

# ENGLISH 480: THE MODERN AMERICAN SUPERHERO

## SPRING 2016

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Office Hours: Wednesdays, 9 a.m. — 12 noon (366 PLC)

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#### Description:

Once upon a time, the four-color world of the superhero was a comfortingly simple place. Whether they came from distant galaxies, other dimensions, or our home planet, the super-powered beings of the 1940s and 50s were secure in their sense of righteousness and saw no contradiction in the alignment of truth and justice with the American way. But in the 1960s superheroes experienced a crisis of confidence. They became more neurotic, more driven by guilt than moral rectitude, and more likely to be feared and misunderstood than admired and revered. Throughout the 1970s, things got worse. The Green Lantern was accused of racism; Spider-Man's girlfriend was murdered; Superman wondered about his own relevance; Iron Man turned to the bottle. By the 1980s it had become hard to tell the heroes from the villains. In *Watchmen*, the single most influential superhero narrative of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, super-beings were imagined variously as weapons in the Cold War, wannabe celebrities chasing the corporate dollar, self-loathing closet cases, and damaged psychotics. When the comic book industry underwent one of its periodic collapses in the 1990s it looked like it was all over for the spandex set. But today, superheroes are enjoying a commercial renaissance; indeed, the figure of the superhero has become one of the dominant fantasies of our present moment. What does all this tell us about the genre? And what does it say about us — our culture, politics, and values?

In this class we will map the path of the American superhero and consider the ways in which that journey reflects larger processes of social change. But we will also attempt to analyze superhero comic books as significant aesthetic achievements in themselves: expressions of a misunderstood and under-appreciated genre and art form, as uniquely American as jazz. Together we will try to formulate a critical vocabulary to discuss this remarkable artistic legacy. Finally, we will make an effort to better understand the extraordinary imaginative appeal of the costumed crime-fighter — an appeal that apparently overlaps significant distinctions of age, gender, nation, and culture, and which no amount of silliness or cynicism seems quite able to dispel.

#### Texts:

Siegel and Shuster	<i>Superman Chronicles, Volume One</i>
Morrison and Quitely	<i>All Star Superman</i>
Miller, Janson, and Varley	<i>The Dark Knight Returns</i>
Marston and Peter	<i>Wonder Woman Chronicles Volume One</i>
Rucka and Johnson	<i>Wonder Woman: Down To Earth</i>
Lee and Kirby	<i>The Fantastic Four Epic Collection — The World's Greatest Comic Magazine</i>
Lee and Ditko	<i>Spider-Man Epic Collection — Great Power</i>
Moore and Gibbons	<i>Watchmen</i>
Bendis and various	<i>Ultimate Spider-Man Ultimate Collection, Volume One</i>
Bendis and Gaydos	<i>Jessica Jones Alias Volumes One &amp; Four</i>
Wilson and Alphonso	<i>Ms. Marvel Volume One: No Normal</i>
Stewart, Fletcher, and Tarr	<i>Batgirl Volume One: The Batgirl of Burnside</i>

All the above texts are available for purchase at a **30% discount** from **Emerald City Comics**, located at 770 East 13<sup>th</sup> (in the Smith Family Building). **Due to the production costs associated with graphic novels you must be prepared to pay more for your course texts than you would in a typical English class. Please do not enroll in the course if you are unable or unwilling to meet this expense (around \$180). 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 **Canvas** 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 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 project those pages on screen during the discussion period itself.

**Method of Assessment:**

Grades will be based upon:

- **TWO** assignments (**about 4-5 pages apiece**) exploring the diversity of superhero comic book criticism, due on the Monday of Week III (April 11) and the Monday of Week V (April 25).
- **ONE** formal analysis of a one-to-three page sequence from *Watchmen* (**4 pages minimum**), due on the Monday of Week VIII (May 16).
- A research paper (**8 pages minimum**) OR a creative final project, due by 5 pm on Monday of Week XI (June 6).

Detailed descriptions of each assignment provided separately.

There will also be **reading comprehension pop-quizzes** throughout the semester. No further warning will be given with regard to these quizzes.

Final grades will breakdown as follows:

Superhero Criticism Paper I:	20%
Superhero Criticism Paper II:	20%
Formal Analysis of <i>Watchmen</i> :	20%
Final Paper/Project:	30%
Quiz Results:	10%

**Anticipated Learning Outcomes:**

You should expect to put **at least** 8-10 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 should have acquired a deeper knowledge of: the origins and historical developments of the superhero genre; the specific achievements of key comic book creators; the economic and material conditions of comic book production. You will also have considered a variety of different explanations for the popularity of the superhero fantasy over the last seventy-plus years. In addition, you will have gained experience and proficiency doing the following activities:

- Reading both superhero 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.** If you miss more than one class without explanation, those absences will be considered “unexcused” and your grade will be lowered, 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.”** I expect courteous students to contact me about these unavoidable absences, either before or (in the event of an emergency) as soon as is reasonable after the class in question. If it’s a matter of a single class, I will not require documentation to excuse you. However, if circumstances cause you to miss more than one class, you **must** contact me as soon as possible so we can make appropriate arrangements for make-up assignments. Otherwise, **your grade will be lowered** as per the policy above.
- **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.
- **If you miss a quiz, you miss a quiz.** There will be no “make-up” opportunities, except in the case of an excused absence.
- **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 a book in front of you.
- **Plagiarism (presenting the research and insights of others as if they were your own) will result in automatic failure of the course.** There will be appeals. Please be aware: if you re-write a source in your own words and then site that source in your general bibliography **without making clear precisely what ideas you have taken from it** in the main body of your essay **you are still committing plagiarism.** 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.**
- You should also be aware that while superhero comic books were aimed at younger readers when they first appeared in the 1930s, since at least the 1980s most superhero comic books have been aimed at an older and (presumably) more sophisticated audience. These texts are consequently more explicit in their treatment of **sexual** and **violent** subject matter and more overt in their handling of **political** and social themes; **they do not meet the designation of “children’s literature”** and are not marketed as such. 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.

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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 comic book criticism is done and how we can do it better. Which critics do you learn the most from? What critical methods appeal most to you and what might that say about your own intellectual make-up — your critical talents and your blind spots and prejudices?

In all these 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. But remember, even if a particular assignment does not require you to write according to a typical college 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.

**Sloppy writing will not be rewarded.**

**Assignment One: Academic Superhero Criticism – Summary and Response Paper (3-4 pages minimum)**

First, read José Alaniz's introduction to his book, *Death, Disability, and The Superhero* (University Press of Mississippi, 2014); then read the introduction to Dan Hassler-Forest's book, *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in a Neoliberal Age* (Zero Books, 2012). (Both texts have been supplied as photocopied handouts.)

Second, summarize Alaniz's claims in one or two paragraphs; then do the same for Hassler-Forest. **Do not take more than one page to summarize each essay.** The point of this portion of the assignment is to show that you can reduce complicated and detailed arguments down to their essentials with efficiency and clarity. You will be graded on your ability to select the most salient details, your accuracy, and your elegance of style, as well as your capacity for brevity.

Third, return to the essays and consider the following questions: What different intellectual assumptions drive these two different pieces of criticism? Can you attach some names or labels to their different critical methodologies? (For example, does either essay conform to one of the four basic methodologies I discussed in the opening lecture? Or does it combine those types? Or can you think of other intellectual labels that seem to apply more accurately?) And **more importantly**, what are the consequences of the author's chosen methodology for the arguments these essays make? What are they good at emphasizing — and what are their potential blind spots? Write a page addressing these questions as best you can.

Finally, ask yourself what **you** would chose to investigate and what methods of argument you would employ if you were required to make Superman or Batman the focus of a research project. Sketch out your reasons for choosing your particular project, and what you might hope to discover. For this portion of the assignment you may consider the possibilities presented by any text or iteration of the Superman character (including adaptations in other media). You may also move beyond Alaniz and Hassler-Forest to consider issues from the lectures or in any of the other readings we have considered thus far in class (e.g. Fletcher Hanks' comics, the essays by Gordon and Singer, Brooker's work on Batman, or my own essay on Superman in *Do The Gods Wear Capes?*). **Take up to a page** to generate a roadmap for this fantasy assignment. (Remember, you don't have to commit yourself to actually doing this particular assignment, although if you do find yourself coming up with a final paper topic this early in the term, that is all well and good. **The point this time is to get you thinking about producing a research paper of your own in this field well ahead of Finals Week, when such a paper is actually due.** I'll be grading for seriousness of approach, so don't be tempted to blow this last portion of the assignment off.)

## Assignment Two: Comics Criticism Online – Descriptions and Essay (5 pages minimum)

The Internet abounds in comic book related reviews, gossip, and criticism. Not all of this work is held to academic standards, but that doesn't make it all bad (and nor is the academic criticism all good).

For a sample of what is out there, visit

<http://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2014/02/best-online-comics-criticism-2013/>

and click on a few of the recommendations with regard to the best comics criticism of that year. There is a 2014 list, and they are probably working on their 2015 list; but the stuff here is better, I think. Given our superheroic focus, you might want to start with pieces that look superhero-y, but browsing is fine.

Then, visit the following website:

<http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/>

This is the home of *ImageText*, an online academic journal devoted to comics and related media. Again, browse through articles with titles that strike you as interesting (you can look at previous issues and their contents by scrolling down the page).

You should also check out several of the following:

<http://4cp.posthaven.com>: A blog devoted to the discovery of beauty in the mechanics of old comic book print technology. Highly recommend, particularly for the material on Jack Kirby.

<http://atollcomics.blogspot.ca>: A blogger tries to figure out which comics to buy given his limited financial resources, and discovers his critical voice in the process.

[http://www.avclub.com/search?feature\\_types=comics-panel](http://www.avclub.com/search?feature_types=comics-panel): Comic book reviews from the smart and funny folks at The Onion.

<http://comicsalliance.com>: News/reviews/interviews, with a multi-media focus.

<http://www.comicsreporter.com>: A news site, but often linking to more obscure and cool comics related sites.

<http://www.comicsresearch.org>: A bibliography of academic criticism. Useful, even though it is not updated very regularly.

<http://www.hoodedutilitarian.com>: Comics criticism, plus a bit of music, film, and literature criticism, all edited by an avowed theory-head.

<http://ifanboy.com>: A chatty website oriented towards contemporary superhero comics.

<http://mattfraction.com>: There are as many creator-blogs as there are creators, but Fraction will use his for actual analysis and he has a sharp mind. He posts on all kinds of topics, but dig around for his "cover versions" of other comics, at least.

<http://pappysgoldenage.blogspot.com>: As the name suggests, a site devoted to comics from the 1940s.

<http://sequart.org>: Self-consciously invested in "Comics as Art."

<http://www.tcj.com>: The website for *The Comics Journal*, the longest running resource for in-depth comics criticism (once a lone voice in the wilderness, now struggling to be heard over all the other pundits).

<http://www.themarysue.com>: "A guide to girl geek culture."

<http://zeronada.freesevers.com/CapVsBats/cvsbParodies.htm>: Satire-with-Photoshop.

This is just a smattering — there are so many (so many!) comics related websites and blogs. You are encouraged to trawl for more, and to develop you own sense of what distinguishes an unusual or high-quality comics blog or fansite from an average or poor one.

Once you have spent some time looking at the blogs, articles, and reviews, **pick between two and five**, and write a brief critical description/summary of their style, format, and general content (**devote about a paragraph apiece to each website**). **You may write about websites or blogs that I have not listed above**,

**particularly if they seem unusual or different in some way;** moreover, the websites you chose don't have to be *exclusively* devoted to superhero comics, as long as discussions of superheroes take up a good part of the website content.

When writing your descriptions, don't just tell me what the website looks like, or what kind of content it foregrounds. I'm also interested in what you can glean about the aesthetic investments and critical presumptions and biases of the website. This means asking, for example:

- Does your chosen website or blog have an explicit political/ideological orientation?
- Does it have less obvious or even unacknowledged biases?
- Is the website focused on comics alone or does it discuss other media, and what are the implications of these choices about content?
- Does the website or blog strike you as regarding comics more as entertainment or as an art form? (These are not exclusive categories, of course; but what are the signals of a bias in one direction or the other?)
- Does your chosen website feature advertisements or receive other forms of revenue from particular comic book companies or entertainment-oriented corporations? How easy or difficult is it to determine if and how the website makes money? To what extent might such financial ties create a critical conflict of interest?
- Does the website seem to you to fall more or less clearly and squarely into any of the following categories: entertainment journalism; independent criticism; corporate advertising; creative blogging; nostalgic reminiscence; history of the medium/industry; academic peer-reviewed analysis? When do these categories overlap? Are there other categories that might describe the website or blog more accurately?
- Does the website strike you as serious or humorous in approach, and what are the intellectual implications of adopting either posture towards the act of critical evaluating superhero comics? Do these categories sometimes overlap, and in what ways and to what effect?
- Does the website seem to you to either foster or discourage reasoned arguments, ad hominem attacks, the circulation of rumor and gossip, trolling, new talent, and/or original and non-traditional critical approaches?

Then, write a short essay (**3 pages minimum**) to accompany your website-descriptions, exploring the theme: **What I Learned From Looking at Comics Criticism On The Internet.** You may approach this essay from any number of angles. For example:

1. You might compare some genres of online comics criticism to the academic models we've already discussed, in terms of methodology and style.
2. Alternatively, you might focus on the question of whether and how the Internet, and the fact that "anyone with a computer can now be a critic," changes the rules of the analytic game — to produce new ways of engaging with the texts at hand, or maybe just to give an infinite number of clueless pundits a platform from which to broadcast their unfounded opinions.
3. Or you might discuss the critical possibilities that are opened up by the more visual orientation of web-based discussions.
4. Or you might consider the different political and aesthetic prejudices of different/rival websites.
5. Or you might discuss the ethical conflicts that emerge from the (generally unexamined) relationship between "entertainment journalists" and the corporations that fund their websites with advertising revenue.
6. Or you might talk about the function of gossip in online comics criticism, or the psychology of fandom, or the status of sites devoted to older superhero comics, or the practice of trolling ...
7. Or you may surprise me by taking some approach I have not even begun to consider!

**This is your chance to get creative about your own critical practice, with the whole world of comic-book criticism online serving as your basic material.**

**Assignment Three: Formal Analysis of *Watchmen* (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 Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*.

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 to you. The essay by Andre Molotiu I have assigned on Ditko's Spider-Man and "abstract comics" contains some very useful concepts (such as "iconostasis") that are not mentioned by Harvey. You could also look back for moments of formal analysis in, say, Marc Singer's work. Finally, you should consider browsing online (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? What about color symbolism? etc.

In this context, you should also consider Gibbons' specific artistic style. For example: Does he 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 his drawing technique? 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?

Once 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)

You may write a research paper upon 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 (and these may include materials we have read for class), as well as any non-academic discussions drawn from the web or other media. 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 additional sources. Just come and see me during office hours or send me an email with your thoughts.

### 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 (as outlined below). In addition to the comic, there will be a short written component to this assignment (also 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; remember, 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 been produced that way.) I am interested in how you employ the comic form to communicate ideas about the superhero (political, philosophical, or aesthetic) 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 graded on creative use of things like page and panel layout, 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 two page discussion of your comic. In this discussion you must include the following four components:

1. A short plot or narrative 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 (1) 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.**