

Professor Lisa Wedeen
lwedeen@uchicago.edu
Wilder 202
Office Hours: Tuesday 4:30–6:30

Professor Monika Nalepa
mnalepa@uchicago.edu
Pick 324 A
Office Hours: Wednesday 4:30–6:00

Popular Culture, Art, and Autocracy
Autumn 2015



The University of Chicago
Wednesdays 1:30-4:20
Wilder House

This seminar focuses on the connections between authoritarian regimes and art. The class deals with both popular culture forms and “high art,” with an emphasis on comparing practices in the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union with autocracies in the Middle East. Reading works by theorists such as Althusser, Arendt, Berlant, Bourdieu, Kant, Williams, and Zizek, and putting studies of authoritarianism in conversation with discussions of the market, the class asks a variety of questions: How does compliance operate under autocratic conditions? What distinguishes autocracy from democracy? How might concepts such as ideology, hegemony, and legitimacy help or hinder our efforts to understand political life? Why might artistic practices be an especially important form of evidence in understanding how political power works, and what role do specific genres play in producing aesthetic expectations? In what ways does censorship constrain and/or enable art? How are authoritarian institutions of censorship different from market-oriented ones and how do pressures to conform operate in each? How does transgressive art “work the weaknesses” (Butler) of the system and how might it reproduce or underwrite conventional forms of political power? How does state sponsorship or private sector endorsement affect artistic value? What counts as artistic value anyway?

The class is for advanced undergraduate students and will cover methodological issues related to interpretation, genre, reception, and form. Students will also be exposed to films, comedy skits, a novel, and short stories.

- **Requirements**

You are expected to attend every class, to complete all of the assignments on time, and to participate avidly in class discussions (10%). The films specified on the syllabus as homework should be viewed prior to class. Students will write a midterm take-home essay exam (40%) and a final essay exam (50%). Required books can be purchased at the Seminary Cooperative Bookstore. They are the following:

Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Penguin, 2006.

Glaeser, Andreas. *Political Epistemics: The Secret Police, the Opposition, and the End of East German Socialism*. University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Matar, Hisham. *Anatomy of a Disappearance: A Novel*. Reprint edition. Dial Press Trade Paperback, 2012.

Wedeen, Lisa. *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. University of Chicago Press, new preface 2015.

Yurchak, Alexei. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton University Press, 2013.

All written assignments are to be handed in hard copy in 12-pt Times New Roman font, double-spaced. If you wish to dispute an exam grade, you must submit a formal appeal in writing, addressed to the professors.

- **Academic Honesty**

As a member of The University of Chicago community you will not participate in or tolerate academic dishonesty. We will hold you to the University's standards for academic responsibility. If you are not adequately familiar with the University's policy on academic honesty, please consult page 31 of the Student Manual:

(<http://studentmanual.uchicago.edu/sites/studentmanual.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/Student Manual 2014-15.pdf>).

- **Students with Disabilities**

Students with disabilities are urged to contact us early in the quarter so that per guidelines from student disability services (<http://disabilities.uchicago.edu/>), we can make special accommodations for exam taking.

- **Film Showings**

The movies we do not show in class are available on Netflix or YouTube. For those who do not have Netflix subscriptions, we shall organize evening showings before the class for which the film is assigned. Please contact the instructor if you are interested in participating in these viewings.

- **Schedule**

Week 1 (September 30): Introduction

“A Pervert’s Guide to Ideology,” film by Sophie Fiennes with Slavoj Zizek (to be shown in class)

Readings: NOTE THESE FIRST WEEK’S READINGS SHOULD BE COMPLETED BY THE THIRD WEEK (in addition to those assigned for weeks two and three). We shall begin to discuss them in relation to the film on the first day of class and they will continue to inform our discussions throughout the quarter.

Althusser, Louis, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1970).

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 108-114; 121-135

Zizek, Slavoj *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Verso 2008, Chapter One.

Zizek, Slavoj “[Denial: The Liberal Utopia.](#)”

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, “On taste as a kind of sensus communis” pp. 173-176

Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, chapter 2.

Berlant, Lauren, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 1-26.

Recommended: Bourdieu’s *Distinction*, Chapters 1 and 3.

Week 2 (October 7): Performing Under Autocracy---Fascism

“Mephisto,” film by Istvan Szabo (144 minute film shown in class)

Readings:

Imre, Aniko “[White man, white mask: Mephisto meets Venus.](#)” Screen 40:4. Winter 1999.

Continue to read from Week 1:

Recommended: Mann, Klaus. *Mephisto* (tr. Robin Smyth). Penguin, 1995.

Week 3 (October 14): Fascism as Spectacle and as Ordinariness

“[Triumph of the Will.](#)” film by Leni Riefenstahl

Readings:

Sontag, Susan. “[Fascinating Fascism.](#)” The New York Review of Books, February 1975.

Borowski, Tadeusz. *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*. Penguin, 1976 (short story by the same title)

Schnapp, Jeffrey T. “[18 BL: Fascist Mass Spectacle.](#)” *Representations*, 1993, 89–125.

Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Penguin, 2006. ENTIRE.

Week 4 (October 21): Why compliance?

Readings:

- Havel, Vaclav. *The Power of the Powerless (Routledge Revivals): Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*. Routledge, 2009. (essay by same title)
- Kuran, Timur. "Now out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989." *World Politics* 44, no. 01 (1991): 7–48.
- Svolik, Milan W. *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*. Cambridge University Press, 2012. (Chapter 3)
- Wintrobe, Ronald, and others. *The Political Economy of Dictatorship*. Cambridge University Press, 1998 (Chapter 11)

Week 5 (October 28): Performing under Autocracy—Communism

“The Lives of Others” film by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck

Readings:

- Glaeser, Andreas. *Political Epistemics: The Secret Police, the Opposition, and the End of East German Socialism*. University of Chicago Press, 2011. (**Parts III and IV**)
- Recommended: Cooke, Paul. "Watching the Stasi: Authenticity, Ostalgie and History in Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* (2006)." *New Directions in German Cinema* (2011): 111-127.

MIDTERM ESSAY DUE

Week 6 (November 4): Performing under Autocracy—Syrian Ambiguities

[Stars in Broad Daylight](#), film by Ossama Mohammed

Readings:

- Wedeen, Lisa. *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. University of Chicago Press, 1999 [New Edition 2015]

Week 7 (November 11): Soviet Paradoxes

Readings:

- Yurchak, Alexei. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton University Press, 2013 (**Chapters 1–5**)

Week 8 (November 18): Youth

[Beats of Freedom](#), film by Jacek Wozniak (excerpts)

Lesiakowski, Perzyna, and Toborek. *Jarocin w obiektywie bezpieki*. Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2004. (Images from album on punk rock festival with commentary)

Readings:

Yurchak, Alexei. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton University Press, 2013 (Ch. 6)

Matar, Hisham. *Anatomy of a Disappearance: A Novel*. Reprint edition. New York: Dial Press Trade Paperback, 2012.

Mannheim, Karl. "The Problem of Youth in Modern Society." *Diagnosis of Our Time*. New York, 1944.

Week 9 (November 25): Thanksgiving, no class

Week 10 (November 30): Neoliberal Autocracy and its Art Forms: Reproduction and Change under the Market

Note the different date, location TBA

Television episode clips from *A Forgotten Village* (and others—all to be shown in class)

Readings:

Wedeen, Lisa, *Neoliberal Autocracy and its Unmaking: Reflections on Syria* (chapter 1, excerpts from chapter 2 and chapter 4)

Arendt, Hannah, "Truth and Politics" in *Between the Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. Penguin Books, 1977.

Week 11 (December 11): Final essays due