In recent years, the topic of energy has gained increasing prominence in both public and scholarly discourse. Amidst ever-intensifying competition for global energy markets and mounting ecological crisis, the history of energy production and the emergence of related forms of thought and aesthetic representation have stimulated intense interest across the humanities.

This interdisciplinary symposium examines energy as a shaping force in Russian literature, visual culture, and social practice from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. We will investigate such questions as: How did the new unifying concept of energy as a “power to make work” structure Russian realist novels and paintings? How did the poetics of energy shape pre-Revolutionary and Stalinist utopianism? And how has the extraction or exhaustion of specific sources of energy—living bodies, fossil fuels, (hydro-)electricity, nuclear fission—generated distinctive aesthetic features in Soviet and post-Soviet literature and cinema?

Schedule

9:30-11:00 — 19th-century Energetics: Chernyshevsky, Tolstoy, and Fedorov

Konstantine Klioutchkine, Pomona College
Chernyshevsky’s Vera Pavlovna as the Power Station for the Modern Cultural Economy

This paper explores the role of women as energizers of social progress in Chernyshevsky’s What Is to Be Done?. Vera Pavlovna’s Fourth Dream envisions “the queen of light” at the center of electrical circuitry animating the utopian world of the future. This vision is symbolic of the novel’s scientistic figuration of women as the dominant social force on account of their bodies’ superior neuro-electrical resources. Klioutchkine places Chernyshevsky’s ostensibly paradoxical privileging of women in the context of women’s roles as writers and readers in the Russian press of the time and, more broadly, as producers and consumers in the developing culture of print capitalism.

Jillian Porter, University of Colorado Boulder
Make It Work: Narrative Energy in Anna Karenina

This paper reorients existing studies of Tolstoy’s engagement with physical and social science in Anna Karenina. Porter explores the thermodynamic operations of Tolstoy’s narrative and proposes the emerging 19th-century idea of energy (energiia), or the “power to make work,” as a new key to the novel’s structure and style. Reading energy as both a store metaphors and a central dynamic of plot, she also posits “narrative energy” as a more capacious alternative to Brooks’ classic formulation of “narrative desire.”
Maya Vinokour, New York University,
"Personal Responsibility and the 'Common Task': the Energetics of Self-Discipline in Russian Cosmism"

This paper examines the emergence of the Stalinist conjuncture of liquidity, futuristic utopianism, and personal responsibility in the decades before 1917. As the Russian autocracy tightened its grip amid rising social unrest, literature and philosophy became laboratories of future societal organization. Authors like Leo Tolstoy, Nikolai Fyodorov, and Alexander Bogdanov promoted a biocentric self-discipline as the only remedy against moral and physical degeneration. By imagining immortal, fraternal collectivities relying on anti-technological, anti-institutional modifications to human nature, cosmic space, or time itself — and by tying these attributes to conceptions of the body as a limited source of energy — these thinkers set the stage for the glorification of individualistic heroism in the Soviet Union.

11:00-11:15 — Break

11:15-12:15 — Envisioning Energy in Late Imperial Russia

Mieka Erley, Colgate University
Radiant Images: Nikolai Fedorov’s Apparatus of Resurrection

This paper examines how Nikolai Fedorov’s project to resurrect the dead was inspired by innovations in mid- to late-19th-century physics and photography. The discovery of new forms of energy, and the development of new technologies for measuring, recording, and producing energy across the electromagnetic spectrum, fundamentally informed Fedorov’s utopian project. Inspired by the indexical nature of photography, Fedorov speculated on how unseen energy might be controlled by new apparatuses to perform the vital “work” of not simply representing matter (as in photography), but actually rebuilding the human body. Fedorov’s Philosophy of the Common Task is a revealing case study in how new scientific discoveries and technologies inspired other realms of cultural production, and how new forms of energy figured in the late 19th-century Russian utopian imagination.

Jane Costlow, Bates College
Seeing Oil: Transporting the Volga into the Modern Era

By the late 19th century both commercial fishermen and biologists were increasingly concerned about oil spills in the Volga, resulting both from oil’s transport (from Astrakhan up at least as far as Yaroslavl) and its use to fuel various craft along the river. My interest in this paper is in exploring what it might mean to “see” oil in the period from (roughly) 1885 to 1917. Biologists’ discussions reveal a proto-ecological understanding of oil’s impacts (and raise questions about how to evaluate the visual as well as smell and taste as evidence). What would it mean to learn to “see” oil in both visual and written art of the period? This paper will explore both evidentiary and more indirect images, aiming to chart a range of responses in the early decades of Russia’s “oil boom” - from celebratory gushers to what the Volga poet “Shiriaevets” called (early 1920’s) “more and more splotches of dirty oil”.

12:30-1:30 PM — Lunch Break (a catered lunch will be provided for symposium speakers)

1:30-3:00 — Revolutionary Resources: Oil, Coal, and Mental Hygiene

Anindita Banerjee, Cornell University
Red Allah’s Oil: Arts of the Revolution and the Energy of the Colonized

Oil and Russia are usually invoked together in an isomorphic economic and political continuum of resource extraction, state power, and national identity. This talk offers a counter-narrative from a hitherto unexamined frontier of Russian literature and art in the heady years following the October Revolution. For prominent representatives of the Russian avant-garde, the geo- and biopolitics of petroleum emerged as the primary fuel of a transformative utopian aesthetics not in the metropolitan centers of European Russia, but at the offshore drilling sites of the Caspian Sea teeming with migrant workers from the colonies. Combining insights from the emerging field of energy humanities with new archives of writers, artists, and filmmakers who congregated in the oil city of Baku in 1920 for the First Congress of the Peoples of the East, I examine how the material potentials of petroleum converged with the spiritual energy of anti-imperial struggle to shape a unique imagination of Red October’s internationalist promises.

Molly Brunson, Yale University
Painting Coal in the Donbass: Nikolai Kasatkin, Aleksandr Deineka, and the Energy of Realism

From the works of the late Peredvizhnik Nikolai Kasatkin to those of the celebrated Soviet painter Aleksandr Deineka, realism—as an aesthetic and an ideology—has been deployed to represent the latent and manifest energy of labor. In this paper I will consider these artists’ representations of coalmining on the Donbass, as well as the curious history of the coal industry in Hughesovka (modern-day Donetsk) and the parallel visual cultures of coal in the UK and the US. I will ask how Kasatkin and Deineka’s very different realisms make related propositions about human and environmental resources, and the possibility of transforming both into painterly and political power.

William Nickell, University of Chicago
On Social Condensers and Mental Health

In his 1934 book Soviet Russia Fights Neurosis, Frankwood Williams argued that Soviet society was achieving success in approaching mental health as a social, rather than personal concern. He noted that “in a queer sort of way there is mental hygiene all over the place,” and saw the Park of Culture and Rest, the factory, and the community kitchen as places where this was most evident. Williams was essentially arguing that what architects in the 1920s had called “social condensers” were achieving their desired effect, drawing workers into healthy collectives full of salutary contact. Was there any basis for this view?

3:00-3:15 — Break
3:15-4:45 — Energetic Futurity: Electric, Nuclear, Transhuman

**Isabel Lane**, Boston College  
Subjunctive Realism and the Conditional Nuclear Future

This paper argues for imagining our nuclear future in a subjunctive mood. In conversation with critical narratives that position speculative and science fiction as the preeminent literary means for imagining ecologically disastrous futures, Lane argues instead for a “subjunctive realism” that mixes genres, modes of representation, and temporalities to build a conditional relationship between present and future. In particular, she aims to probe distinctions between forms (fiction and nonfiction), genres (realism and speculative fiction), and mediums (verbal and visual).

**Alec Brookes**, Memorial University of Newfoundland  
Visualizing Powerlines in the Post-Soviet North

This chapter takes Anindita Banerjee’s cultural-material history of electrification in Russia up to GOELRO as its starting point, asking where are we now (see Banerjee, “Generating Power,” in We Modern People, 2012). Brookes focuses my study on the visualization of powerlines in Andrei Zviaginstev’s Leviathan (2014), and the photography of Liza Faktor and Anna Filipova. The visualization of powerlines was integral to the project of electrifying the countryside, as evidenced in Dziga Vertov’s *Eleventh Year* (1928), Oleksandr Dovzhenko’s *Earth* (1930) and later in Fedor Shurpin’s painting “Morning of Our Motherland” (1948). But by shifting our attention to the visibility of powerlines in twenty-first century Siberia, these artists, I argue, convey the limits of that modern Prometheanism and the speculative utopianism that defined the Leninist project. Ultimately, in the current moment, encountering such limits prompts a shift away from the visible to the underground for powerlines and other infrastructure in the continuing spread of the modern world system.

**Anya Bernstein**, Harvard University  
The Future of Immortality: Remaking Life and Death Contemporary Russia

Through practices such as cryonics and plans to build robotic bodies for future “consciousness transfer,” the Russian transhumanist movement has engendered competing practices of immortality as well as ontological debates over the immortal body and person. Drawing on an ethnography of these practices and plans, Bernstein explores controversies around religion and secularism within the movement as well as the growing disagreements between transhumanists and the Russian Orthodox Church. She argues that the core issues in debates over the role of religion vis-à-vis immortality derive from diverse assumptions being made about “the human,” which—from prerevolutionary esoteric futurist movements through the Soviet secularist project and into the present day—has been and remains a profoundly plastic project.