We live amidst dangers: Accidents and catastrophes are dramatic and always possible events that challenge individual and collective life. They break the protective shields that ward off the threats surrounding us. Their traumatic impact calls upon psychological and cultural coping mechanisms and forces us to reconfigure our lives that will never be the same. How have cultures dealt with the unexpected breakdown of order and normality? This course imparts a critical knowledge about the models according to which narrations about these events are formed and asks how literature and film can help to cope with disasters.

Art has an immunological function: The stories we tell ourselves help integrate and make sense of what has previously mutilated us. They also anticipate possible future accidents and enable us to cope with them. In Modernity, accident and catastrophe – both previously interpreted as destiny – change their meaning. They stand for contingency and represent a risk inherent in our way of life. Urban spaces, modern working environments, and new means of transportation such as trains and the automobile make accidents more probable and ubiquitous. The course will examine how filmic and narrative representations integrate the disintegration and violence inherent in our world. Accidents are sources for artistic productivity. We will read short texts from Grimmelshausen and Heinrich von Kleist to Franz Kafka and Thomas Mann, and discuss films from Buster Keaton to Brian de Palma.

All texts and materials will be provided through ereserve and in class.

Johannes Türk is a specialist on 18th, 19th, and 20th century German and European literature, philosophy and culture. He teaches a wide variety of courses ranging from German cultural history 1500-1900 to a course on injustice in German literature and film and an introduction into contemporary Germany. He also specializes in the history of knowledge. He has published on the relationship between immunology and literature, on psychoanalysis, accidents in literature, as well as on empathy.