

ENG 607: COMICS THEORY

Winter 2019 | M 2-4:50PM | PLC 448

Course Description

In this course, we will work together to develop a theoretical framework for interpreting image/texts and apply this interpretive model to a variety of graphic narratives. A number of questions that have driven comics scholarship inform our readings as well as our approach: Form—What are the unique formal principles or attributes of comics? How might such formal properties be theorized? Using Franco-Belgian structuralist and post-structuralist models (Fresnault-Deruelle, Peeters, Groensteen) as well as recent US-based approaches (Hatfield, Witek), how might we conceptualize comics formally? Culture—How do socio-political contexts as well as gender and ethnicity factor into comics production and interpretation? How might we use gender theory (Chute), multi-ethnic approaches (Royal, Aldama), as well as postcolonial theory (Mehta and Mukherji) in order to think through the complex, transnational issues that comics pose? Materiality—How can we understand comics through the matrix of media and materiality? How do comics relate to ideas like Henry Jenkins' notion of transmediality? Disciplinarity—Where should comics be positioned within the academy? How do the preceding categories shift our understanding of comics as a field of study?

Prof. Kelp-Stebbins*

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Office: PLC 333

Office Hours: M 12:00-2:00pm,
5-6:00pm, and by appointment

*she/her

Course Objectives

- ◆ Read graphic narratives and theoretical texts with deepened understanding of their conventions.
- ◆ Explore relevant academic sources in order to situate comics within their historical, cultural, and political contexts.
- ◆ Perform formal analyses of a narrative medium that combines visual and verbal elements in a unique way.
- ◆ Employ creativity and interpretive skills to write persuasive, original arguments.
- ◆ Utilize a diverse array of primary and secondary sources, with proper acknowledgment and citation, to generate persuasive conference and article-style papers.

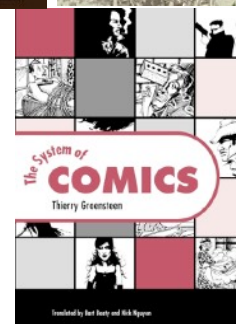


Required Texts

Available at the Duck Store; all additional works posted on Canvas



- Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do* (ISBN 1419718770)
- Gilbert Hernandez, *Human Diastrophism* (ISBN 1560978481)
- Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* (ISBN 0618871713)
- Zeina Abirached, *A Game for Swallows* (ISBN 1575059419)
- Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece, *Incognegro* (ISBN 1506705642)
- Joe Sacco, *Journalism* (ISBN 0805097937)
- Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics* (ISBN 1604732598)



Grade Breakdown

Participation	10%
Discussion Board Posts	15%
Class Facilitation	15%
Conference Short Paper	20%
Final Paper and Abstract	40%

Participation: It is essential that you attend every meeting and show up to class on time, ready to contribute to discussion. Missing class more than once in the quarter will result in a substantial (1/3) deduction of your final grade.

Discussion Board Posts: Every week, you will write a discussion board post that critically engages with the assigned readings. Your post should be between 300-500 words, and your post may either take the form of an original response to the required readings (close readings, critical questions, application of theoretical frameworks) or a response to another student's post in which you engage with their claims and the readings. Your posts are due by 6am the day of class. You do not need to incorporate every reading

for a given week; however, your post should demonstrate deep attention to assigned readings and use direct evidence (quotes or paraphrases) to support your points.

Class Facilitation: Working with a partner, you will facilitate discussion of the readings for a given week once during the quarter. You will sign up for presentations during the first week of the course. Your facilitations should last between 20-25 minutes in length and demonstrate close attention to and engagement with the assigned primary and secondary materials. You may draw from the discussion board in order to develop questions for further analysis. You are also encouraged (but not required) to supplement your facilitation with visual material, either in the form of a digital presentation or handout. You will be evaluated on how your facilitation engages with the assigned readings, as well as the engagement that you generate among your peers.

Course Requirements

Conference Short Paper: “What could it mean to build a ‘place’ for a field that cannot quite *be* placed, one that has operated on the margins and in the interstices among the disciplines—literature, art, mass communications, film, and media studies design, philosophy, sociology, and many others? Comics Studies is a liminal field, defined by the unresolved nature of its very object of study” (Hatfield, “Foreword: Comics Studies, the Anti-Discipline,” *The Secret History of Comics Studies* xi).

Comics Studies in the US has a strange and variegated history (Smith and Duncan 2017, Varnum and Gibbons 2007, et al.), sometimes practiced within art history, literary studies, communications, media studies, cultural studies, film studies, and a number of other disciplinary situations. Your task in this short-form presentation paper (6-8 minutes) is to compose an argument for where you would locate Comics Studies in terms of its disciplinary placement within US universities. Your argument should take into account the parameters and requirements of the field of Comics Studies as well as those of the discipline in which you might “home” them. Does a literature department seem more capable of researching and teaching comics due to its focus on reading practices? Is an art and art history program better equipped to approach comics as a uniquely artistic craft rather than stories with pictures? You may also make an argument for the necessarily interdisciplinary approach that an institution should take to comics, and diagram the sorts of programs or departments that you think should be involved in Comics Studies. You may also—*caveat scriptor*—argue that comics should not be studied within the academy. Once you have your argument in place, you will write a short paper (3-5 pages, double-spaced) with your reasoning and any examples to support your claims. You will upload these papers to Canvas and present your paper in conference-style panels that we will hold on successive days of class.

Final Paper: For your final paper you will write a paper that critically engages with the concepts of the course using close-reading and secondary sources. Based on submission limits from *Inks*, *The Comics Grid*, *The International Journal of Comics Art*, *Studies in Comics*, *ImageText*, and *Word & Image*, your paper should be article-length: 4,000-7,000 words, with in-text citations and a Works Cited. Your paper must draw from and cite course readings, although the number of readings will vary depending upon your topic and focus.

You will upload a paper abstract to Canvas in week 9 and receive feedback from me. You are also encouraged to discuss possible paper topics and approaches with me during my office hours. Following my feedback, you will revise your abstract and present it in our final class meeting.

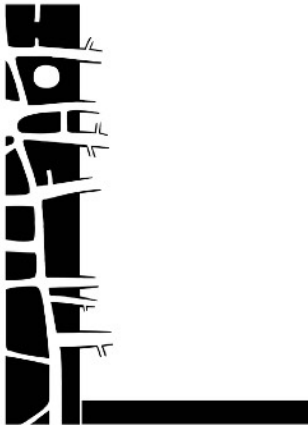
Course Policies

- **Respect:** A respectful environment is essential to facilitate discussions and to create a safe space for students to share their thoughts. Part of being an active participant is listening to others’ ideas and being considerate with your own comments. At times, discomfort can be productive when our ideas are challenged, but at no time will we tolerate sexist, racist, or homophobic comments in class. I reserve the right to ask any student to leave if he or she does not adhere to these guidelines. Furthermore, the UO Student Conduct Code provides clear guidelines regarding student behavior. You are responsible for acting in accordance with this code or you will be subject to disciplinary action.
- **Academic Honesty:** The UO Student Conduct Code defines plagiarism as: “using the ideas or writings of another as one’s own.” Plagiarism is not only detrimental to your own development as a



scholar and a writer; it is also a serious violation of UO policy. Any plagiarized assignment will result in a failing assignment grade, the threat of a failing course grade, and academic sanctions as determined by the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards.

- **Reading:** Assigned readings are due on the day they are listed on the syllabus. We will build on the ideas from the reading during class, and a thorough understanding of the reading will be necessary in order to complete the class activities.
- **Sensitive material:** A couple of the readings for this class feature disturbing language and images. You are responsible for all course readings; there are no substitute readings. Take the time to look over the course material and ensure that the violence, sexuality, and mature themes included in any readings will not prevent you from succeeding in the course.
- **Outside of class contact:** I will respond to emails within 48 hours, feel free to email if you need to make an appointment outside of my office hours.
- **Cell Phones and laptops:** Cell phones are to be turned off during class. The use of laptops is strongly discouraged except by documented necessity.
- **Access:** The University of Oregon is working to create inclusive learning environments. I am available to discuss appropriate academic accommodations that may be required for students with disabilities. Requests for academic accommodations are to be made during the first two weeks of the quarter. Students are encouraged to register with the Accessible Education Center in 164 Oregon Hall at 541-346-1155 or uoaec@uoregon.edu.
- **Harassment, Assault, and Discrimination:** UO is committed to providing an environment free of all forms of discrimination and sexual harassment, including sexual assault, domestic and dating violence, and gender-based stalking. If you have experienced or experienced gender-based violence (intimate partner violence, attempted or completed sexual assault, harassment, coercion, stalking, etc.), know that you are not alone. UO has staff trained to support survivors in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, getting academic and housing accommodations, getting legal protective orders, and accessing other help. If you tell me about harassment or assault, I am not required to report this information to anyone unless you request that I do so. I am required to consult with a confidential UO employee (someone with legal confidentiality, such as a counseling professional or a crisis center advocate) to ensure that you are supported. If you decide to make a report, I and other UO employees will help you to do so. My goal is to make sure you are aware of the range of options available and that you have access to the resources you need. If you wish to speak to someone confidentially, you can call 541-346-SAFE, UO's 24-hour hotline, to be connected to a confidential counselor to discuss your options or visit the SAFE website at safe.uoregon.edu.



Readings and assignments are due on the day they are listed. *Schedule subject to change*—I will post any changes to our Canvas site. You are responsible for checking Canvas for updates.

Week 1	<p>1/6 Introductions</p> <p>What is a comic? In-class readings of definitional texts and Richard McGuire's "Here"</p>
Week 2	<p>1/14 Stripology</p> <p>Readings Due:</p> <p>Newspaper comics (Canvas)</p> <p>Smolderen, Chapters 7 and 8 from <i>The Origins of Comics</i> (Canvas)</p> <p>Witek, "The Arrow and the Grid" (Canvas)</p> <p>Newgarden and Karasik, "How to Read Nancy" (Canvas)</p>
Week 3	<p>1/21 NO CLASS—MLK Jr. Day</p> <p>Readings Due:</p> <p>Groensteen, <i>The System of Comics</i>, "Introduction"</p> <p>Fresnault-Deruelle, "From Linear to Tabular" (Canvas)</p>
Week 4	<p>1/28 Mise en Page</p> <p>Meet at JSMA for curator-led tour of Bui artwork</p> <p>Readings Due:</p> <p>Bui, <i>The Best We Could Do</i></p> <p>Groensteen, <i>The System of Comics</i>, "Chapter One: The Spatio-Topical System"</p> <p>Peeters, "<u>Four Conceptions of the Page</u>"</p> <p>Baetens and Frey, "Chapter Five: Understanding Panel and Page Layouts" from <i>The Graphic Novel</i> (Canvas)</p>
Week 5	<p>2/4 Sequence and Narrative</p> <p>Readings Due:</p> <p>Hernandez, <i>Human Diastrophism</i></p> <p>Groensteen, <i>The System of Comics</i>, "Chapter Two: Restrained Arthrology"</p> <p>Hatfield, "An Art of Tensions: The Otherness of Comics Reading" from <i>Alternative Comics</i> (Canvas)</p> <p>Conference Short Paper Due (upload to Canvas)</p>
Week 6	<p>2/11 Tressage</p> <p>Readings Due:</p> <p>Bechdel, <i>Fun Home</i></p> <p>Groensteen, <i>The System of Comics</i>, "Chapter Three: General Arthrology" and "Conclusion"</p> <p>Chute, "Animating an Archive" from <i>Graphic Women</i> (Canvas)</p>

<p>Week 7</p>	<p>2/18 Race and Representation Mat Johnson Skype Session Readings Due: Johnson and Pleece, <i>Incognegro</i> Wimberly, "<u>Lighten Up</u>" Campbell, "<u>How to Draw a Black Guy</u>," "<u>How to Draw a Black Lady</u>," and "<u>How to Draw a Black Lady Part 2</u>" Royal, "Coloring America" (Canvas) Royal, "Foreword" and Aldama, "Introduction" from <i>Multicultural Comics</i> (Canvas) Whitted, "<u>What is an African American Comic</u>"</p>
<p>Week 8</p>	<p>2/25 Postcolonialism Readings Due: Abirached, <i>A Game for Swallows</i> Kerbaj, "Suspended Time" (Canvas) Mehta and Mukherji, "Introduction" from <i>Postcolonial Comics</i> (Canvas) di Ricco, "Drawing for a New Public" from <i>Postcolonial Comics</i> (Canvas) Abirached, "Artist's Statement" (Canvas) Monroy, "Creating Space" (Canvas)</p>
<p>Week 9</p>	<p>3/4 Journalism Readings Due: Sacco, <i>Journalism</i> Worden, "Introduction" from <i>The Comics of Joe Sacco</i> (Canvas) Rosenblatt and Lunsford, "Joe Sacco's Comics Journalism" (Canvas)</p> <p>Final Paper Abstract Due (Upload to Canvas)</p>
<p>Week 10</p>	<p>3/11 Abstraction and Materiality Reading Due: Vaughan James, <i>The Cage</i> (Canvas) Baetens, "Abstraction in Comics" (Canvas) Web Comics (<u>e-Merl</u>; <u>Tamaki</u>; <u>Love Circuits</u>) Kashtan, "<u>Digital Comics and Material Richness</u>"</p> <p>Revised Final Paper Abstract Due (Upload to Canvas and bring to class)</p>
<p>Final Paper Due 3/18</p>	