

**[Please note, this syllabus is from a past semester; the syllabus for an upcoming semester will vary]**

**CIMS 1130 / COML 1130 / ENVS 1040 GRMN  
1130**

## **Water Worlds: Cultural Responses to Sea Level Rise and Catastrophic Flooding**

**Instructor: Simon Richter**

### **Course Description**

As a result of global warming, the world that is taking shape is becoming decidedly more inundated with water than we're accustomed to. Ice sheets are melting, glaciers are retreating, ocean levels are rising, ocean temperature is increasing, coral is dying and marine species are going extinct, polar habitat is disappearing, and countries are jockeying for control over a new Arctic passage. Coastal cities and small island nations are becoming uninhabitable or submerging, setting what will become hundreds of millions of climate refugees in motion. Catastrophic flooding events are increasing in frequency and intensity, as are extreme droughts. Hurricane-related storm surges, tsunamis, and raging rivers have devastated regions on a local and global scale. The unfolding climate crisis tests the limits of the human imagination, precisely at a time when it is most needed.

### **Course Goals**

The primary goal of the course is to involve you in the process of analyzing and interpreting an array of creative works that show how people and cultures have responded to catastrophic high-water events and sea level rise over the course of history. Primary objects of interest will be works of literature, myth, film, music, and art. As an example of the new interdisciplinary field known as "Environmental Humanities," the course will include input from the social and natural sciences. The basic question we'll be asking is: What is the specific contribution that the humanities can make to help confront the problems and challenges caused by climate change and sea level rise? By the end of the course, we will

know a great deal about floods and flooding from a variety of perspectives; we will have analyzed and interpreted texts, images, and films from an array of cultural traditions; we will have consulted relevant scholarship about these cultural artifacts; and we will have developed interpretive models for understanding the role culture plays in the human response to flooding and rising sea levels. Because of the international scope of the course, intercultural analysis is a vital component. Important themes and motifs include: water and memory; “permeability” as a cultural construct and feature of individual and national identity; sacrifice and other cultural forms of propitiation; prophecy and catastrophe; the metaphor of the ark; the importance of community; and recognizing non-human agents. At the end of the semester, you will have a "big picture" of our complex and challenging situation. At times you'll despair. But we'll encounter many narratives of hope and learn strategies of cultural resilience.

A subsidiary goal of this course is to provide you with multiple opportunities to become aware of the wide range of community-based climate action and knowledge sharing on and around the Penn campus.

## Readings and Films

Many readings will be provided as pdfs through the canvas site, but you will have to acquire two books.

- *Myths from Mesopotamia*, translated by Stephanie Dalley, Oxford UP
- *The Drowned World*, J. G. Ballard, Liveright Press (Kindle available)

You can order them online for pick up through the Penn Book Center (preferable) or from Amazon or another online retailer. Feel free to purchase them as e-books.

We'll be analyzing some remarkable movies. Most of them can be streamed from the course canvas site. Click on Penn Library Course Reserves to find them. Titles include:

- Chasing Coral
- The Shape of Water
- Noah
- When the Levees Broke
- Beasts of the Southern Wild
- The Impossible
- Wonderful Town
- Rivers and Tides
- DamNation

# Course Assignments and Grading Policy

This course is officially categorized as a lecture course. And there will be lectures, though they will tend to be interactive. It is crucial that you give yourself a chance to be absorbed by the readings and films you encounter and that you come to class ready to engage. The purpose of the assignments is to allow you to experience the kinds of scholarly activities undertaken in the environmental humanities. These involve research, analysis, interpretation, interdisciplinary thinking, and creativity. Your grade will be based on the following:

- Participation in bi-weekly online discussions and completion of small assignments (10%)
- Attendance (10%)
- Attendance and participation in five on- or off-campus events of your choice from the running list of water and climate related activities (5%). For every activity you attend and participate in *beyond* the first five, you will receive an absolute point that is added to your total grade.
- A five-page interpretive essay on the film *Noah* (20%) **Due Sept 30.**
- A paragraph (ca. 200-300 words) describing your plans for the research paper (5%) **Due Nov 3**
- A five-page interpretive essay on the novel *The Drowned World* (20%) **Due Nov 13**
- An eight to ten-page research paper, described in detail in the next item (30%) **Due Dec 18**

## Discovering the Penn and Philadelphia Water and Climate Community

5% of your grade comes from attending and participating in five water and climate-related activities on or off campus over the course of the semester. You will find a running list of almost endless opportunities near the top of the modules. The goal of this component of the course is to show you how many activist and knowledge-sharing communities there are. Global warming is scary. You don't want to be alone and you don't want to be idle. It's good to know that so many people and organizations are fighting to stave off the worst effects of climate change and to create better communities.

Once you've attended your five events, there is no reason to stop. For every subsequent event you attend you will earn one extra point that will be added directly to your final grade. This can easily make the difference between a B+ and an A- or an A- and an A.

**Aug 29 Introduction to Water Worlds**

# Syllabus

Syllabus

## Running List of Water & Climate Events

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### Aug 29 & Sept 3 Chasing Coral and the Submerged Art of Jason Decaires Taylor

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### Sept 4 Your Favorite Watery Place

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### Sept 5 The Shape of Water

Sept 5 The Shape of Water

### Sept 10 The Oldest Flood Story: Atrahasis

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### What is the Source of Your Local Water?

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### Sept 12 Gilgamesh

Sept 12 Gilgamesh

### Sept 17 The Great Yü and the Yellow River

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### Sept 19 & 24 Noah and the Ark

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### Sept 26 Aranofsky's Noah (first written assignment due on Oct 2)

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### Oct 1 The Shape of Rivers (Postponed to Oct 8. No class today)

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### Oct 3 Aranofsky's Noah 2

Oct 3 Aranofsky's Noah 2

## Oct 8 The Shape of Rivers 2

Oct 8 The Shape of Rivers 2

## Oct 10 Fall Break

Oct 10 Fall Break

## Oct 15 Rivers: The Mississippi

Oct 15 Rivers: The Mississippi

## Oct 17 & 22 Telling the Stories of Hurricane Katrina

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## Oct 24 The Shape of Resilience

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## Oct 29 & 31 The Problems with Dams

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## Final Project Paragraph Description Due

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## Nov 5 & 7 International Water Week in the Netherlands

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## Nov 12 & 14 The Drowned World (second written assignment)

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## Nov 19 & 21 Tsunami: The Impossible and Wonderful Town

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## Nov 26 The Ocean Defends Itself: The Swarm

Nov 26 The Ocean Defends Itself: The Swarm

## Dec 3 & 5 Floating and The Shape of Retreat

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