ENG 399: FACULTY PERSPECTIVE SEMINAR
SUPERHEROES - BEYOND THE PRINTED PAGE
PROFESSOR BEN SAUNDERS

SEMINAR DESCRIPTION

In our main class, ENG 480: *The Modern American Superhero*, we map the path of the American superhero from the first appearance of Superman, at the height of the Depression in 1938, to the present day. Along the way we consider the ways in which that journey reflects larger processes of social change. We also analyze the aesthetic dimension of comic books. The superhero comic is a critically under-appreciated form, but in terms of popularity and cultural impact it is as important — and characteristically American — as Jazz or Rock & Roll. We attempt to formulate a critical vocabulary to discuss this remarkable artistic legacy. Finally, we make an effort to understand better the extraordinary imaginative appeal of the costumed crime-fighter — an appeal that can apparently overlap significant distinctions of age, gender, nation, and culture, and which no amount of silliness or cynicism seems quite able to dispel.

In our Faculty Perspective Seminar, *Superheroes: Beyond the Printed Page*, we will explore a multitude of attempts to translate that unique appeal into other representational forms. Within four years of his appearance in a comic book, Superman was a star of the radio. In fact, *The Superman Show* was not only a hit show during the decade of the 1940s, but also contributed significantly to the development of the mythology around the character (both Superman’s Pal, Jimmy Olsen and Superman’s great weakness, Kryptonite, were introduced for the first time on the radio, not in the pages of the comic). Ever since the success of that radio show, there have been dozens of attempts to recreate the four-color fantasies of the comic book world in other media, and in this class we will consider a historical range of high-points in that tradition. Besides the *Superman* radio show, we will also consider: the popular *Superman* television series of the 1950s; the “camp” *Batman* TV show of the 1960s; the huge number of recent “super-hero” themed blockbuster movies; and examples drawn from a long history of animated films, beginning with the Superman cartoons made by the Fleischer Studio in the 1940s (at the time, the most expensive animated features ever made), and continuing to the present.

The class will therefore bear graphic witness to almost a century of change, as we listen to and watch the conventions of this special example of the “action/adventure” genre change with the political and social climates of each decade. The course should be, in it’s very materials, a vivid demonstration of the interactions between history and culture. However, the class will also provide a means to deepen our understanding of the formal achievements of comics, by showing what comics can do that other media cannot (and, perhaps, vice versa). One (frustrating and inaccurate) supposition among some cultural critics is that comics are essentially more “like” films than, say, novels or poems. Part of the purpose of this class will be to show how inadequate that assumption turns out to be, when films and comics are finally placed side by side.
SEMINAR STRUCTURE

Each session we will listen to or watch part of a superhero adaptation, and then discuss it as a group. Topics will include: specific revisions or changes to the original materials, and what those changes signify; the technical and formal challenges of the adaptation; the relative success or failure of the adaptation; and the role played by the larger cultural contexts of these representations (these “larger contexts” include: WW II, the ideology of the 1950s, the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s, the conservative backlash of the 1980s, and the “war on terror” — a significant backdrop for the Iron Man movie of 2009.)

TENTATIVE COURSE OUTLINE

Week One: Heroes on the Radio

Week Two: Battling Animated Nazis: The Fleischer Studio Superman Cartoons of the 1940s

Week Three: Truth, Justice, and The American Way – The Superman Television Show of the 1950s

Week Four: Batman in 1943.

Week Five: Batman in 1966.


Week Seven: Wonder Woman featuring Linda Carter.

Week Eight: The Music of the Superhero.

Week Nine: Finally: Spider-Man (or, why did the top selling hero at Marvel Comics have to wait more than forty years for his Big Screen debut?)

Week Ten: Iron Man: superheroes and the War on Terror.

SEMINAR REQUIREMENTS/GRADING STRUCTURE

In the wake of our discussions, students will also be required to write a short paper (3-5 pages) due in the final week of term on some aspect of media adaptation, such as: the problems of media translation; the effects of social change in the revision of primary materials; the formal differences between comics and radio, TV, or film. A small number of additional readings will be distributed in class. Attendance mandatory.