

Topics in German Studies: Nazis and Nirvana: The Orient and German Identity

A popular idea some might know under the guise of a “horseshoe theory” proposes that divergent concepts will eventually reach such extremes that they converge again. Fascism and mystical spirituality can be regarded as two disparate spheres that nevertheless encounter one another. One concrete example is the swastika: a religious symbol appropriated and repurposed for fascist aesthetics and collective formation. While surprising, this fusion can be considered a result of the mysterious part Eastern thought has been forced to play with regard to the construction of a German nation and identity. This course will explore German Orientalism’s paradoxical exoticization of and identification with South and East Asian concepts and systems throughout the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. In addition to reading the Orientalist writings of artists from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to Hermann Hesse, and seminal philosophers including Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, this course will introduce students to the most important Eastern classics that influenced and were appropriated by German thought and letters, such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Heart Sutra*, and the *Diamond Sutra*. These texts and authors will serve as guiding threads as we investigate and define fields and concepts such as mythology, cultural fantasy, the philosophy of language, and nihilism. More specific areas of focus will include the history behind the concept of “the Orient,” the origins of Aryanism, German stereotyping of Asians, and the intersections of esotericism and fascism. Readings and discussion in English.

Introduction

Week 1: Introduction

Edward Said

Orientalism (excerpt, “Introduction”)

Urs App

“The Cult of Emptiness. the Western Discovery of Buddhist Thought and the Invention of Oriental Philosophy” (excerpts)

Unit 1: Hinduism and the Social Symbolic

Week 2: Familiarity and Exoticism

AW Schlegel

“Brahmin’s Funeral”

Goethe

“The Chinese in Rome”

Week 3: Faith and Myth

Tr. Wilkins

Bhagavad Gita (Excerpts)

Tr. Friedrich Schlegel

Bhagavad Gita (Excerpts)

Tr. Herder

Bhagavad Gita (Excerpts)

Week 4: Faith and Myth cont.

AW Schlegel

“On the Bhagavad Gita”

Week 5: Honor and Caste

Kalidasa

Sakuntala

Week 6: Honor and Caste cont.

Herder

“On an Oriental Drama”

Goethe

Faust – “Prologue in Heaven”

“Sakuntala”

Unit 2: Western Philosophies of Being and Becoming

Week 7: Pantheism and Nihilism

GWF Hegel

“On the Episode of the Mahabharata Known by the Name Bhagavad-Gita”

Week 8: Pantheism and Nihilism cont.

Arthur Schopenhauer

The World as Will and Representation (Excerpt, "Book Four")

Week 9: Life and Individual

Karoline von Günderrode

"The Manes"

"Idea of Earth"

"Story of a Brahmin"

Week 10: Life and Individual cont.

Friedrich Nietzsche

The Gay Science (Excerpts)

Unit 3: Buddhism and Erasure

Week 11: Practice

The Heart Sutra

The Diamond Sutra

Hermann Hesse

Siddhartha

Week 12: Practice cont.

Hermann Hesse

Siddhartha

Week 13: Japanism

Martin Heidegger

"A Dialogue on Language Between a Japanese and an Inquirer"

Mori Ogai

"The Dancing Girl"

Week 14: Emperorism

Akira Kurosawa

The Most Beautiful

Maggie Riefenstahl

Triumph of the Will

Week 15: Erasure

Heinrich Himmler

“Speech at Posen, 1943” (Excerpts)

Paul Celan

“Death Fugue”

Theodor W. Adorno

The Authoritarian Personality (Excerpts)