

CENS 202 - Special Topic

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

Instructors: Prof. Dr. Gaby Pailer and Graduate Teaching Assistant (TBA)

Term 1, 2021; Tuesday, Thursday 11:00-12:30

This course is taught in English. No prerequisites.



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.

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 deals 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 on women's role and agency within those discourses, and how living through disastrous events is represented in range of literary works. Key theoretical readings will be drawn from 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: This module will focus on 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 Chilean Earthquake* (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 is Norwegian 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 Chernobyl neighbourhood in the aftermath of the reactor disaster (1987). In this section, we'll also make reference to additional works: Christa Wolf's *Accident. A Day's News* (1989), Paul Celan's *Death Fugue* (1948), and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), dealing with aspects of political and 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 and her former life 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. As a final course reading, we'll include Denise Chong's *The Girl in the Picture. The Story of Kim Phuc, the Photograph and the Vietnam War* (2001).

Week 13-14: Conclusion: Final Course Work. Student Presentations.