

LIT 20S.01 (Fall 2008)  
 WF 8:30-9:45  
 Location: Friedl 102

Instructor: Gerry Canavan  
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 Office Hours: WF 9:45-11 AM  
 or by appointment

### **The Imagination of Disaster**

“We live under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror. It is fantasy, served out in large rations by the popular arts, which allows most people to cope with these twin specters.”  
 —Susan Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster.”

This course will trace Sontag’s “imagination of disaster” in the literature and film of North America over the course of the twentieth century, from the violent crucible of the world wars through the nuclear terror of the Cold War to contemporary fears about ecological disaster and peak oil. This will be an interdisciplinary study of apocalyptic fantasy that uses historical, political, psychological, philosophical, and scientific methodology alongside traditional literary analysis. We will seek to understand why it is that some human societies, our current cultural moment clearly included, seem so preoccupied with imagining their own annihilation, as well as explore what happens to a society when it finds itself living in fear of the end of the world.

#### **Course Objectives**

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Use literary study to develop skills for careful reading and clear writing
- Apply techniques of literary analysis to myth, art, literature, and film
- Demonstrate understanding of the cultural and historical contexts in which various literary texts have been written
- Develop individual voice in analytic, persuasive, and critical writing

#### **Required Texts** (*available at Regulator Bookshop on Ninth Street*)

Sven Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing*  
 Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*  
 Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*  
 Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*

#### **Films** (*on reserve at Lilly Library*)

*Things to Come* (1936) – dir. William Cameron Menzies  
*Ilha das Flores/Isle of Flowers* (1989) – dir. Jorge Furtado  
*Atomic Café* (1982) – dirs. Jayne Loader, Kevin Rafferty, and Pierce Rafferty  
*Dr. Strangelove* (1964) – dir. Stanley Kubrick  
*War of the Worlds* (2005) – dir. Steven Spielberg  
*The Twilight Zone: “The Shelter”* (1961) – dir. Lamont Johnson  
*The Twilight Zone: “Two”* (1961) – dir. Montgomery Pittman  
*The Birds* (1963) – dir. Alfred Hitchcock  
*The End of Suburbia* (2004) – dir. Gregory Greene  
*Children of Men* (2007) – dir. Alfonso Cuarón

**E-Reserves** (available through [blackboard.duke.edu](http://blackboard.duke.edu))

Wells Tower, "Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned"

Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster"

Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics"

Judith Butler, "Precarious Life"

Daphne du Maurier, "The Birds"

Jimmy Carter, "Malaise" Speech (July 15, 1979)

James Howard Kunstler, excerpt from *The Long Emergency*

Al Columbia, "The Trumpets They Play!"

Kelly Link, "Some Zombie Contingency Plans"

**Course Requirements**

weekly 1-2 page responses, due on Fridays

three 4-6 page papers (can each be optionally revised for a higher grade once)

one 8-12 page revised and expanded final paper

Paper #1 will be close reading of a scene or scenes from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Paper #2 will be a persuasive paper on a topic related to Cold War nuclearism.

Paper #3 will be a critical or comparative analysis of a treatment of the end of the world in literature, film, or popular culture.

Students will be required to submit a full or partial draft to the instructor at least a week before the paper's due date. Once graded, each of these papers can also be optionally revised and resubmitted once, at the student's discretion.

Students are also encouraged to make use of the Duke University Writing Studio. You can find details and schedule an appointment at <http://uwp.duke.edu/wstudio/resources/index.html>.

More details on the requirements for each paper will be distributed in class.

**Grading**

Each of the papers will count for 20% of your final grade.

The remaining 20% of your grade will be derived from class participation, attendance, weekly responses, and other assignments.

**Attendance**

Class discussion is an essential part of this seminar. It is important that you come to class every day having read the required material and prepared to discuss it.

Attendance in this class is mandatory. You should plan on attending every class. You are allowed two unexcused absences over the course of the semester. After that, your class participation will drop a letter grade for each additional unexcused absence. Upon the fifth unexcused absence, you will receive a failing grade for the course.

### Conferences

Twice during the semester I will meet with students individually to discuss both graded papers and papers in progress. (I'm happy to meet more than twice, if desired.) Missing a scheduled conference will count as one absence.

### Film Screenings

I will occasionally schedule evening screenings of the films that are to be discussed in class. While attendance at these screenings is not mandatory, students who don't attend the evening screening will have to view these films on their own time. Details on the screenings will be provided in class.

### Blackboard

This course will make periodic use of the Blackboard program at <http://blackboard.duke.edu>. In addition to being a place where you can find electronic copies of the syllabus and other course handouts, Blackboard also features a bulletin board discussion program where we can continue our discussion after class is over.

The Blackboard discussion forums are an excellent place for people who may feel inhibited by regular class discussion to share their opinions with the class. I will be reading the discussion forum regularly and I recommend you do the same. From time to time, post topics will be assigned. (Additional posts will be looked upon favorably when I calculate your final grade.)

### Email

Students in this class are required to check their Duke email account at least once a day, in case there are any last-minute announcements or disruptions.

### iPods and iTunesU

This course is part of the iPod and iTunesU programs at Duke. I will periodically upload files and content for use by the class; students without iPods are eligible for loaner iPods from OIT for the duration of the course. (See me for details.)

Details on the iTunesU program can be found at <http://itunes.duke.edu>.

### Honor Code

Students are expected to abide by the terms of the student code of academic conduct, available in your undergraduate bulletin or online at <http://www.integrity.duke.edu>. I urge you all to examine this material and consult me with any questions you may have about plagiarism or academic integrity *before* it becomes an issue.

Ignorance of what constitutes plagiarism is not an acceptable excuse for plagiarism. **Academic dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated and will result in a failing grade for the course.**

### Respect

This classroom is a community. It is crucial that we treat each other with the appropriate level of courtesy and respect. No one should be made to feel unwelcome here.

Failure to treat other students with the respect they deserve will **severely** negatively impact your class participation grade.

### Preliminary Schedule

**W 8/27 FIRST DAY OF CLASS**

F 8/29 Susan Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster” (e-reserve)  
*War of the Worlds* (2005) (film excerpt)

W 9/3 Wells Tower, “Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned” (e-reserve)

**F 9/5** Welcome to the Twentieth Century: Poetry and Art (handout)  
Sven Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing*: “The History of the Future,” “Death Comes Flying,” “What Is Permissible in War?,” and “Bombing the Savages”

**END OF DROP/ADD**

W 9/10 Faulkner and García Márquez Nobel Prize speeches (available at nobelprize.org)  
Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Chapters 1-5

F 9/12 Gabriel Garbia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Chapters 6-9  
*Ilha das Flores/Isle of Flowers* (film)

W 9/17 Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Chapters 10-17

F 9/19 Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Chapters 18-20

**W 9/24** *Things to Come* (discussion only—screening details TBA)

**CLOSE READING DUE**

F 9/26 Sven Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing*: “Bombed into Savagery,” “The Law and the Prophets,” “From Chechaouen to Guernica,” “The Splendid Decision,” “Hamburg, Auschwitz, Dresden,” “The Dream of a Superweapon,” “Hiroshima,” and “Living with the Superweapon”

**W 10/1 CONFERENCES – NO CLASS**

F 10/3 Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, Chapters 1-18

W 10/8 Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, Chapters 19-74

F 10/10 Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, Chapters 75-127  
*Atomic Café* (film excerpt)

**FALL BREAK**

W 10/15 Sven Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing*: “Massive Retaliation,” “Flexible Retaliation,” “Surgical Precision,” and “The Bomb on Trial”

**F 10/17** *Dr. Strangelove* (discussion only—screening details TBA)

**PERSUASIVE PAPER DUE**

W 10/22 *Strangelove* Day 2

F 10/24 Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics” (e-reserve)

*The Twilight Zone*: “The Shelter” (film)

Judith Butler, “Precarious Life” (e-reserve)

*The Twilight Zone*: “Two” (film)

**PAPER #2 NOW DUE HERE**

- W 10/29 Daphne du Maurier, “The Birds” (e-reserve)  
*The Birds* (discussion only—screening details TBA)
- F 10/31 **CONFERENCES – NO CLASS**
- W 11/5 Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, Chapters 1-5  
 F 11/7 Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, Chapters 6-8
- W 11/12 Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, Chapters 9-12  
 F 11/14 Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, Chapters 13-15
- W 11/19** Jimmy Carter, “Malaise” Speech (July 15, 1979) (Blackboard: Course Documents)  
 James Howard Kunstler, excerpt from *The Long Emergency* (e-reserve)
- F 11/21** *The End of Suburbia* (discussion only—screening details TBA)  
**THEMATIC PAPER DUE**
- W 11/26** **THANKSGIVING BREAK – NO CLASS**  
**F 11/28** **THANKSGIVING BREAK – NO CLASS**
- W 12/3** *Children of Men* (discussion only—screening details TBA)  
**F 12/5** Al Columbia, “The Trumpets They Play!” (Blackboard: Course Documents)  
 Kelly Link, “Some Zombie Contingency Plans” (e-reserve)  
**LAST DAY OF CLASS**
- F 12/12** **REVISED AND EXPANDED FINAL PAPER DUE**