

Please Note: This is a course description, not a full syllabus

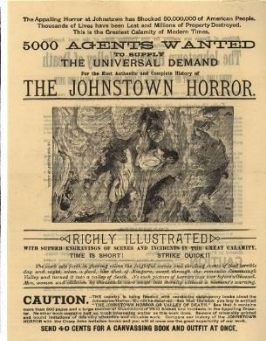
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GESM 120g: Seminar in Humanistic Inquiry: Epidemics and Disasters in History (Freshmen only)

Spring 2016 Tu-Th 11-12:20



Course Description

Disasters and epidemics have threatened human existence ever since human beings began to form societies and to manipulate natural environments to their advantage. But the growing complexity of civilization has made it at once more subject to the spread of diseases and “natural” disasters (earthquakes, fires, and flooding) and more capable of disaster and disease prevention. Modern societies at once engage in increasingly risky activity (space exploration, for example) and yet seem less tolerant of risk (hysteria over epidemics such as Ebola). Just *how* any society faces, reacts to, and remembers (or re-imagines) a disaster varies according to historical circumstances and reveals a great deal about its politics, social structure, cultural traditions. As societies become more modern—measured by their control over and manipulation of nature, microbes, and human populations—natural disasters and deadly epidemics can create deep psychological, emotional, and cultural wounds stemming from the sudden loss of the illusion that human beings control their environments. This course will focus on specific examples of epidemics and disasters. In addition, we will explore a case of human-generated disaster in an example of the conquest of Africa as well as imagined future disaster in the form of science fiction. We can learn much from responses to disasters and epidemics in the distant past as well as in more recent times. This seminar will thus explore “what it means to be human” through responses to real and imagined epidemics and disasters.

Readings include the following:

Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* Penguin Classics 978-0140437850

David McCullough, *The Johnstown Flood* Simon & Schuster 978-0671207144

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, Anchor Books 0385474547

H.G. Wells, *War of the Worlds*, Tribeca 978-1936594054

Simon Winchester, *A Crack in the Edge of the Earth* Harper Collins 978-0060572006

Susan Kingsley Kent, *Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919: A Brief History with Documents*
978-0312677084

Learning Objectives

- 1) Introduce students to historical methodologies through the exploration of textual, visual sources.
- 2) Examine contemporary issues of risk and panic that have roots in the past.
- 3) Develop critical analysis and writing skills through the examination of primary and secondary sources.

Course Notes

When relevant, power point presentations and other electronic resources will be made available through Blackboard.