

COLT 475: Politics and the Novel

From Year One to Year Zero: The Time of the Law in the Invention of the Modern World

Professor Hilary Schor

“Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,/But to be young was very heaven!”

Or so William Wordsworth thought, until the blood began to run in the gutters of the streets of Paris. This class begins with the reinvention of the world in 1789: the guillotine; the committee for public safety, which judged, as it believed it could, the passion of every citizen for the revolution; and of course a new beginning to time itself, new months, new holidays, year one, start the clock again. No one today dates her letters “13 Fructaire 226” or “18 Brumaire,” but the shock of that vision, the amazing “pathos of novelty,” as Hannah Arendt once described it, stays with us. Are we new yet? Have we ever been modern? What is the difference between civil wars, revolts, revolutions, sleeping with the enemy, and a bloodbath?

In this seminar we will read a range of 19th and 20th century literature in the light of amazing, rapid, and soul-shocking historical change, from the American and French Revolutions to the Industrial Revolution to the Anarchists, from the Russian Revolution to the fall of the Berlin Wall; from the Cold War to Nuclear War to the killing fields of Cambodia; from the Suffragists to the sexual revolution to #metoo. How do we assimilate change, how do novels (as well a revolutionaries) play with our sense of time and order, how do changes in gender roles and sexual freedom (and violence) transform the grounds of the traditional novel? And what are the roles of “fiction” and “law” in making (and unmaking) a new world order?

Literary texts will include Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, John le Carre, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, Jiri Weil, *Mendelssohn is On the Roof*, Christa Wolf, *Accident: A Day's News*, Timothy Garton Ash, *The File*, Anna Funder, *Stasiland*, Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* and Anna Burns' *Milkman*.

Theoretical texts will include Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, Adorno and Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and Ellen Willis, *Beginning to See the Light: Sex, Hope and rock-and-roll*.

Films will include *The Lives of Others*, *The Legend of Rita*, *Germany Year Zero*, *The Missing Picture*, *The Death of Stalin*, *Klute* and *Three Days of the Condor*. Assignments will include three papers and a final examination.

This class will substitute for English 473, English 466 or English 425 and count towards the majors in Narrative Studies and Law, History and Culture.

Fall 2019 • Tues & Thurs 3:30- 4:50pm • THH 121