First-Year Seminar
Reading the Plague
Professor Rebecca Falkoff
T/Th 12:30-1:45

Essential information
Professor email: rebecca.falkoff@nyu.edu
Office hours: Tuesday 2-4 & by appointment
Office: Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, 24 West 12th Street, Room 401

Seminar Description
Giovanni Boccaccio’s Decameron, a story about a group of young Florentines who flee their plague-devastated city to enjoy country estates, stories and song, begins with a simple claim: “It is a matter of humanity to show compassion for those who suffer.” The plague Boccaccio describes tests the strength of compassion and even humanity: brothers abandon their brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, wives their husbands, fathers and mothers their own children. The plague also tests the power of Boccaccio’s pen and, more broadly, the possibility of language to evoke incomprehensible, apparently unprecedented pain and sorrow: “What I have to tell is incredible, and if I and many others had not seen these things with our own eyes, I would scarcely dare to believe them, let alone write them down.”

In this seminar we will read, discuss, and analyze historical and literary works about the plague and other contagious illnesses, real and fictional. In the account of Thucydides, the plague threw funeral customs into confusion, as desperate Athenians sought to dispose of the dead in any way possible. In a haunting story by Dino Buzzati, an infectious disease that afflicts automobiles also debases social relations, as friends turn on friends and neighbors turn on neighbors to report those suspected of harboring infected vehicles. Reading these and other seminal accounts of the plague through the centuries by survivors, historians, storytellers and philosophers, and noting remarkable similarities, we will gain perspective on these tragic and unsettling times, finding compassion in—that is, “suffering with”—the past.

Course Objectives
• Cultivate analytical and critical thinking
• Advance multimodal communication and presentation skills
• Use short-form and long-form writing to explore ideas
• Introduce modes of inquiry and research in the disciplines represented in the College of Arts and Science
• Incorporate issues of ethics and diversity
• Develop intellectual curiosity through academic mentoring and engagement with the liberal arts
Primary Texts – * = available at bookstore | @ = available through classes

- Thucydides, selections from *The History of the Peloponnesian War* @
- Lucretius, selections from *The Nature of Things* @
- Giovanni Boccaccio, selections from *The Decameron* *
- Alessandro Manzoni, selections from *The Betrothed* @
- Thomas Mann, selections from *The Magic Mountain* @
- Dino Buzzati, “Seven Stories,” “The Epidemic,” and “Motor Plague” * @
- Gesualdo Bufalino, *The Plague Sower* *
- Primo Levi, “Cladonia rapida” and “The Plague Has No Borders” @
- Curzio Malaparte, selections from *The Skin* @
- Albert Camus, *The Plague* *
- Antonin Artaud, “The Theater and the Plague” * @
- Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Separate Rooms* *
- Steven Soderbergh, *Contagion*

Secondary Texts – * = available at bookstore | @ = available through classes

- René Girard, “The Plague in Literature and Myth” @
- Susan Stewart, *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* * @
- Roberto Esposito, selections from *Immunitas. The Protection and Negation of Life* * @
- Felice Cimatti, “The Metaphysics of Patient Zero” @

Assessment

Response Paper.................................................................10%
Short Paper 3-4 pages..................................................... 15%
In-class presentation .....................................................5%
Midterm..................................................................................15%
Final Research Paper (breakdown below).........................45%
  Secondary Source Assessment Worksheet.....5%
  Research Paper Proposal...........................................5%
  DURF Application......................................................5%
  Draft & Peer Evaluation...........................................5%
  Final Research Paper..............................................25%
Participation......................................................................10%

Response Paper
The response paper is the first graded assignment in this class. Although it is an informal piece of writing, it should engage critically with a reading, formulate questions and ideas about the text.

Short Paper
The short paper should be a polished piece of writing that develops an original argument in response to one of three prompts. The argument should be supported with specific textual examples.

In-Class Presentation
The midterm will be composed of passage identification essays and short answers.

You will receive detailed instructions about each of these assignments later in the semester.
Participation and Attendance
You are expected to attend class regularly, complete all required readings, and participate actively in class discussions. In order to effectively prepare for class, it may be helpful to underline passages you find particularly interesting or important and to jot down any observations and questions you might have.

Absences
The Seminar follows the University Calendar Policy on Religious Holidays, which is online here: https://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/university-calendar-policy-on-religious-holidays.html.

Electronic Devices
The use of cell phones in the classroom is prohibited; the use of other electronic devices—i.e. tablets or laptops—is strongly discouraged. All electronics should be switched to airplane mode and silenced before class.

Writing Support
Students are strongly encouraged to take advantage of the services offered by the NYU Writing Center, including free one-on-one tutoring in-person and through Zoom. More information can be found here: http://ewp.cas.nyu.edu/object/writing.center.

Academic Accommodations
Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is www.nyu.edu/csd. Please contact the Moses Center for Student Accessibility (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

Academic Integrity, Plagiarism, and Cheating (adapted from the website of the College of Arts & Science)
https://cas.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/cas/academic-integrity.html: Academic integrity means that the work you submit is original. Obviously, bringing answers into an examination or copying all or part of a paper straight from a book, the Internet, or a fellow student is a violation of this principle. But there are other forms of cheating or plagiarizing which are just as serious — for example, presenting an oral report drawn without attribution from other sources (oral or written); writing a sentence or paragraph which, despite being in different words, expresses someone else’s idea(s) without a reference to the source of the idea(s); or submitting essentially the same paper in two different courses (unless both instructors have given their permission in advance). Receiving or giving help on a take-home paper, examination, or quiz is also cheating, unless expressly permitted by the instructor (as in collaborative projects).

Course Schedule

**Week One**
Thursday, September 3, 2020
Introduction to course and to each other

**Week Two - History and Commemoration**
Tuesday, September 8, 2020
Thucydides: Book I, 1, 20-22; Book II, 35-54

Thursday, September 10, 2020
René Girard, “The Plague in Literature and Myth”
**WEEK THREE - POETRY AND SCIENCE**

Tuesday, September 15, 2020  
Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*, Book VI

Thursday, September 17, 2020  
* Reading Response paper due

**WEEK FOUR - FLIGHT TO UTOPIA: BOCCACCIO**

Tuesday, September 22, 2020  
Read Proem, Introduction to Day I

Thursday, September 24, 2020  
I.1: Ser Ciappelletto and the truth of fiction

**WEEK FIVE - STRANGE UTOPIAS, BOCCACCIO cont.**

Tuesday, September 29, 2020  
VIII, 7: The Scholar, the Widow: on justice and measure  
* Short paper assigned

Thursday, October 1, 2020  
X, 10: Griselda: on sacrifice and obedience

**WEEK SIX - NARRATING HISTORY: PATIENT ZERO, ALESSANDRO MANZONI’S THE BETROTHED**

Tuesday, October 6, 2020  
Felice Cimatti, “The Metaphysics of Patient Zero”  
Alessandro Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, Chapter 1, 32

Thursday, October 8, 2020 – the craft of research  
* In-class meeting with librarian

**WEEK SEVEN – FORMULATING A RESEARCH PROJECT**

Tuesday, October 13, 2020  
Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, Chapter 36  
* Short paper due

Thursday, October 15, 2020  
Dino Buzzati, “Peste motoria”  
Primo Levi, “Cladonia Rapida”

**WEEK EIGHT - PLAGUE AND DENOUEMENT DELUS EX MACHINA**

Tuesday, October 20, 2020  
In-class DURF Application Peer Review Workshop

Thursday, October 22, 2020  
**Secondary source assessment worksheet due**  
* Add your secondary source to collaborative bibliography wiki project  
Buzzati, “The Epidemic” and “Seven Stories”
**WEEK NINE – ILLNESS AS METAPHOR**

**Tuesday, October 27, 2020**

**Hand in draft DURF Application to professor.**

* If you complete the CAS DURF application and awarded a DURF grant you will receive a 100 for this assignment.

Even if you decide not to hand in the DURF application to CAS, you must complete this assignment for the seminar.

Curzio Malaparte, “The Plague,” (first chapter *The Skin*)

** Trigger Warning: this reading contains material that may be offensive and disturbing.**

**Thursday, October 29, 2020**

Susan Sontag, selections from *Illness as Metaphor*

Albert Camus, *The Plague*

**WEEK TEN – RESEARCH METHODS / ALBERT CAMUS, THE PLAGUE**

**Tuesday, November 3, 2020**

Albert Camus, *The Plague*

**Thursday, November 5, 2020**

Albert Camus, *The Plague*

Final paper proposal due

**WEEK ELEVEN – DEADLY BEAUTY: THOMAS MANN**

**Tuesday, November 10, 2020**

Thomas Mann, *A Death in Venice*

**Thursday, November 12, 2020**

Gesualdo Bufalino, *The Plague-Sower*

**WEEK TWELVE – DEADLY LOVESICKNESS: GESUALDO BUFALINO**

**Tuesday, November 17, 2020**

Gesualdo Bufalino, *The Plague-Sower*

**Thursday, November 19, 2020**

Finish *The Plague Sower*

**WEEK THIRTEEN – ROUGH DRAFT PEER REVIEW WORKSHOP**

**Tuesday, November 24, 2020**

**Rough drafts due in class**

* Email one copy to professor before 5pm, bring a hard copy to class for in-class peer review workshop

** Thanksgiving – No Class on Thursday, November 26**

**WEEK FOURTEEN – VITTORIO TONDIELLI / AIDS AND ITS METAPHORS**

**Tuesday, December 1, 2020**

Vittorio Tondelli, *Separate Rooms*

**Thursday, December 3, 2020**

Vittorio Tondelli, *Separate Rooms*

Excerpts from Susan Stewart, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*
WEEK FIFTEEN – CONCLUSIONS, CONTAGION

Tuesday, December 8, 2020
  Steven Soderbergh, Contagion (watch before class)

Thursday, December 10, 2020
  Presentations of final papers

* Final research papers due on Friday, December 18