk 5 ... Feb. 28-Mar 2:	Stanisław Lem, <i>Solaris</i> (+ Tarkovsky film)
Wk 6 ... Mar. 7-9:	Karel Čapek, <i>Hordubal</i>
<i>Spring Break (March 14-18)</i>	
Wk 7 ... Mar. 21-23:	Karel Čapek, <i>War with the Newts</i>
Wk 8 ... Mar. 28-30:	Jaroslav Hašek, <i>The Good Soldier Švejk</i> [selections] Bohumil Hrabal, <i>Closely Watched Trains</i> (+ Menzel film)
Wk 9 ... Apr. 4-6:	Milan Kundera, <i>The Joke</i> (+ Jireš film)
Wk 10 ... Apr. 11-13:	Ivo Andrić, <i>The Bridge on the Drina</i>
Wk 11 ... Apr. 18-20:	Dubravka Ugrešić; <i>Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life</i> (+ Grlić film)
Wk 12 ... Apr. 25-27:	Cosić, Drakulić, Kiš, and the End of the End of Communism (+ Tanović film "No Man's Land")
