Worlds Apart: East European & Russian Fantasy and Science Fiction
Summer 2025

About this course
This course focuses on East European, Russian, and Soviet science fiction and fantasy, with readings drawn from the nineteenth century through the present. We will discuss these works as both anchored in their particular cultural-historical circumstances and also for their contribution to the development of sci-fi and fantasy as world genres. The course will survey major writers and their works in the Czech, Polish, and Russian/Soviet contexts; most of the readings are less known in the US but are nevertheless fundamental to the genre. Written in a time of growing authoritarianism and nationalism throughout Europe and in the wake of various traumas (WWI, the Bolshevik Revolution, the Stalinist Terror, WW2, etc.) these works register the seismic upheavals in human consciousness and society as they question accepted ideas of logic, time, reason, self-identity, the nature of "the other", communication, and fundamental questions of truth and morality, as well as the possibility of constructing literary narratives in trying circumstances. Through our analysis of a variety of works (in translation) from Eastern Europe, we will come to better understand human behavior and compare how broader cultural and societal concerns – progress, imperialism, gender relations, the role of technology, etc. – are expressed through the fantastic and science fiction to test the limits of knowledge as humanity pushes further into the unknown.

Seminar members should plan to read the assigned texts in advance of class discussion. In-class time will be devoted to a) short lectures on the author and the historical context the work was created in, and b) group discussion of key points in the text, themes, ideas, etc., to analyze the broader questions posed by the particular author.

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Course Format
This course will be a hybrid course, meaning students may select to attend on campus or online at registration.

Seminar members should plan to read the assigned selections of the text in advance of class discussion. The discussions will be based on the assumption that everyone is familiar with the basic plot within the assigned selection for the class and has the texts at hand during class.

Course Text
The following texts are required for the course:
- Evgenii Zamyatin, *WE* (Penguin, ISBN 978-0140185850)
- Karel Capek, *War with the Newts*
- Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita* (H.N.Abrams, ISBN 978-1419756508)
- Stanislaw Lem, *Solaris* (Harper Voyager, ISBN 978-0156027601)

- Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic* (Chicago Review Press, ISBN 978-1613743416)

Any other course materials (i.e., handouts, etc.) will be provided by the instructor.

Course Schedule

Week 1
- Reading Assignments: Karel Capek, *RUR*. Evgenii Zamyatin, *WE*
- Topics: Introduction: Capek's life and the cultural context of *RUR*. Zamyatin's life and the cultural context of *WE*. The mechanization of life. Encountering "the other" as a business opportunity. Utopia and Dystopia. Inertia v. Energy. The nature of imagination.

Week 2
- Reading Assignment: Karel Capek, *War with the Newts*
- Topics: Capek on war, the global community, the environment. The nature of Capek's "science fiction".

Week 3
- Reading Assignment: Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*
- Topics: The Stalinist Terror. Why the Devil comes to Moscow. The nature of the Jerusalem chapters. Humor and Satire in the novel

Week 4
- Reading Assignment: Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master and Margartia*
- Topics: The role of the Master and Margarita. Stasis vs. Life. The nature of Evil.

Week 5
- Reading Assignment: Stanislaw Lem, *Solaris*
- Topics: Reaching out for the unknown. The limits of human knowledge and experience.

Week 6
- Reading Assignment: The Strugatsky Brothers, *Roadside Picnic*
- Topics: What is the Zone? *Roadside Picnic* as Nuclear Literature.