

Dissertation Abstract

The artistic association “OBERIU” is considered to be a significant movement in the Russian avant-garde, and several authors associated with this movement (Daniil Kharms, Nikolai Zabolotsky, Alexander Vvedensky) have enjoyed popularity and influence among later generations both in Russian and abroad. Nonetheless, few studies have attempted to describe the group as a whole, and questions persist about their place in the development of the Russian avant-garde or the cultural history of the early Soviet period. This dissertation provides a revised framework for understanding the writers officially and unofficially associated OBERIU by focusing on how they responded to a particular set of debates important to the Soviet literary culture of the 1920s and 1930s. Rather than posit a cohesive poetics or worldview uniting these writers, I suggest an ongoing debate between competing visions of progressive art as the key to understanding both the internal dynamics of the group and the artistic evolution of its members.

Chapter One presents the theoretical framework of the dissertation. It offers both a critical interpretation of the scholarly trope of discussing OBERIU as the “end of the Russian avant-garde” (Jaccard). Drawing on Iurii Tynianov’s theory of literary evolution, I argue that the “end of the avant-garde” should not be seen as a simple continuation of the preceding generation, but rather a reconsideration of avant-garde devices, in part, as a critical response to contemporaneous cultural developments. The succeeding chapters extend and refine this framework by examining problems in the construction of a work of verbal art (verse semantics, narrative structure, lyric voice) from these authors’ point of view. These chapters also follow a rough chronology based on the major stages of the group’s evolution: Chapter Two focuses on the public poetry readings of the mid-1920s, Chapter Three contextualizes their theatrical performances of the late-1920s, and Chapter Four considers the unofficial circle that succeeded OBERIU after political reprisals further made public performance impossible. The conclusion reconsiders the legacy of these authors through a close reading of philosophical texts by Iakov Druskin (who preserved their legacy) and the poet Arkadii Dragomoshchenko.