

University of Pittsburgh  
Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures  
SLAV 1225

**Behind Bars: Cross-Cultural Representations of Prison in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

Spring 2011  
Time: 4:00-5:15pm  
Room: CL 363  
CRN: 26219

Instructor: Erin Alpert  
Office: CL 1417  
Tel: 412-624-5715 (no voicemail)  
Office hours: Tues 1-2; Thurs 12-1  
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**Other Contacts**

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**Credits, Prerequisites, and Format:**

This course carries three credits and satisfies the A&S requirements in literature and comparative foreign culture. The course has a demanding reading load and challenging writing assignments; it is an upper-level course best suited for juniors and seniors. This course also addresses a variety of sensitive and controversial topics and students should be prepared to discuss them in a mature and intellectual manner.

The course meets twice a week and combines lecture and discussion formats. Participation will be a vital component of the class, and students will be required to share their opinions and ideas. I encourage every student to consult with me during my office hours regarding any concerns, questions, or ideas that they have about the course.

**Course Description:**

This course examines artistic works produced in prison and artistic works about prison, addressing both the allure of the criminal world as a form of entertainment and the function of art within prison as escapism and survival technique. In structure the course is broken into three parts: the first part focuses on the forced-labor camp system known as the Gulag in the Soviet Union; the second part examines Europe (Germany and Eastern Europe) during the Holocaust; and the third part concentrates on prison writings and criminal culture in America.

Analyzing cultural products from prisons allows for discussion of key philosophical issues of human existence. These issues are often centered on a system of dichotomies, such as freedom vs. captivity, mind vs. body, master vs. slave. The content of the course provides the opportunity to compare not only cultures—American, Russian, and German/East European—but also the variety of prison experience according to race, gender, and religion.

Since the space of the prison is a fertile ground for producing many different types of artistic expression, the course incorporates an assortment of media, including: literature, film, life-writing, songs, and even tattoos. Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Approach the relationship between prison and art from a critical perspective
- Assess different experiences of imprisonment according to race, gender, and religion
- Interpret differences and similarities between a textual work and its filmic adaptation
- Trace literary motifs relevant to the course through different works and different time periods
- Value the importance of studying multiple media when approaching a cultural topic
- Explain different theoretical models of prisons and intellectual approaches to imprisonment
- Produce a coherent, well-researched, and well-reasoned paper engaging in literary and cultural analysis

### Required Texts:

The following books are available for purchase through the University Book Center. Students will also find copies of these texts on two-hour reserve in Hillman Library.

- Bliss, Sharon E., Kevin B. Chen and Steve Dickison, eds. *Prison/Culture*. San Francisco: City Lights Foundation Books, 2010.
- Borowski, Tadeusz. *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*. NY: Penguin Classics, 1992.
- Davis, Angela. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Toronto: Open Media, 2003.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. NY: Vintage, 1995.
- Levi, Primo. *Survival in Auschwitz*. NY: Touchstone, 1996.
- Shalamov, Varlam. *Kolyma Tales*. Trans. John Glad. NY: Penguin Classics, 1995.
- Spiegelman, Art. *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale*. NY: Pantheon, 1991.

### Texts on Reserve or E-Reserve:

All of the shorter texts (selections from the works below) for this course can be found either on reserve in Hillman Library or by using E-Reserve. The password to access the documents will be given as soon as it is available. You can access the E-Reserve system through PittCat on the library's home page.

- Abbot, Jack Henry. *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison*. NY: Random House, 1981.
- Auerbach, L. et al, eds. *Belomor: An Account of the Construction of the New Canal between the White Sea and the Baltic Sea*. Westport, CT: Hyperion, 1977. 17-16, 117-22, 125-49, 150-55, 216-224.
- Baldaev, Danzig. *The Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia*. Göttingen: Steidl/Fuel, 2002. Introduction (17-25) and selected images.
- Berkman, Alexander. *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*. NY: Schocken Books, 1970.
- Burns, Robert E. *I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1997. 37-81.
- Cleaver, Eldridge. *Soul on Ice*. NY: Delta, 1968.
- Hassine, Victor. *Life Without Parole: Living in Prison Today*. NY: Oxford UP, 2008. 58-64
- Himes, Chester. "Prison Mass." *The Collected Stories of Chester Himes*. NY: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1990. 147-92.
- Jackson, George. *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*. NY: Coward-McCann, 1970.
- Peltier, Leonard. *Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sun Dance*. NY: St. Martin's Press, 1999. 1-58.
- Shapovalov, Veronica, Ed. and Trans. *Remembering the Darkness: Women in Soviet Prisons*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001. 97-106, 125-46, 207-24, 253-62, 283-96, 301-354.
- Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr I. *The Gulag Archipelago: An Experiment in Literary Investigation I-II*. NY: Harper, 1973. 565-615.

Tertz, Abram. *A Voice from the Chorus*. Trans. Kyril Fitzlyon and Max Hayward. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976. 3-40.

### Films and Television Episodes:

The following films and sound documents are available for viewing and listening in Hillman Library's Media Resource Center:

Benigni, Roberto, dir. *Life is Beautiful*. 1997.  
 Goldovskaia, Marina, dir. *Solovki Power*. 1988.  
 Polanski, Roman, dir. *The Pianist*. 2002.  
 Rosenberg, Stuart, dir. *Cool Hand Luke*. 1967.  
*Oz: The Complete First Season*. 1997.  
*Prison Break: Season One*. 2005.

### Supplementary Texts:

The following texts are not required for the course, but students may wish to consult them as accompaniments to their readings and for their final papers.

Applebaum, Anne. *Gulag: A History*. NY: Doubleday, 2003.  
 Biesen, Sheri Chinen. *Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005.  
 Des Pres, Terrence. *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camp*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1976.  
 Ginzburg, Evgeniia. *Journey into the Whirlwind*. San Diego: Harvest, 1967.  
 Glinka, Elena. "Kolyma Streetcar."  
[http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-Literature/gulag\\_2791.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-Literature/gulag_2791.jsp)  
 Gonthier, David Jr. *American Prison Film since 1930: From The Big House to The Shawshank Redemption*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006.  
 Levine, Michael G. *The Belated Witness: Literature, Testimony and the Question of Holocaust Survival*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006.  
 McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. NY: Harper, 1994.  
 Milliken, Stephen F. *Chester Himes: A Critical Appraisal*. Columbia: U Missouri P, 1976.  
 Naremore, James. *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1998.  
 Parker, Alan, dir. *Midnight Express*. 1978.  
 Toker, Leona. *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000.  
 Wilder, Billy, dir. *Stalag 17*. 1953.

### Course Requirements and Grading:

You will be required to:

- Complete reading assignments for each class meeting and be prepared to discuss them intelligently in class on the pertinent day. Pop quizzes may be given on the readings.
- Participate actively in class discussions
- Prepare and present one small group (2-3 people) presentation, with handout, on background information about the author and context of assigned text
- Submit a total of three 1-page response papers on reading assignments; these short papers should be critical responses to the reading for the day and must be emailed to the instructor 24

hours before the pertinent session (**two of the three must be completed before the third part of the semester**)

- Complete three preparatory writing assignments for the final paper (thesis statement/proposal; bibliography; outline)
- Write one final 8-10-page paper (students must consult with me during office hours regarding their topic and thesis before beginning)

Your grade will be determined by the following components:

- One 8-10-page paper (30%)
- Paper assignments: thesis/proposal, bibliography, outline (15%)
- Participation in class discussions and in class assignments or quizzes (20%)
- Response papers (20%)
- Presentation (15%)

**Given the advance notice of all paper-related deadlines, no late work will be accepted.**

Grading scale:

|           |          |          |          |          |
|-----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| 98-100—A+ | 87-89—B+ | 77-79—C+ | 67-69—D+ |          |
| 93-97—A   | 83-86—B  | 73-76—C  | 63-66—D  | ≤ 59 = F |
| 90-92—A-  | 80-82—B- | 70-72—C- | 60-62—D- |          |

### **Attendance Policy:**

Students are expected to attend all classes. Missing classes jeopardizes your participation record and puts you in danger of missing important discussions. **More than three unexcused absences will affect the final grade by one full notch (an A to A-, a B+ to B, etc). More than six will result in automatic failure of the course, regardless of the student's prior standing.** Excused absences, such as illness or death in the immediate family, must be documented no later than a week after the student's return to class.

In case of absence, it is your responsibility to obtain from your classmates any information passed out during the class you missed. You are, therefore, encouraged to exchange telephone numbers and e-mail addresses with your classmates.

### **Academic Integrity:**

By remaining enrolled in the course, you not only agree to abide by the above stipulations, but also understand that I will follow rigorously the rules spelled out in the Arts and Sciences Academic Integrity guidelines regarding cheating and plagiarism, available at: <http://www.as.pitt.edu/faculty/policy/integrity.html>. Any infraction of this policy will result in automatic course failure.

### **Disability Policy:**

If you have a disability that requires special testing accommodations or other classroom modifications, you are required to notify both me and Disability Resources and Services by the second week of the term. You may be asked to provide documentation of your disability to determine the appropriateness of accommodations. To notify Disability Resources and Services, call 412-648-7890 (voice or TDD) to schedule an appointment. The Internet address is: <http://www.pitt.edu/~osaweb/drs/drs.html>. The office is located in William Pitt Union, Rm. 216.

**Email Policy:**

Each student is issued a University e-mail address (username@pitt.edu) upon admittance. This e-mail address may be used by the University for official communication with students. Students are expected to read e-mail sent to this account on a regular basis. Failure to read and react to University communications in a timely manner does not absolve the student from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. The University provides an e-mail forwarding service that allows students to read their e-mail via other service providers (e.g., Hotmail, AOL, Yahoo). Students that choose to forward their e-mail from their pitt.edu address to another address do so at their own risk. If e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve the student from responding to official communications sent to their University e-mail address.

| <b>PART I: Russia</b>  |   |  |
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| <b>The Criminal and the Political Prisoner in the Soviet Gulag</b> |   |  |
| <i>Day</i>   | <i>General Theme &amp; Homework Due That Day</i>  | <i>In-Class Discussion Topics</i>  |
| <b>January 6</b>   | INTRODUCTION AND SYLLABUS   | –Functions of art in prison<br>–Purpose of prison?   |
| <b>January 11</b>  | THEORETICAL APPROACHES<br><br>HW: <i>Discipline and Punish</i> *<br>(Section 1 “Torture”; section 4 “Prison”) | –Birth of the prison<br>–Punishment: from spectacle to secret<br>–Prison as institutions   |
| <b>January 13</b>  | THE POLITICAL PRISONER<br><br>HW: <i>The Gulag Archipelago</i><br>(565-615)                                   | –Introduction to the Gulag<br>–The historical approach<br>–Testimony and its challenges<br>–Comparison with <i>One Day in the Life of...</i>                                 |
| <b>January 18</b>  | HW: <i>Kolyma Tales</i> *<br>(3-49)   | –The male narrative: Solzhenitsyn vs. Shalamov<br>–Fiction vs. “facts”: what better represents the experience?   |
| <b>January 20</b>  | HW: <i>Kolyma Tales</i> *<br>(68-79, 107-13, 173-83, 284-91)  | –Issues of loyalty in the camps<br>–Identity and self-definition<br>–Importance of “remaining human” in camps<br>–Special advantages in the camps                            |
| <b>January 25</b>  | HW: <i>Remembering the Darkness</i> (chapters 4, 6, 10, 13)   | –Relating women’s experiences to the Gulag in general  |
| <b>January 27</b>  | HW: <i>Remembering the Darkness</i> (chapters 16, 18-20)  | –Women’s experience in the Gulag<br>–Specific issues: pregnancy, rape, health care<br>–Differences between male/female narratives  |
| <b>February 1</b>  | HW: <i>A Voice from the Chorus</i><br>(3-40)  | –The Sinyavsky/Danil trial<br>–Solzhenitsyn and Sinyavsky: two approaches  |
| <b>February 3</b>  | HW: <i>Solovki Power</i>  | –How film documentary helps us to understand the Gulag<br>–Interviewing survivors; the Harvard Project<br><br><b>Student meetings to discuss paper topics</b>                |
| <b>February 8</b>  | THE CRIMINAL PRISONER<br><br>HW: <i>The Russian Tattoo Encyclopaedia</i> (introduction and images)            | –The criminal body as text<br>–The secret language of Gulag prison tattoos   |
| <b>February 10</b>   | HW: <i>The History of the Construction of the White Sea Canal</i> (17-26, 125-49)                             | –The notion of “re-forging” and the re-education of criminal prisoners<br>–Criminal creativity and literacy in the camps<br>–Criminals as “privileged” segment of population |

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| <b>February 15</b> | HW: Shalamov's <i>Essays on the Criminal World</i> (in <i>Kolyma Tales</i> ) | –Interactions b/t criminal and political prisoners<br>–Tension between criminal and political prisoners |
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| <b>PART II: Europe and the Holocaust</b>                                 |  |   |
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| <b>Representations and Testimony: Culture and the Concentration Camp</b> |  |   |
| <b>February 17</b>   | THE CLASSIC TESTIMONY<br>HW: <i>Survival in Auschwitz</i> * (9-63)           | –Introduction to the Holocaust<br>–Representing the Holocaust: specific challenges<br>–Discussion of life-writing and current theories<br>–Preserver/distorter: dual role of the memoir     |
| <b>February 22</b>   | HW: <i>Survival in Auschwitz</i> * (64-105)                                  | –Issues of memory<br><b>Bibliography for papers due</b>   |
| <b>February 24</b>   | HW: <i>Survival in Auschwitz</i> * (106-57)                                  | –Comparison with Gulag testimonies<br>–Comparison with other Holocaust memoirs  |
| <b>March 1</b>   | FICTION VS. TESTIMONY<br>HW: Tadeusz Borowski stories* (29-49, 82-97)        | –Fiction vs. testimony: similarities and differences<br>–Can we compare the Gulag and concentration camps?  |
| <b>March 3</b>   | HW: Tadeusz Borowski stories* (98-142, 177-80)                               | –Freedom vs. captivity, inside vs. outside<br>–The Holocaust as “normal”  |
| <b>March 15</b>  | NEW APPROACHES IN REPRESENTING THE HOLOCAUST<br>HW: <i>Maus II</i> , 41-117* | –Introduction to reading graphic novels<br>–How does this medium work? Well or with serious limitations?  |
| <b>March 17</b>  | HW: <i>Life is Beautiful</i>   | –Introduction to representing the Holocaust in film<br>–Approaching the Holocaust with comedy: offensive or penetrating?  |
| <b>March 22</b>  | HW: <i>The Pianist</i>   | –The theme of resistance during the Holocaust<br>–Can the ghetto be considered a prison?<br>–The role of art in procuring advantages<br><b>Paper outlines due with revised bibliography</b> |

| <b>PART III: America</b>   |  |  |
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| <b>From Anarchists to Chain Gangs, from Pulp Fiction to Crime Film</b> |  |  |
| <b>March 24</b>  | TURN OF THE CENTURY: FEAR OF THE OTHER<br>HW: <i>Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist</i> (1-22, 95-158) | –Fear of anarchy as the “other;” Ukrainian anarchist vs. Pittsburgh industrialist<br>–Industrialization and inequality<br>–Beginning of prisons in America |

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| <b>March 29</b> | 1910S-1920S: THE CHAIN GANG<br><br>HW: <i>I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang</i> (37-81)   | –The chain gang phenomenon<br>–Issues of race<br>–Birth of the blues: slavery, the chain gang, and prison songs<br>–The connection between labor and song<br>–Social justice and the chain gang |
| <b>March 31</b> | 1930S AND 1940S: PRISON AND THE CRIMINAL ALLURE<br><br>HW: Chester Himes “Prison Mass”  | –Himes and his relationship to creativity in prison<br>–Beginning artistic careers in prison<br>–Popularity of pulp fiction and crime comics  |
| <b>April 5</b>  | THE 1960S FILM AND SENSATIONALISM<br><br>HW: <i>Cool Hand Luke</i>  | –Prison on the big screen<br>–Representation of the 1960s   |
| <b>April 7</b>  | THE 1960S AND 1970S: PRISON LETTERS<br><br>HW: <i>Soul on Ice, Soledad Brother, In the Belly of the Beast</i><br>(excerpts from all three TBD)  | –Issues of race continued<br>–The Black Panther Movement<br>–Purpose of letter writing?   |
| <b>April 12</b> | THE 1970S AND 1980S<br><br>HW: <i>Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sun Dance</i> (1-58),<br><i>Life Without Parole: Living in Prison Today</i> (58-64)  | –Issues of race – beyond black and white<br>–Impact of prison writing   |
| <b>April 14</b> | ART IN PRISON<br><br>HW: <i>Prison/Culture*</i><br>Prepare to explain one work or project that you find particularly interesting  | –Visual arts in prison<br>–Prisoner created art<br><br><b>Final papers due</b>  |
| <b>April 19</b> | PRISON ON THE LITTLE SCREEN<br><br>HW: <i>Oz</i> (episode 1: “The Routine”)<br><i>Prison Break</i> (episode 1: “Pilot”)<br><b>note:</b> you may want to begin reading <i>Are Prisons Obsolete?</i> over the weekend | –Prison on TV, contemporary crime and prison dramas   |
| <b>April 21</b> | FINAL QUESTIONS<br><br>HW: <i>Are Prisons Obsolete?*</i>  | –Course wrap-up: ideas and conclusions  |