

ENGLISH 280: INTRODUCTION TO COMICS STUDIES

FALL 2015

PROFESSOR BEN SAUNDERS

Classroom: PAC 30

Office: 366 PLC

Hours: Wednesdays, 10 am – 12pm; 1 pm – 2pm

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Course Description:

This class provides an introduction to the political and aesthetic history of Anglo-American comics and to the academic discipline of Comics Studies. You will be exposed to a variety of comic-art forms (the newspaper strip, the comic book, the graphic novel) and a spectrum of modes and genres (fiction, non-fiction, kids comics, crime comics, and so on). You will also be asked to read several examples of contemporary comics scholarship.

Required Texts (in reading order):

Scott McCloud:	<i>Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art</i>
Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely:	<i>We 3</i>
George Herriman:	<i>Krazy and Ignatz, 1937-1938</i>
Charles Schulz:	<i>The Complete Peanuts, 1965-1966</i>
Various Creators:	<i>Archie's Favorite Comics From The Vault</i>
Ed Brubaker and Sean Phillips:	<i>Criminal: Last of the Innocent</i>
Nick Sousanis:	<i>Unflattening</i>
Greg Rucka and Justin Greenwood:	<i>Stumptown Volume III</i>
Chris Sebela and Ibrahim Moustafa:	<i>High Crimes</i>
Kelly Sue Deconnick and Valentine De Landro:	<i>Bitch Planet</i>
Matt Fraction and Christian Ward:	<i>ODY-C</i>

All these texts (**except *Unflattening***) are available for purchase **at a significant discount price** from Emerald City Comics, located at 770 East 13th in the Smith Family Building (across the street and a block and a half west of The Duck Store). *Unflattening* will be available at the Duck Store. **Supplementary essays will also be supplied throughout the term in photocopied form and/or as PDFs on Canvas.**

Please be aware that due to the production costs associated with graphic novels your textbook bill will be higher than for a typical English class. You should not enroll in this course if you are unable or unwilling to meet this expense (between \$150-170). **Students who attend class without a copy of the required text will be counted as absent and sanctioned accordingly.**

Method of Assessment

Grades will primarily be based on **three written assignments**, worth 30%, 30%, and 40% of your final grade, respectively. **See the attached descriptions for details and due dates.** A measure of extra-credit (up to a third of a letter grade) may also be awarded for highly distinguished class participation, at my discretion. (Please note: **This does not mean that you will get points merely for talking.** But students who regularly demonstrate familiarity with the readings, advance discussion by asking pertinent questions, and consistently ground their observations in specific details of the texts will be rewarded for their contributions.)

Anticipated Learning Outcomes

You should expect to put **at least** 10 hours per week into this course (on top of time spent in class), with that number rising to **at least** 12-14 hours during weeks 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 developments of American comics; the specific achievements of key comic strip and comic book creators; the economic and material conditions of comic book production; the range of comic forms (from newspaper strip to graphic novel). In addition, you will have gained experience and proficiency in the following activities:

- Reading both comics and critical texts with a view to better understanding their conventions.
- Drawing on relevant information to situate these 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** except in the case of a medical or family emergency.
- **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 emergency, or approved University business (such as participation in a sporting event), certain absences may be considered “excused.”** Please let me know before or (in the event of an emergency) as soon as is reasonable after the class in question if you think an absence should be excused. Bear in mind that in most cases I will require some form of official documentation (for example, a doctor’s note, a letter from your coach, and so on). **If you do not contact me about an absence then I will assume it falls under the category of “unexcused” and lower your grade accordingly.**
- **There will be no “do-overs” or 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.
- **All electronic devices are to be turned off and put away at the start of class.** You must take notes with a pen and paper, and you must refrain from checking personal messages for the duration of our meetings. **Students who violate these rules will be marked as absent and sanctioned accordingly.**
- **If you miss a quiz, you miss a quiz.** There will be no “make-up” assignments, except in the case of an excused absence.
- **Always bring a text to class. Students without a text will be marked as absent.** You can’t even pretend to be interested if you don’t have the book in front of you.
- You should be aware that some of the comics we will read this term deal with **adult themes** and subjects. A few are **violent**; others explore the range of **human sexuality**. Some are shockingly unconventional in their treatment of **political and religious** issues. You are not required to like everything you read — indeed, I hope for a more complicated response than that — but please be ready to meet the intellectual challenges of this material with an open mind if you choose 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.

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WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

In General

Assignments should be double-spaced and in 12 point font. You may consult additional resources, but these must be clearly and appropriately cited (see the “warning about plagiarism” below), and are not to be considered a substitute for close engagement with the assigned texts. (The point of an outside resource is not to provide you with a short cut so that you can spend less time thinking and writing, but rather to help you produce a more nuanced, engaged, and intelligent argument.) Use your common sense on this issue and consider the nature of each specific assignment. (In the case of the first, I’m inclined to advise against using additional resources at all — you will have your hands full with McCloud and Cohn — but I don’t forbid it. In the case of the final assignment, however, the use of additional resources is strongly encouraged.)

A bibliography of works cited is always required and does not count as one of your pages.

I: A Formal Analysis of Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely’s *We 3*.

Length: 4 pages (minimum)

Due date: 5 p.m. Monday, October 12 (366 PLC)

Making use of the terminology, theories, and examples laid out in Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* and in the excerpts we have read from Neil Cohn’s *The Visual Language of Comics*, perform a close formal analysis of a 2-3 page sequence from Morrison and Quitely’s *We 3*.

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

Before you begin writing your essay, then, 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 or perspectives taken on the panel contents; the relation of elements in the panel to one another; the panel-to-panel transitions; the use 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 does the perspective or point-of-view in each panel 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 with a particular object, viewpoint, or character? Does your chosen sequence make use of any visual symbols? What about color symbolism? etc.

In this context, you should also consider Quitely’s specific artistic style. For example: Does he seem to employ a more “realistic” mode at certain points, and adopt a more abstract, distorted, expressionistic or cartoony vision at others? What words best describe his drawing technique at these different times? What are his individual artistic mannerisms? How might his style itself function meaningfully, shaping the way you look at the objects and people that he renders?

Refer back to McCloud's and Cohn's various accounts of these formal issues while you are making your notes. Can McCloud help us to understand Morrison and Quitely as formalists? Can Cohn? Do Morrison and Quitely come up with any story-telling techniques that McCloud and/or Cohn fail to consider?

Once you have taken some detailed notes on your chosen pages, checking your thoughts against McCloud and Cohn, write them up in the form of an essay (a minimum of 4 pages in length). **There is no need to provide a windy 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 at this stage.

When you have proofread and corrected your work, attach a copy of your chosen pages (a black and white printout or photocopy is fine) and hand it in at my office by the due date above. (If I am not there, just slip it under the door.)

II: On Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* and/or George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*

Length: 6 pages (minimum)

Due date: 5 p.m. Friday, October 30, 366 PLC.

For your second paper, you are required to write about either Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* or Herriman's *Krazy Kat*. (And you may even attempt to write about both at once.)

You may consider a variety of questions and adopt a variety of approaches. For example:

- Building on your previous assignment, you can analyze the formal aspects of their work (taking into account the specific formal conventions of a newspaper strip which are, of course, very different from those of the monthly comic-book or graphic novel).
- In the case of Schulz's work, you can reflect on the experience of reading two years worth of *Peanuts*, noting the ways Schulz makes use of the calendar and the seasons to develop his themes or to repeat certain gags and storylines.
- Similarly, you can compare particular dates (E.G. February 14th) or repeated storylines (E.G. "Lucy-with-the-Football" or "The Great Pumpkin") across multiple years of the strip. **There are more volumes of *Peanuts* in the Library that can be used for this purpose, and many more strips are available for comparison online.** (In fact, the entire fifty-years worth of the strip can be searched by date, starting from the very first strip, at <http://www.gocomics.com/peanuts/1950/10/02.>)
- You could attempt to illuminate a particular strip or series of strips by locating it in its particular historical and cultural moment and context: e.g. The Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, the history and the landscape of the South West, the Native American experience. **Be careful to avoid over-generalized claims if you take this approach.**
- You can engage in dialog with one of the essayists on either Herriman or Schulz that we have read, using your own analyses of the strip to develop, extend, complicate, or qualify their key points.
- You can explore the politics of either strip. While both creators generally avoided making explicitly ideological statements, their work (like all works of art) inevitably expresses and embodies certain social and political assumptions. So, ask yourself: Does it make sense to describe *Peanuts* (for example) as either a conservative comic strip or a radical one? And if neither of those terms seems adequate to you, what *can* you say about the ideology of *Peanuts*?
- You can explore the aesthetics of either strip. *Krazy Kat* was embraced by many modernist artists and writers, and even made into a ballet, but did not enjoy sustained popular success; today, however, it is one of the most praised and analyzed newspaper comics ever created. *Peanuts*, by contrast, was embraced by the public, translated into TV and movies, and forms the basis of a merchandizing empire; however, Schulz has also been criticized for being overly commercial, and academic

- discussions of his work are (at present) less common than discussions of Herriman’s work. The aesthetic evaluation of both strips appears to be quite different, in other words; but are the aesthetic approaches — the technique and style — of the two strips really so different?
- You can combine a couple of these ideas into a single essay. In fact, **the best essays will probably involve some combination of the above.** (Note: “combine” does **not** mean “take on each of these prompts one-at-a-time.”)
 - You can **come up with your own essay topic**, in consultation with me.

Whatever your topic, **your essay should offer some formal analysis** — a close reading of **at least** one strip from either of the collections we are reading, or some other source — **in the context of a broader discussion, claim, or argument** about either Herriman’s *Krazy Kat* or Schulz’s *Peanuts*.

III: Open Topic Essay

Length: 8-10 pages (minimum)

Due date: 5 p.m. Friday, December 4th, 366 PLC.

For your final paper, you may write about any of the texts we have studied this term. Choose a topic that you wish we could have spent more time discussing in class and use this essay as an opportunity to find out more about it, and to write your best thoughts about it. You are encouraged to consult additional critical resources (academic essays, online discussions, creator-interviews, etc.) to supplement your work, as long as they are properly cited (according to MLA or Chicago methods of academic citation).

Once again, **these essays should combine formal analysis with a larger claim or argument.**

I am more than willing to discuss your ideas for this final paper during office hours; but please do some thinking about your chosen subject first. It is much easier for me to be helpful if you have already considered a few ideas **before** you come to me.

Finally: A Warning About Plagiarism.

Plagiarism (presenting the research and insights of others as if they were your own) will result in automatic failure of the course. Loss of financial aid is a common additional consequence, and in certain cases (a second offense, for example) plagiarism can even result in dismissal from the university. **It is not worth the risk.**

You should be aware that **every term for the last fifteen years I have failed students** for plagiarizing online sources. **On one particularly unpleasant occasion I was forced to fail eight students in a class of forty.** (Yes, that’s almost a quarter of the class; yes, I failed them all, outright; yes, at least one of those students lost her financial aid and was unable to complete her degree.) **Understand further: even if you re-write a source in your own words, if you do not cite that source in both your text and your bibliography you are still committing plagiarism (of the sneakiest, most dishonest kind).**

This is your only warning. Let’s try and make this the first term that I don’t have to fail anyone. If you are unsure how to cite sources, you have many options: for example, you can consult a style manual, a reference librarian, a writing instructor or a student-writing advisor. If you remain uncertain, you can ask me. But remember, **it is ultimately your responsibility to familiarize yourself with this basic requirement of scholarly writing.**

ENG 280: Introduction To Comics Studies

Fall 2015

Sequence of Readings

Week I: Questions of Form ...

Sept. 29	Lecture:	What Are Comics (And Why Does It Matter?)
	Reading:	Scott McCloud, <i>Understanding Comics</i> (first five chapters)
Oct. 1	Discussion:	Up In McCloud
	Reading:	Scott McCloud, <i>Understanding Comics</i> (chapter six to end) Essay by Douglas Wolk

Week II: Questions of Reception ...

Oct. 6	Discussion:	McCloud vs Cohn
	Reading:	Scott McCloud, <i>Understanding Comics</i> Excerpts from Neil Cohn, <i>The Visual Language of Comics</i> . (PDF/handout)
Oct. 8	Discussion:	Form and/as Content
	Reading:	Morrison and Quitely, <i>We 3</i>

Week III: Mad Love ...

Oct. 12		First Assignment Due.
Oct. 13	Lecture:	Comics and/as Modernity
	Reading:	Herriman, <i>Krazy & Ignatz, 1937-1938</i> , pp. 11-63 Essay by Ian Gordon (Canvas)
Oct. 15	Discussion:	Krazy Kat – Beyond Black and White
	Reading:	Herriman, <i>Krazy & Ignatz, 1937-1938</i> , pp. 64-117 Essays by Robert Harvey and Jeet Heer (Canvas)

Week IV: Losing All The Time ...

Oct. 20	Discussion:	Herriman's Poetics
	Reading:	Herriman, <i>Krazy & Ignatz, 1937-1938</i> Essays by Willmott, Douglas Wolk, Sarah Boxer (Canvas)
Oct. 22	Lecture:	Re-Introducing <i>Peanuts</i>
	Reading:	Schulz, <i>The Complete Peanuts, 1965-66</i> Essay by Hatfield (Canvas)

Week V: Sex, Gender and the Newspaper Comic Strip

Oct. 27	Discussion:	Peppermint Patty's Desire
	Reading:	Schulz, <i>The Complete Peanuts, 1965-6</i> .

Oct. 29 Discussion: Schulz's Poetics
 Reading: Schulz, *The Complete Peanuts, 1965-66*

Oct. 30 Second Assignment Due.

Week VI: When Good Comics Go Bad ...

Nov. 3 Discussion: Who Cares About *Archie*?
 Reading: Various Creators, *Archie's Favorite Comics From The Vault*
 Extracts from Bart Beaty's *12 Cent Archie* (Canvas)

Nov. 5 Discussion: Archie's Dark Side?
 Reading: Brubaker and Phillips: *Criminal: Last of the Innocent*

Week VII: Doctorate Level Comics – with Nick Sousanis!

Nov. 10 Discussion: The Comic Book Dissertation
 Reading: Nick Sousanis, *Unflattering*

Nov. 12 Guest Lecture: Nick Sousanis (**This session will be held in Straub Hall 145**)
 Reading: Nick Sousanis, *Unflattering*

Week VIII: Local Crimes – with Greg Rucka!

Nov. 17 Discussion: Conventions of Crime Fiction
 Reading: Rucka, *Stumptown* Vol 1 (Canvas) and Vol 3

Nov. 19 Guest Appearance: Greg Rucka
 Reading: *Stumptown* Vol 1 (Canvas) and Vol 3

Week IX: International Crimes – with Chris Sebela and Ibrahim Moustafa!

Nov. 24 Guest Appearance: Chris Sebela and Ibrahim Moustafa
 Reading: *High Crimes*

Nov. 26 No Class: Happy Thanksgiving!

Week X: Science Fiction and Gender Politics

Dec.1 Discussion: Speculative Fictions and Myths of Gender
 Readings: Deconnick and De Landro, *Bitch Planet*
 Fraction and Ward, *ODY-C*

Dec. 3 Guest Appearance: Matt Fraction and Kelly Sue Deconnick!

Dec. 4 Third Assignment Due.