

# ENG 410: Horror and Science Fiction Comics

Summer Session I (June 20-July 15, 2016)

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## Description

The early 1950s were marked by social and political conservatism, anti-feminist backlash, and racial repression, all served up against a background of cold war paranoia. But EC bucked these ideological trends in comics such as *The Vault of Horror*, *Weird Fantasy*, *Frontline Combat*, and *Shock SuspenStories* — anthologies of short stories in the Horror, SF, War and Crime genres. The creators at EC rebuked racists and warmongers, critiqued the paranoid state, and challenged the patriarchal vision of matrimonial bliss with tales of jealousy, hypocrisy, and murder. They had a sense of humor and irony, too, launching a comic book called *Mad* in 1952 that parodied the very genres and stories that were elsewhere their stock in trade. Publisher Bill Gaines encouraged his artists to draw in their own styles (rather than create a “house” look) and the most talented artists in the history of American comics flocked to work for him: Wallace Wood, whose depictions of rocket-ships, star-scapes, and beautiful alien women shaped the imaginations of George Lucas and Stephen Spielberg; Johnny Craig, whose design and storytelling skills influenced a generation of subsequent creators; Graham Ingels, whose horrific visions captivated the young Stephen King; and Harvey Kurtzman, the founder of *Mad*, and one of the greatest American satirists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It was too good to last, of course. Politicians, parents, and educators all recoiled from what they saw in the comic books. Comics were banned in schools and burned in bonfires, and in reaction the industry imposed stringent standards of self-censorship, denying distribution to EC’s titles. Only *Mad* survived (by becoming a magazine and escaping the censors). But for a generation of young readers, EC comics had provided a glimpse of a more exciting and less repressive world. The comics became tokens of counter-cultural hipness, collected by musicians and writers such as Jerry Garcia and Ken Kesey, and cited as an influence by generations artists, filmmakers, and — of course — comics creators.

This class will explore the creative ambition, political courage, and pop-cultural legacy of what was once regarded as a “trash” publisher of the 1950s. Because our primary materials are comic books, we will spend a portion of our time thinking about what makes the comics form distinctive from other modes of representation, both in formal and cultural terms. We will also take advantage of the unique resource presented by the “Aliens, Monsters, and Madmen” exhibition running concurrently at the JSMA; at least one assignment will be built around this unusual exhibition.

## Course Texts:

All course texts will be made available in the form of PDFs on Canvas. **You are asked to read these PDFs before each class and take notes on specific moments, pages, or images for discussion;** during the class session itself I will project the PDFs onto a screen so we can analyze them together.

## Method of Assessment:

Grades will be based upon:

- **One short paper** (4-5 pages) making use of materials in the JSMA exhibition “Aliens, Monsters, and Madmen: The Art of EC Comics,” due on Sunday, July 10<sup>th</sup> at 9pm, via email.
- **One longer research paper** (10 pages minimum), due on Monday, July 18<sup>th</sup> at 3pm, in hardcopy form (to be dropped off at 366 PLC).
- **Class participation.**

Detailed descriptions of these assignments/requirements will be provided below.

Graduate students will also be required to do a 15-20 minute presentation on a text or texts of their choice during weeks two, three, or four of the term.

Grades will breakdown as follows:

| For Undergraduates:  |     | For Graduate Students |     |
|----------------------|-----|-----------------------|-----|
| Short paper:         | 40% | Short Paper:          | 30% |
| Research paper:      | 50% | Research Paper:       | 40% |
| Class Participation: | 10% | Class Participation:  | 10% |
|                      |     | Presentation:         | 20% |

### **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 should have acquired a deeper knowledge of: the origins and historical developments of popular comics genres; the specific achievements of several key comic book creators; the social, economic, and material conditions of comic book production. In addition, you will have gained experience and proficiency doing the following activities:

- Reading both genre comic books 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 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.
- **The use of all electronic devices is prohibited.** I will project scans of the stories we are discussing during the class session (see more on this, below); therefore, there should be no need for you to turn on your phones or laptops. **Students who text in class will be marked as absent and downgraded accordingly.**
- **Almost all our readings this term are on Canvas.** Because I generally do not allow students to use electronic devices in class **it is vital that you read the required texts for the relevant day carefully before coming to class, taking notes on things that strike you so you can refer to those moments in our discussions.** You won’t be able to even pretend to be interested if you don’t have some notes on your readings 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.** Please be aware: if you re-write a source in your own words and then cite 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.**
- The EC publishing company has a reputation for progressive politics, but these publications are nevertheless the product of a different era; you therefore should not be surprised if the attitudes expressed towards gender, sexuality, race, and religion are not always the same as yours. Many EC stories also contain deliberately sensationalist, titillating, and violent imagery, even as they address political and social topics. Some of you may regard these comics as tame by contemporary media standards; but others among you may be surprised at the ongoing power of this work to shock and disturb. **You are not required to like everything you read — indeed, I hope for a more complicated response than that — 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.

**ENGLISH 410: Summer 2016  
WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS**

**Short Paper: Comics in a Museum**

**Length: 4-5 pages.**

**Due date: Sunday, July 10<sup>th</sup>, 9pm, via email.**

Before starting this paper, read Bart Beaty's essay (on Canvas) entitled "What If Comics Were Art?" and ponder his arguments. Consider in particular his claim that comics constitute "the other" of Art. What does he mean by this?

Then take another look around the JSMA exhibition, "Aliens, Monsters, and Madmen," and pick either a single work or some larger aspect of the show to write about.

You may consider the following questions as prompts. (Don't try to answer them all in sequence; just think of them as platforms upon which you might build your own personal reflections on the exhibition and the larger issues that emerge from thinking about comics as "art.")

For example, you could reflect on the interpretive effects of placing original art from an EC comic on the walls of a museum, rather than reading them in printed form. How does the museum setting change the way you look at and think of an artwork? In the process, you might consider what makes original comic art different from other kinds of art that get exhibited in museums. (Look at some of the other art objects in the JSMA as you ask yourself this question.) You might also ponder the ways in which the organization and "argument" of the show encourages us to see the art. Might other ways of seeing, other kinds of response, and other modes of evaluation have been encouraged by a different method of organization? (Again, how do the other exhibitions in the Schnitzer this term compare in this regard?)

As for the structure and content of the essay: you might begin with a close reading (or "close looking") of a single image, using it as a springboard into the larger questions of that relation; or you might begin by engaging with Beaty directly, and use an element of the show to support, complicate, or qualify his claims; or you might want to argue directly with some detail or implied claim made by the show itself; or you may have another idea of your own. That's all fine; but whatever angle or approach you take, your essay should incorporate some formal analysis of a single page or image as part of the larger argument.

**Final Research Paper**

**Length: 10 pages (minimum)**

**Due date: Monday, July 18th, 3 p.m., at 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 should consult **at least** four critical resources (academic book or essays, online discussions, creator-interviews, etc.) to supplement your work, and they must properly cited (according to MLA or Chicago methods of academic citation). Make one of your sources a recent academic book or article on "horror," "science fiction," "crime-noir" or "satire." (By recent, I mean something published after 1990.)

Once again, **these essays should combine some formal analysis with their larger claims or arguments.**

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.

## Required Readings and Discussion Topics:

### Week One

Monday, June 20:

#### **What was EC horror?**

Please read all the comics selections on Canvas. Note the variety of horror tropes on display in the stories. If you enjoy (or dislike) some artists' work more than others, make a note of that, too. What are you responding to, exactly, when you like or dislike an artist's style or choices? If you have time, also read Poe's "The Black Cat" (link provided on Canvas). The EC story "The Wall" freely adapts Poe's famous tale, and you can usefully compare and contrast the two texts.

Tuesday, June 21:

#### **Delight and Disgust, Humor and Horror**

Please read all the selections on Canvas. Ask yourselves as you proceed: "How does horror overlap with humor? What's going on when we take delight in disgust, or when we refuse to do so?"

Wednesday, June 22:

#### **Reading With Dr. Wertham: A Guest Lecture by Professor Chris Pizzino (UGA)**

Please read Jared Gardner's essay carefully — it is an important supplement to the topics that Professor Pizzino will raise during his visit — and also read the small number of relevant comics I have selected for the day on Canvas. (N.B. I have cut the number of comics readings for the day to give you time to absorb Gardner's lengthy essay and arguments; remember that the careful reading of this kind of professional critical material will help you raise your own analytic game.)

Thursday, June 22:

#### **Corrupting The Children!**

Building on our prior discussion about Dr. Wertham's reading methods — and his claims about the effects of comics on young minds — today we'll look at some EC comics in which children play a central role. All readings on Canvas; a copy of Bill Gaines's Senate Testimony will also be provided in class.

Friday, June 23:

#### **The Best of Ghastly**

Please read all the Graham Ingels stories on Canvas for this day, and we'll enjoy an in-depth discussion of this notorious horror artist. As you read, make a careful note of moments of taboo-violation, abjection, dysfunctional family bonds, and indeed anything that strikes you as particularly vivid, strange, uncanny, or peculiar. You should also ask: What makes Ingels' visual style distinctive? What themes draw the best (or is it the worst) out of him?

### Week Two

Monday, June 27:

#### **Breaking The Law With Johnny Craig**

Please read all the Johnny Craig stories on Canvas for this day, in anticipation of an in-depth discussion of this justly celebrated and influential comic book artist. Craig is considered extremely skilled at conveying the breakdown or distortion of a character's perceptions to produce a kind of "rising paranoia." How does he achieve these effects? Also make a careful note as you read of repeated Crime-Noir tropes and themes, and of self-reflexive moments.

- Tuesday, June 28: **Social Justice and Sensationalism, or Preachies versus Creepies**  
The creators at EC took a bold stance against racism, McCarthyism, and Cold War extremism in their comics. But the progressive messages came wrapped in sensationalistic trappings, and were published alongside stories that seem less didactically motivated. In this session we will look at some of the most explicitly political stories and revisit some of the more flagrantly exploitative and pulpy stories. We'll also read a survey essay by Paul Buhle on "the Left in comics." All readings on Canvas.
- Wednesday, June 29: **On Harvey Kurtzman: A Guest Lecture by Comics Historian, Mark Arnold**  
Mr. Arnold will provide a general introduction to Kurtzman's life and career. In preparation, please read all materials on Canvas for this day (some online selections from his very early work, plus *Mad* #1 and 2).
- Thursday, June 30: **Kurtzman At War**  
I've scanned a small number of Kurtzman's war stories as a single PDF for this day, alongside a short essay by Christopher Field on the subject. You should also find the iPad in the "War" section of the Museum exhibition and read the short note on "the way he [Kurtzman] worked."
- Friday, July 1: **Kurtzman Gone Mad**  
Besides being adored by many comics fans, *Mad* was also read by hipsters and tastemakers who would not have dreamed of reading (or admitting reading) other comic books. Why was *Mad* such a big deal? We'll read a chapter by Ethan Thompson on the question of whether *Mad* was "subversive" (I'll hand out copies *and* place it on Canvas). We will also read a selection of early *Mad* comics on Canvas.
- Week Three**
- Monday, July 4: **No class. Happy Independence Day!**
- Tuesday, July 5: **What Was EC Science Fiction?**  
As with our first day reading EC horror, will start with a broad selection of EC SF comics on Canvas, and ask ourselves what (if anything) is distinctive about the EC approach to the genre.
- Wednesday, July 6: **The Future Is Now**  
We'll consider EC SF stories as parables about the era in which they were produced.
- Thursday, July 7: **Guest Lecture: Professor Charles Hatfield (CSUN)**  
One of the most distinguished comics scholars in the country, Professor Charles Hatfield will visit to talk about one of his favorite works in the exhibition. Readings TBA.

Friday, July 8:

**Last Chance to See ...**

Instead of holding class, I'd like you to read Bart Beaty's essay ("What If Comics Were Art?") and spend as much time as you can in the JSMA looking at the exhibition and taking notes for the paper (due on Sunday night). The exhibition closes on July 10<sup>th</sup>, so this Friday, Saturday, and Sunday will be your last opportunities to take it in.

**Week Four**

Monday, July 11:

**Race, Gender, and SF Comics (Part One)**

Besides the usual round of comics on Canvas we will read a brilliant recent academic essay on "Judgment Day" — one that could serve as a model for a quality research paper.

Tuesday, July 12:

**Race, Gender, and SF Comics (Part Two)**

This will be our final discussion of the term. One more round of Canvas readings.

Wednesday, July 13:

In lieu of a last class session I will hold extra office hours to meet with those of you who want to discuss your final paper topics.