

ENGLISH 385: Graphic Narrative and Cultural Theory
WINTER 2015
PROFESSOR BEN SAUNDERS

Office: 366 PLC
Hours: Tuesday, 2pm-5pm*
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Description:

The most widely read (if not the most respected) novels of the last one hundred and fifty years have been so-called "genre fictions" — Crime, Western, Horror, Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Romance stories. It is commonly assumed that these kinds of stories are popular because they are less demanding than canonized works of literature, but this idea doesn't bear close scrutiny. (Among other things, it is simply untrue that genre fictions are always an "easy" read; it takes considerable effort to plough through *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, while the SF novels of Samuel Delaney can be as formally challenging as any high modernist text). One thesis of this class, then, is that the appeal of the most successful genre fiction is less a function of "accessibility" (whatever that actually means) than evidence of resonantly emblematic content.

More specifically, my claim is that genre fictions tap into genuine social anxieties — for example, anxieties provoked by the divisions of race, class, and gender — even when they present themselves as "mere" entertainments that supposedly do not merit serious critical analysis. With the benefit of hindsight, older genre fictions can be nakedly revealing with regard to such anxieties; and this raises the (slightly unnerving) question of what contemporary genre fictions might reveal, in turn, about us. We won't shy away from this question; on the contrary, throughout the term we will explicate the ways in which genre fictions work ideologically to reify or complicate our ethical and political values.

Our primary materials will be Horror and Science Fiction comic books dating from the 1940s through the 1980s and into the present day. Because we are working with comics we will also need to consider the effects of that specific medium when it comes to telling these kinds of tales. Additional topics for discussion will therefore include: how comics respond to, incorporate, and diverge from rival narrative modes, such as prose fiction and film; how the unique combination of verbal text and static image that we find in modern comics generates different kinds of ambiguity; how popular comics repeat, revise, and/or resist established genre conventions; and whether the complicated social status of the comics form within the larger culture makes it particularly suited to certain kinds of genre work.

Texts (in reading order):

Robert Kirkman and Tony Moore:	<i>The Walking Dead: Days Gone By</i>
Alan Moore, Steve Bissette and John Totleben:	<i>The Saga of Swamp Thing, Vols. 1 and 2</i>
Mike Mignola:	<i>Hellboy, Volume 1: Seeds of Destruction</i>
Mike Mignola:	<i>Hellboy: Right Hand of Doom</i>
Terry Moore:	<i>Rachel Rising Vols. 1 and 2</i>
Alan Moore and Ian Gibson:	<i>The Ballad of Halo Jones</i>
Carla Speed McNeil:	<i>The Finder Library Volume 1</i>
Greg Rucka and Michael Lark:	<i>Lazarus Volume 1</i>
Dan Slott and Mike Allred:	<i>The Silver Surfer Vol. 1</i>

All the above texts are available for purchase from Emerald City Comics, located at 770 East 13th (in the Smith Family Building). All texts are required; students who attend class without books will be counted as absent for the day.

Additional Texts:

Some critical essays and additional comic book texts will be made available through **Blackboard** in the form of PDFs. **In the case of the critical essays:** you are required to print up copies to refer to in class when relevant. Again, students who do not bring a hardcopy will be marked as absent for the day. **In the case of the comic book texts:** you are not required to print them up, but you will need to read them on a computer or iPad **before** the class in question and make a note of particular pages for discussion. I will then project the relevant pages on screen during our class sessions.

Method of Assessment:

Grades will be based upon:

- **TWO** shorter assignments (about **3-4 pages apiece**) summarizing and responding to different critical theories, due on the Friday of Week One (Jan 9), the Friday of Week Two (Jan 16).
- **ONE** formal analysis of a one-to-three page sequence from *Finder* (**4 pages minimum**), due on the Friday of Week VIII (Feb. 27).
- A research paper (**10 pages minimum**) OR a creative final project, due by 5 pm on Friday of Week X (March 13).

Detailed descriptions of each assignment provided separately.

Final grades will breakdown as follows:

Criticism Response I:	20%
Criticism Response II:	20%
Formal Analysis of <i>Finder</i> :	20%
Final Paper/Project:	30%
Class Participation:	10%

Anticipated Learning Outcomes:

You should expect to put **at least 9 hours** per week into this course (on top of time spent in class), with that number rising to **at least 12 hours** when assignments are due. Assuming you are able to devote yourself fully to the readings and assignments, by the end of the class you will have acquired a deeper knowledge of: the origins and historical development of the study of "popular literature"; the concept of genre and the aesthetic and political implications of genre distinctions; the transformation of genre conventions across media forms. You will also have considered a variety of different explanations for the popularity of the horror and SF genres over the last seventy-plus years. In addition, you will have gained experience and proficiency doing the following activities:

- Reading both comic book and critical texts with a view to better understanding their conventions.
- Drawing on relevant information to situate these popular texts within their cultural, political, and historical contexts.
- Performing formal analyses of a narrative medium that combines visual and verbal elements in a unique way.
- Writing focused analytical essays in clear, grammatical prose.
- Employing creativity and interpretive skills to produce original, persuasive arguments.
- Employing a diversity of primary and secondary sources, with proper acknowledgment and citation, to generate a persuasive written argument.

Buyer Beware

- **Late papers will not be accepted** without a valid medical excuse.
- **Attendance is mandatory.** Unexcused absences will result in a lowered grade, at the rate of 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g. from A to A-) for every unexcused absence. **No further warnings will be given.**
- In the event of illness, an unanticipated family commitment, or other approved University business (such as participation in a sporting event), some absences may be considered "excused." **Excused absences generally require some form of official documentation** (for example, a doctor's note, a letter from your coach, and so on), but I'll make this determination on a case-by-case basis if documentation is unavailable. **Courteous students will contact me about their unavoidable absences,** either before or (in the event of an emergency) as soon as is reasonable after the class in question.
- **There will be no second-chances on written assignments.** You need to make it your best work the first time around. If you are concerned that you will underperform on a particular assignment, **you need to come and see me beforehand;** afterwards is too late.
- **Always bring a text to class.** Students without a text will be marked as "absent: unexcused" for the day in question. You can't even pretend to be interested if you don't have the book in front of you.
- You should be aware that while horror and SF comic books emerged in the 1940s as a genre and form aimed at younger readers, since at least the 1980s comics have been aimed at an older and (presumably) more sophisticated audience; they do not meet the designation of "children's literature," and are not marketed as such. Consequently, these texts are often **graphically violent, sexually explicit, and overtly political.** You are not required to *like* everything you read, of course; but you must be prepared to meet the challenges of this material with an open mind if you chose to take this course.

Finally, if you have any questions about any of the above, feel free to ask. That is why I am here.

*Please note: on occasion I will be forced to cancel office hours for departmental and committee meetings, graduate student examinations, and other significant administrative duties. When this happens I will endeavor to inform you all in advance and to reschedule my appointments; your patience and understanding is appreciated.

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ADDITIONAL CRITICAL READINGS AND WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

Overview

Try to think of these assignments **not** as hoops you must jump through, but as **opportunities** to develop and broaden your sense of how the criticism of popular texts gets done, and how we can do it better. Which critics do you learn the most from? What arguments appeal most to you, and what might that say about your own intellectual make-up — your talents and your prejudices?

In the written assignments, please avoid windy introductions, unsupported generalizations, and grand conclusions. You generally don't have a lot of space in which to work, so don't waste words. Remember, too, that even if a particular assignment does not require you to write according to typical essay structure, I will still expect you to observe the rules of English grammar throughout, and to cite sources appropriately (including Internet sources) according to MLA or Chicago style guidelines.

Assignment One: Thinking About "Popular" Literature (3-4 pages)

First, read John Cawelti's essay, "With The Benefit Of Hindsight: Popular Culture Criticism" (supplied in photocopied form and available on Blackboard).

Second, summarize the most important aspects of his arguments, as you understand them, in one or two paragraphs. (Do not take more than one page to summarize his essay. The point of this portion of the assignment is to show that you can reduce a lengthy piece of prose to its salient ideas with efficiency and clarity. You will be graded on your ability to select the most cogent details, your accuracy, and your elegance of style, as well as your capacity for brevity.)

Third, consider the following questions: Has your understanding of critical practice changed after reading this essay (along with the other works we've already looked at by Fiedler and Cawelti)? What did you think criticism was, and how would you define it now? Do you find Cawelti persuasive? Does he make assumptions/arguments that you want to resist? What are the larger implications of the essay, and of our discussions this week, for the business of literary studies?

Fourth and finally, write **at least two pages** addressing these questions (and any other relevant issues you can think of) as best you can in the form of a mini-essay on the topic of "The Study of Popular Culture." You can (and should) come up with a better title than that, of course. Then attach your summary and your essay together and hand them in by 5pm at 366 PLC on Friday, January 9th. (If I am not there when you drop by, just slide your work under the door.)

Assignment Two: Theorizing Horror — Zombies and/as Capitalism (3-4 pages)

First, read Lauro and Embry's "A Zombie Manifesto" (supplied in photocopied form and also available on Blackboard).

Second, summarize the most important aspects of their arguments, as you understand them, in one or two paragraphs. (Do not take more than one page to summarize this essay. As with the first assignment, the point is to show that you can reduce a lengthy piece of prose to its salient ideas with efficiency and clarity.)

Third, consider the arguments of the essay in relation to any of the zombie comics we have read — that is, the comics from the 1950s, or Kirkman and Moore's *The Walking Dead: Days Gone By*. Do Lauro and Embry help us to understand these texts in a new way? Do the texts resist or conform to their analyses? Is there a particular moment or scene that you can now re-read through their arguments, or is there, by contrast, a moment or scene that you can point to that would complicate or qualify their claims?

Fourth and finally, write at least two pages addressing these questions in the form of a mini-essay on "The Zombie as Metaphor for Modern Life." You are welcome to try and come up with a better title than that, of course, although I think it's a pretty good one already. Then attach your summary and your essay together and hand them in by 5pm at 366 PLC on Friday, January 16th. (If I am not there when you drop by, just slide your work under the door.)

Assignment Three: Formal Analysis of *Finder* (4-5 pages)

Just as the title of the assignment suggests, you are asked to perform a formal analysis of one to three consecutive pages from Carla Speed McNeil's *Finder*.

As you might expect, a formal analysis gives priority to the *form* of an artwork (how it is made, laid-out, designed), and considers the ways in which those formal elements change our perception of the content (the plot, themes, or subject of the work).

Before you begin writing your essay, you should take a look at some prior examples of the formalist analysis of comics. I will provide one example, in photocopied form, from R. C. Harvey's *The Art of the Comic Book*. But Harvey doesn't present the only possible model. For example, an essay by Andre Molotiu (on Ditko's Spider-Man) I sometimes assign in another class contains some very useful concepts (such as "iconostasis") that are not mentioned by Harvey. I can supply this essay to any of you who are interested. Finally, you should consider browsing online for examples (trying out the phrases "comics and formalism" or "comics formalist analysis" in Google).

Once you have done this basic research, you should sit and look carefully at your chosen pages for an extended period of time. While looking at your pages, make some notes, paying attention to every possible formal detail. Consider the page layout; panel size; the various "camera" angles; the panel-to-panel transitions; the uses of the gutter; the effects of word balloon size and shape; lettering techniques; color palette, etc. Ask yourself: How do these various elements work to generate meaning and shape my experience as a reader?

For example: How does the page layout affect your perception of the kinetic or temporal aspects of the scene? Do the transitions work to suggest movement or stillness? Do they convey a rapid sequence or the slow passage of time? How do the "camera" angles and perspectives position you in relation to the characters or objects you are seeing? When (and how) are you encouraged to view things dispassionately, to reflect upon them philosophically, or to see them in an unfamiliar way? When (and how) are you encouraged to identify (or dis-identify) with a particular object, viewpoint, or character? When (and how) do formal choices of this kind provoke strong emotional responses? Does your chosen sequence make use of any visual symbols? Etc.

In this context, you should also consider McNeil's specific artistic style. For example: Does she seem to employ a more "realistic" mode at certain points, and adopt a more abstract, distorted, or cartoony vision at others? What adjectives best describe her drawing technique? What are her individual artistic mannerisms? How might her style itself function meaningfully, shaping the way you look at the objects and people that she renders?

When you have taken some detailed notes on your chosen pages, write them up in the form of an essay (a **minimum of 4 pages in length**). There is no need to provide a lengthy introduction or conclusion; just state which pages you have chosen to discuss, and then analyze them, panel by panel. The process of analysis should generate sufficient interest without you needing to construct a larger argument.

Assignment Four: Two Options

1) The Research Paper Option (10 pages minimum)

Although I have offered two suggestions for research topics (below) you may write about any aspect of the course that intrigues you. I will expect a fully elaborated argument **in dialogue with some prior works of critical literature already extant on your text or topic, or engaged by some other aspect of contemporary critical and cultural theory**; thus, the paper must make use of at least three academic sources, as well as any non-academic discussions drawn from the web or other media. You should also support your assertions where possible with close formal analysis of your chosen comic book texts.

I will be happy to discuss your research topics with you once you have thought a little about what you are interested in, and offer advice as to possible sources. Just come and see me during office hours or send me an email with your thoughts.

In the meantime, here are two suggestions for possible research papers (one a lengthy prompt, the other more brief):

A) Horror Comics and the Psychoanalytic Tradition

Most people nowadays probably think of psychoanalysis as a dubious therapeutic practice based on old-fashioned (not to mention sexist and homophobic) notions about the formative role of childhood experience. But within the academic disciplines of philosophy and literary studies, "psychoanalysis" actually names a complex, rich, and fascinating system of textual interpretation — one that has often been incorporated within such overtly progressive methodologies as feminism, Marxism, and queer theory.

As a system of interpretation, psychoanalysis starts from the position that our deepest motivations and desires — not exclusively erotic, but desires of every kind, from the mundane to the exotic, from personal tastes to political affiliations to sexual orientation — that our deepest motivations and desires are not always fully present and available to us. (We often refer to these less than fully present motivations and desires as "unconscious.")

At the same time, however, psychoanalysts like to remind us that our internal world is always with us, even (perhaps especially) when we are least aware of it. Thus, while psychoanalysis doesn't deny the existence of the external world in some silly Cartesian fashion, it nevertheless insists that our experience of that world is never pure: it is always mediated, organized, and filtered by consciousness. And that is the profound part. Psychoanalysis asks us to take seriously the idea that we don't ever have direct access to "reality," for all that the world impinges upon us in a very real way. Instead, human experience is always a (partial) reconstruction and never the whole story.

The horror genre has proved attractive to thinkers steeped in this psychoanalytic tradition. This may be because our capacity to take pleasure in horror stories is an obvious example of the kind of counter-intuitive or paradoxical behavior that psychoanalysis was developed to explain. The "primal" fears that horror texts explore (murder, the dark, disfigurement, the unknown) also serve to align this genre of literature with the psychoanalytic drive to uncover and explain our more mysterious impulses and hidden motives. This assignment will therefore provide you with a crash-course in some key concepts from that tradition, and an opportunity to apply those concepts to some of the texts we have been reading.

First, read the extracts on Psychoanalysis and Horror from the book "Reading Popular Narrative" (available on Blackboard) from Freud, Rank, Kristeva, and Carroll. Then read the short essay by Barbara Creed on Femininity and Abjection (also on Blackboard). Then reconsider one or two (but no more than two) of the texts we have read during the term in light of these readings. (*Rachel Rising* would be an obvious choice,

here.) In what ways do your chosen texts conform to the arguments of the psychoanalytic theorists and in what ways do your texts resist those claims? How can these theories enrich your interpretation of the text, and how might the text complicate the theories?

B) Sex, Gender, and Science Fiction

Read "Feminist Theory and Science Fiction" by Veronica Hollinger, and "Science Fiction and Queer Theory" by Wendy Pearson (both available on Blackboard). Then write an essay contextualizing either *The Ballad of Halo Jones* or *Finder* within the traditions of feminist and/or queer SF in the light of these essays. You may supplement your reading by seeking out interviews or other statements by either Alan Moore or Carla Speed McNeil. In the case of McNeil you may also want to consider the interpretive possibilities enabled by transgender theory. The first two volumes of the *Transgender Studies Quarterly* provide an alphabetical list of useful Keywords with bibliographies that may help with such a project (and is also available on the Blackboard site for the course).

2) The Comic-Of-Your-Own Option

For this assignment you will create an original comic, from three to six pages in length. The subject matter, medium, and style will be up to you, as long as your comic engages with ideas from the course readings, lectures, and discussions. The assignment is conceived as a creative alternative to writing a research paper, but the point is still to tell me something about what you have learned from the course. In addition to the comic, there will be a short written component to this assignment (outlined below).

To create your pages, you must necessarily employ some form of visual representation, whether it is drawing, digital photography (using software such as Comic Life), collage, or some other means. You can also experiment with a range of textual forms, as your story dictates; dialogue, thought bubbles, "voice-over" narration, or sound effects. The extent to which you employ text is up to you; some very interesting comics have been created without any words at all.

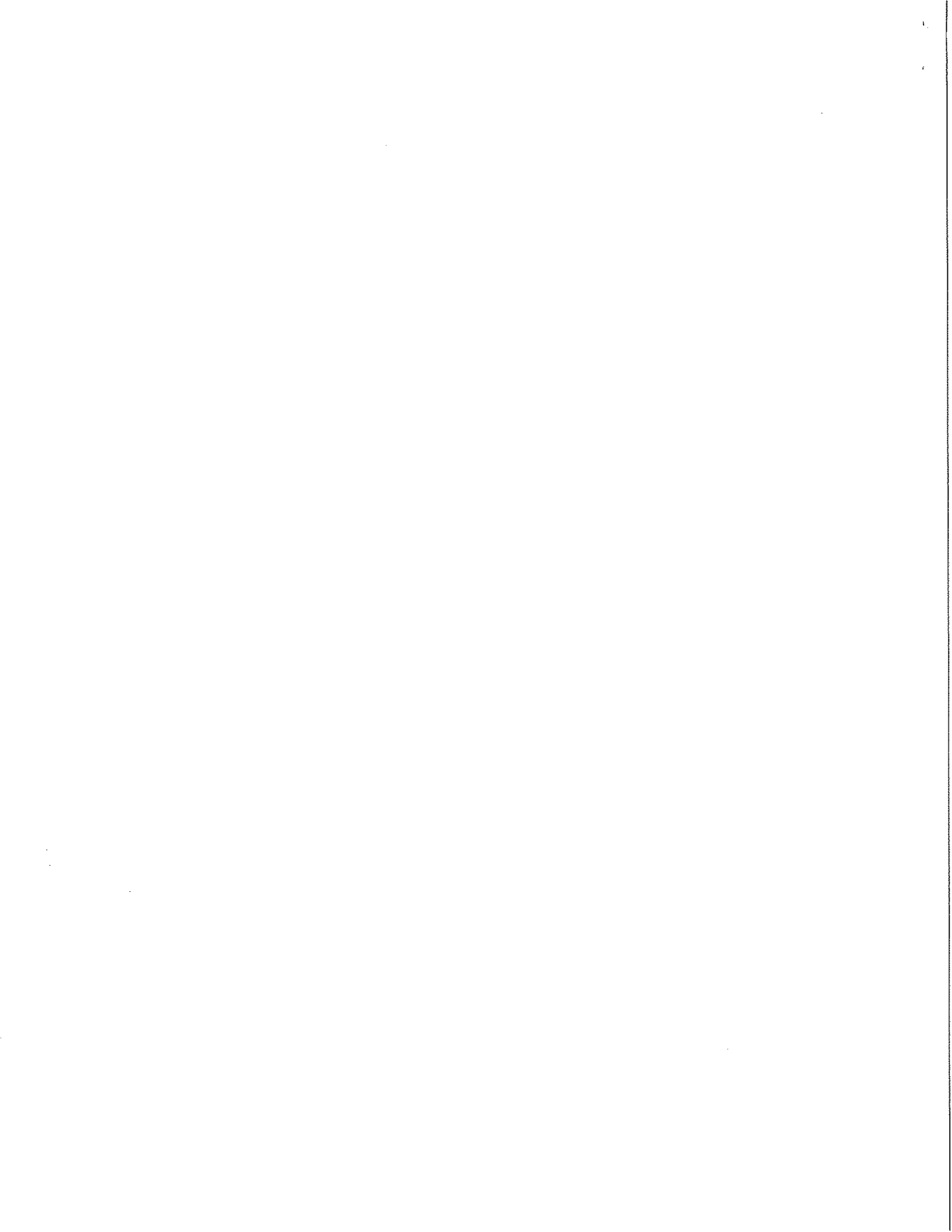
You will not be graded according to your ability to draw "realistic" figures. Choose a drawing style or other representational practice that you are comfortable working with instead of attempting to create images in a medium or style beyond your technical abilities and then using the written part to apologize or explain why your work is "bad." (If that means drawing with stick figures, then use stick figures to tell your story; quite a few effective comics have already been produced that way.) I am interested in how you employ the comic form to communicate ideas about the Horror or SF genres, not in whether or not you consider yourself a good/bad artist.

Although you will not be assessed on the "realism" of your drawing, you will be rewarded for creative use of things like page and panel layout, intelligent consideration of viewpoint or "camera angle" on a panel to panel basis, pacing, clarity, creative use of lettering and word balloons, and any other formal conventions of the comic book medium. There's more to comics page design than simply slicing up time into discrete moments and then putting each moment into a box. Think about the moments you will be emphasizing; think about which images might merit a larger or smaller panel; think about how your format will serve a particular kind of sequence or story.

Written Component: Distinct from the text requirement, you must also provide a one-to-two page discussion of your comic. In this discussion you must include the following four components:

1. A short synopsis (no more than five sentences).
2. A brief commentary on the choices you made regarding the visual style or form.
3. A brief commentary on the way in which you employed text.
4. A focused discussion of at least one idea from the class lectures that you actively engaged in creating your comic.

Students must let me know by the end of week VII if you are taking option two. If I have not heard from you by Monday of week VIII I will assume that you are writing the research paper.



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Required Readings and Other Deadlines

Week One

- Jan 5 **Introduction: On Reading Popular Genres**
Readings: Essay by Fiedler, "Towards A Definition of Popular Literature,"
 Essay by Cawelti, "The Question of Popular Genres Revisited."
 (Both available as PDFs on Blackboard; copies will also be distributed in class.)
- Jan 7 **The Horror! The Horror!**
Readings: A Selection of 1950s Horror Comics. (PDF/Blackboard.)
 Some More Offbeat Stories. (PDF/Blackboard.)
- Jan 9 **First Assignment Due, 366 PLC, 5pm.**

Week Two

- Jan 12 **EC Comics in Context**
Readings Selected EC Stories by Craig, Ingels, Krigstein, and Wood.
 (PDF/Blackboard.)
 Short story by Ray Bradbury: "The Fruit At The Bottom of the Bowl." (Photocopied Handout.)
 Selections from David Hadju's *The Ten-Cent Plague*.
 (Photocopied Handout.)
- Jan 14 **Zombie Theory**
Readings: *The Walking Dead: Days Gone By*.
 "A Zombie Manifesto." (Photocopied Handout.)
- Jan 16 **Second Assignment Due, 366 PLC, 5pm.**

Week Three

- Jan 19 **The Monster as Hero**
Readings: *The Saga of Swamp Thing, Volume One*.
 Selections from *The Horror Reader* on "Monstrosity."
 (Photocopied Handout.)
- Jan 21 Readings: *The Saga of Swamp Thing, Volume Two*.

Week Four

- Jan 26 **The Monster as Hero (cont.)**
Readings: *Hellboy: Seeds of Destruction.*
- Jan 28 Readings: *Hellboy: The Right Hand of Doom.*
- Jan 29: *Hellboy* Lecture by Professor Scott Bukatman, Stanford University (exact time and location TBA).

Week Five

- Feb 2 **"Those Fingers In My Hair ..."**
Readings: *Rachel Rising, Volume One.*
- Feb 4 **"And Though I Know It's Strictly Taboo ..."**
Readings: *Rachel Rising, Volume Two.*
 Essay by Gibson. (Photocopied Handout.)
- Feb 5 **Campus Visit by Terry and Robyn Moore**
(Creator and Publisher of *Rachel Rising*)
Global Scholars Hall, Room 117, 5 pm (food provided).

Week Six

- Feb 9 **The Origins of SF Comics**
Readings: Essay by Stableford: "SF Before the Genre."
 Essay by Atterbury: "The Magazine Era." (Photocopied Handouts)
 Alex Raymond's Flash Gordon. (PDF/Blackboard.)
 Selected Stories by Fletcher Hanks. (PDF/Blackboard.)
- Feb 11 **EC SF**
Readings: The EC stories of Wallace Wood. (PDF/Blackboard.)
 Short story by Ray Bradbury: "There Will Come Soft Rains."
 (Photocopied Handout.)

Week Seven

- Feb 16 **When 2000 AD Was Not History**
Readings: *The Ballad of Halo Jones.*
- Feb 18 **Feminist Futures**
Readings: *The Ballad of Halo Jones.*
 Essay by Merrick: "Gender In Science Fiction."
 (Photocopied Handout.)

Week Eight

Feb 23 **Worldbuilding**
Readings: *Finder.*

Feb 25 Readings: *Finder.*

Feb 27 **Third Assignment Due, PLC 366, 5pm.**

Week Nine

March 2 **The Dystopia To Come**
Readings: *Lazarus*

March 4 **Class visit by Greg Rucka, writer of *Lazarus*.**

Week Ten

March 9 **The SF Superhero**
Readings: *The Silver Surfer Volume One*

March 11 **Class Visit by Dan Slott, Mike Allred, and Laura Allred (writer, artist, and colorist of *The Silver Surfer*).**

March 13 **Final Papers and Projects Due, 366 PLC, 5 pm.**

