

ENGL 393-01 (CRN 16876)

Disaster Narratives: Culture and Philosophy

TR 11:00-12:15 TR 12:45-2:00

Toby Benis (English); Colleen McCluskey (Philosophy)

Cross-listed with PHIL 344-01

This course will explore works that try to represent and make sense of the unrepresentable: natural disasters, acts of war, and chance occurrences that are not anticipated and that offer their victims no chance to avoid them. Is there a vocabulary adequate to convey the tragedy of such events? If not, can we devise a new one that is up to the task? What is the difference – if there is one – between the culture of horror, and the culture of catastrophe? In this team-taught, cross-listed course, we will interweave readings in literature and philosophy in addressing these questions, among others. Course units will consider responses to disease and epidemics; climate change; war; and the literature of the September 11th terrorist attacks.

[Note: this course will involve reading, and watching, some disturbing material. Please bear this in mind before you decide to register for this class.]

Texts will include:

Albert Camus, The Plague; Daniel Defoe, The Storm; Jared Diamond, Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed; Jonathan Safran Foer, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close; Primo Levi, Survival in Auschwitz: the Nazi Assault on Humanity; H.G. Wells, The War of the Worlds; Thornton Wilder, The Bridge of San Luis Rey

Films, Radio and Television:

28 Days Later (dir. Danny Boyle, 2003); The Day After Tomorrow (dir. Roland Emmerich, 2004); The Storm (an edition of the PBS newsmagazine “Frontline” on Hurricane Katrina); War of the Worlds (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2005); The War of the Worlds (Orson Welles’ 1938 radio broadcast with his Mercury Theatre Players, based on H.G. Wells’ novel)