

# American Disasters

The term *disaster* derives from an astrological lexicon, suggesting an unpropitious occurrence that comes from the stars. This vaguely theological connotation is retained in contemporary usage when people refer to cataclysmic events as disasters: they thereby refer to unforeseen and unforeseeable calamities. But do disasters really drop down from the stars? What, or, more incisively, who, prepares the scene for a disaster? How does the framing of a set of events as a disaster exculpate the individuals and entities that profit from social ruptures of various sorts?

From the attacks of 9/11 to Hurricane Katrina to the financial meltdown, the United States has witnessed a series of events unfold in recent years that have been denominated publicly as disasters. In addition to such “real” events, the American imagination is increasingly seized by millennial visions of ecological apocalypse, religious Armageddon, and economic meltdown. As noted critic Fredric Jameson put it recently, we seem to be more capable of imagining the end of the world than of changing the economic system that is driving us to the brink of chaos. What in contemporary U.S. culture is generating this fascination with end times? Who profits from this trend?

This seminar will examine the changing contours of American culture over the last decade, looking in particular at representations of various sorts of disaster. The aim throughout the seminar will be to link this history of the present to previous manifestations of U.S. millennial thought over the last century or so. What, we will ask, are the links between the apocalyptic imagination that is so rife in U.S. popular culture today and the decline of American empire? Might representations of American disaster be turned to progressive ends?

## Course Requirements:

- A series of brief (250 word maximum) blog postings in reaction to assigned readings
- A conference-length (i.e. 1,750 – 2,500 word) paper focusing on one of the readings and/or topics for the course.

## Required Texts:

- Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood* (Talese, 2009)
- Dave Eggers, *Zeitoun* (Vintage, 2010)
- Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Tyndale, 1996)
- Michael Lewis, *The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine* (Norton, 2010)
- Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (Harcourt, 2009)

## Reading Schedule:

1. God
  - a. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days*
  - b. Melani McAlister, "Left Behind and the Politics of Prophecy Talk" from *Exceptional State*
2. Shock
  - a. Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*
  - b. Retort, "The State, the Spectacle, and September 11" from *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (2005).
3. Nature
  - a. Dave Eggers, *Zeitoun*
  - b. Neil Smith, "There's No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster"  
(<http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Smith/>)
  - c. Dylan Rodriguez, "The Meaning of 'Disaster' under the Dominance of White Life" from South End Press Collective, ed., *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation* (2007).
4. Money
  - a. Michael Lewis, *The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine*
  - b. David Harvey, selected chapters from *The Enigma of Capital* (2010)
5. Justice
  - a. Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*
  - b. Marc Abélès, selected chapters from *The Politics of Survival* (2010)