

CENS 202 - Special Topic

Changing Climates: Catastrophe and Gender in Central, Eastern and Northern European Literature

Instructors: Prof. Dr. Gaby Pailer and PhD student Shoshana Schwebel, MA

Term 2, 2020; Tuesday, Thursday 11:00-12:30 - Online

This course is taught in English.



This course focuses on aspects of catastrophe and gender and interrelations of climate change with natural, technical, and social disaster in central Europe. After an introductory section, it falls into four modules, which are briefly outlined below. The instructors will provide a series of 15-minute lectures, and post excerpts of primary sources and theory literature, as well as links on the Canvas course page.

Content Warning: We will read material in this course that contains descriptions of violence, including sexual violence. Please reach out to the course instructor and/or the TA if you feel that you cannot read this material due to its depictions of violence, or if you wish to discuss it privately.

Week 1 – Introduction

The introduction will deal with discourses of catastrophe in philosophical, historical and anthropological perspectives, addressing the notion of the Anthropocene and interrelations of climate crisis with societal change. We'll further discuss "catastrophe" as a dramatic term (since Aristotle) and its applicability to narrative texts. A special emphasis will be put on women's role and agency within those discourses, as well as on how living through disastrous events is represented in range of literary works. Key theoretical readings will be drawn from recent volumes such as: *Greening the Maple: Canadian Ecocriticism in Context* (ed. Sober/Bradley, 2013) and *German Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene* (ed. Schaumann/Sullivan, 2017).

Weeks 2-3 – Module 1: Shaky Grounds, Ancient to Modern

The first module will present four master narratives of disaster, starting with the "Introduction" to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which addresses the Black Death epidemic in Florence (1348); as well as the story of Princess Alatiel (II.7), which forms the counter-narrative to the paradigm of the ancient love-and-adventure novel. Voltaire's *Candide* (1757), known to be another parody of this ancient form, features the earthquake of Lisbon (1755) (Chapters 4-6), and also the experience of a plague epidemic suffered by the Old Woman (Chapters 11-12). Heinrich von Kleist's novella *The Earthquake in Chili* (1811) signals a shift from a former spatial and material perception of "present time" to a more temporal and immaterial perception of real-time events, which also applies to Albert Camus' narrative *The Plague* (1947), about an epidemic outbreak in Oran, Algeria, written in the aftermath of WWII.

Weeks 4-6 - Module 2: Dystopia and Climate Disaster

Our main reading here will be Swedish author Maja Lunde's *The History of Bees* (2018). Its three narrative strands combine strategies of the historical novel with dystopian elements. We will further examine excerpts of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and her recent sequel *The Testaments* (2019). Both Lunde and Atwood make ample reference to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, which in itself is highly referential to classical works (especially Shakespeare, from whose *The Tempest* the titular quote derives).

Weeks 7-9 – Module 3: Technological and Ecological Disaster

Our main reading here will be Russian-German Alina Bronsky's *Baba Dunja's Last Love* (2017), telling the story of an old woman resettling in the Czernobyl neighbourhood in the aftermath of the reactor disaster (1987). In this section, we'll also make reference to two additional works: Christa Wolf's *Accident. A Day's News* (1989), and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), dealing with aspects of social disaster.

Weeks 10-12 – Module 4: Nuclear Strikes and Contaminated Landscapes

The centrepiece of this course section is Marlen Haushofer's *The Wall* (1962), telling the story of a woman stuck in isolation on a mountain in the Austrian Alps severed from the village below by an invisible wall, not knowing what kind of disaster could have caused the world below to be frozen. The motif of isolation and the dystopian vision of a final retreat after a nuclear strike resonates with Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957), adapted into a movie by Stanley Kramer in 1959. And finally, we'll include Denise Chong's *The Girl in the Picture. The Story of Kim Phuc, the Photograph and the Vietnam War* (2001), a compelling and important biography of a woman's survival of a nuclear strike, spending recovery time in Germany and Canada.

Course Readings / Assignments:

Week 1, Jan. 12, 14: Introduction

Welcome, meet & greet, introductory lectures and discussions - synchronous meetings.

The four modules of the course will be taught asynchronously.

Students will gather in the final week for their term paper outline presentations.

Weeks 2-3 / Jan. 19, 21; 26, 28: Earthquake and Plague - Master Narratives, ancient and modern

Boccaccio: Introduction/frame narrative (plague in Florence) and *Alathiel*-Story II.7 (shipwrecking/sexual assault).

Voltaire: *Candide* (earthquake vs. plague/sexual assault)

Kleist: *Earthquake in Chili* (earthquake vs. death sentence, giving birth)

Camus: *The Plague* (changing cityscapes and personal experience due to epidemic)

Discussion board contribution #1 - due Tuesday, Jan. 26

Quiz #1 - due Friday, Jan. 29

Milestone writing assignment #1 - due Tuesday, Feb. 2

Weeks 4-6 / Feb. 2, 4; 9, 11; (16, 18 = reading week); 23, 25: Dystopia and Climate Disaster

Main reading: Maja Lunde: *The History of Bees* - - selected chapters; full reading is recommended

In addition, excerpts of:

Margaret Atwood: *The Handmaid's Tale* and sequel *The Testaments*

Aldous Huxley: *Brave New World*

Discussion board contribution #2 - due Tuesday, Feb. 9

Quiz #2 - due Friday, Feb. 26

Milestone writing assignment #2 - due Tuesday, March 2

Weeks 7-9 / Mar. 2, 4; 9, 11; 16, 18: Technological and Ecological Disaster

Main reading: Alina Bronsky: *Baba Dunja's Last Love* - selected chapters; full reading is recommended

In addition, excerpts of:

Christa Wolf: *Accident*

Dostoevsky: *Crime and Punishment*

Discussion board contribution #3 - due Tuesday, March 9

Quiz #3 - due Friday, March 19

Milestone writing assignment #3 - due Tuesday, March 23

Weeks 10-12 / Mar. 23, 25; 29, Apr. 1, 6: Nuclear Strikes and Changing Climates

Main reading: Marlen Haushofer: *The Wall* - selected chapters; full reading is recommended

In addition, excerpts of:

Nevil Shute: *On the Beach* (Book and Film)

Denise Chong: *The Girl in the Picture. The Story of Kim Phuc, the Photograph and the Vietnam War* (Penguin 2001).

Discussion board contribution #4 - due Tuesday, March 30

Quiz #4 - due Thursday, April 1

Milestone writing assignment #4 - due Tuesday, April 6

Weeks 13-14 / Apr. 8; 13: Conclusion

Student presentations, outlines of term paper topic (1 slide, 5 minutes per student) - synchronous meetings.

Assignments and Distribution of Grades:

1. 4 Discussion board contributions: 16%
2. 4 Quizzes: 16%
3. 4 Milestone Writing Assignments (2 pages, MLA style): 32%
4. Final term paper due on April 17 (5 pages, MLA style; on a topic of choice building on primary sources treated in class): Abstract, one slide, in-class presentation: 8%; final paper: 28%.

Mode of Instruction:

This course will be taught online, in the first and last weeks of class in a synchronous mode; otherwise in an asynchronous mode. The instructors will record all lectures.
All materials are provided on Canvas.

Instructors' Office Hour and Contact Information:

Dr. Gaby Pailer, Professor of German Literature

- Buchanan Tower 907, UBC Vancouver Campus, 1873 East Mall, V6T 1Z1
- Email: pailer@mail.ubc.ca
- Office Hour: Wednesday, 13:00 to 14:00, and by appointment.

Shoshana Schwebel, Graduate Teaching Assistant

- Email and Office Hour: Monday, 11:00 to 12:00.