ENGLISH 280: INTRODUCTION TO COMICS STUDIES
FALL 2017
PROFESSOR BEN SAUNDERS

Classroom: CON 360
CRN: 16551
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Hours: Mondays, 3 pm – 5pm
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Course Description:
This class provides an introduction to the academic discipline of Comics Studies. You will be exposed to a spectrum of comic-art forms (the newspaper strip, the comic book, the graphic novel) and a variety of modes and genres. You will also be asked to read several examples of contemporary comics scholarship.

Required Texts (in reading order):
Scott McCloud: Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art
Lemire and Smallwood: Moon Knight: Lunatic
George Herriman: Krazy and Ignatz, 1929-1930
Various Creators: The Best of Archie
Johnny Craig: Fall Guy For Murder
Brubaker and Phillips: Criminal: Last of the Innocent
Rucka and Scott: Black Magic
Gilbert Hernandez: Heartbreak Soup

All these texts (except Understanding Comics) 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). Understanding Comics 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 be based on three written assignments, worth 30%, 30%, and 40% of your final grade, respectively. See below for descriptions, details, and due dates. A measure of discretionary extra-credit (up to a third of a letter grade) may also be awarded for distinguished class participation. (Please note: This does not mean that you get points merely for talking. But students who regularly demonstrate familiarity with the readings, who advance our discussions by asking pertinent questions, and who ground their observations in specific details from the texts will be rewarded for their contributions.) I will also administer the occasional pop-quiz. Students who get fewer than half the questions correct on these quizzes will have their final grades lowered by a third of a letter grade. No further warnings will be given about these quizzes.
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 academic 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 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, a family emergency, or approved University business (such as participation in a sporting event), certain absences may be considered “excused.” Please let me know, either before or (in the event of an emergency) as soon as is reasonable after the class in question if you think your 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 of all kinds 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 most of the comics we will read this term deal with adult themes and subjects. Some contain violent and disturbing images; others explore the full range of human sexuality including homosexuality. 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

I: A Formal Analysis of Jeff Lemire and Doug Smallwood’s Moon Knight.

Length: 4 pages (minimum)
Due date: 5 p.m. Friday, October 12 (366 PLC)

Making use of the terminology, theories, and examples laid out in Scott McCloud’s Understanding Comics perform a close formal analysis of between one and three pages from Lemire and Smallwood’s Moon Knight: Lunatic. As the name suggests, a formal analysis gives priority to the form of an artwork (how it is made, composed, and designed) and considers the ways in which those formal elements shape our perception of the content (the plot, themes, or subject of the work).

Before you begin writing your essay you should look through the entire text for pages that strike you as formally interesting. (Your chosen pages may be separate or part of a sequence — either is fine.) Study these pages carefully for an extended period of time. Take some notes while looking at them, paying attention to every possible formal detail. Consider the effects of the page layout; the panel size; the different points-of-view 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 suggest a rapid sequence or the slow passage of time? How does the perspective of each panel place 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 react viscerally or emotionally? How are you led to identify with a particular viewpoint, or character? Does your chosen sequence make use of any visual symbols? Etc.

In this context, you should also consider Smallwoods’s specific artistic style. For example: what words best describe his drawing techniques? How would you characterize his line work, or his approach to the human figure? Does his style change at different times or is it essentially consistent? What are his individual artistic mannerisms? How might an artist’s style itself function meaningfully to influence the way you see the objects and people rendered? What about color symbolism? Etc.

Refer back to McCloud’s various accounts of these formal issues while you are making your notes. Can McCloud help us to understand Lemire and Smallwood achievements as formalists? Do Lemire and Smallwood come up with any story-telling or layout techniques that McCloud fails to consider? Does McCloud help us think about issues of style, and if so how?

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 an 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 page or pages (a black and white 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. Krazy or Peanuts

Length: 6 pages (minimum)
Due date: 5 p.m. Friday, October 27, 366 PLC.

For your second paper, you are required to write about either Charles Schulz’s Peanuts or George Herriman’s Krazy Kat.

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

• Building on the previous assignment, write an analysis of the formal aspects of either Schulz or Herriman’s work. The specific formal conventions of a newspaper strip are in some ways quite different from those of a monthly comic-book or graphic novel, and you should spend a portion of your paper thinking about the creative possibilities and limitations that arise from those differences. What can a formal analysis teach us about the way either Krazy Kat or Peanuts work their magic?

• You have two years worth of strips in your collections, and the entire fifty years of the Peanuts strip can be searched by date at http://www.gocomics.com/peanuts/1950/10/02. Write an essay exploring how Schulz makes use of the calendar and the changes of the seasons to develop themes or to repeat certain gags and storylines over several years.

• Like Schulz, Herriman is a master of nuanced variations on a repeated theme (Ignatz’s beaning of Krazy with a brick). Write an essay describing how Herriman generates, frustrates, and/or satisfies his readers’ expectations, and the different emotional effects he creates in the process.

• 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 Peanuts 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. (http://www.gocomics.com/peanuts/1950/10/02.)

• Consider how certain strips by either cartoonist reflect a particular historical or political context (e.g. The Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, the history and the landscape of the South West, the Native American experience, a past Presidential election, or other “real world” event). Then write an essay that deepens our understanding of the cartoonist in question by drawing upon historical resources to place his work in a more detailed context. (Be careful to avoid over-generalized historical claims if you take this approach, and be sure you are always illuminating the cartoons at hand and not simply reciting historical facts.)

• We have read several essays on both Schulz and Herriman. Write a paper that engages in critical dialogue with one of these essays, using your own readings to develop, extend, complicate, or qualify their key points.

• Write an essay that explores the political ideology of either strip. While both creators generally avoided making explicitly political statements, their work (like all works of art) inevitably expresses and embodies certain social and political assumptions. So, for example, ask yourself: Does it make sense to describe Peanuts or Krazy Kat as either a conservative comic strip or a radical one? Why might someone see them in one way or the other? And if neither of those terms — “conservative” or “radical” — seems adequate to you, what can you say about the ideology of these comics?

• Remember, 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.”)

• 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 — in the context of your broader discussion, claim, or argument about either Krazy Kat or Peanuts.
III: Open Topic Essay

Length: 8-10 pages (minimum)
Due date: 5 p.m. Friday, December 1st, 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 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 result in dismissal from the university. It is not worth the risk.

You should be aware that every term for the last seventeen 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 about this issue. 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, and if after all that you remain uncertain, you can ask me. But remember, it is ultimately your responsibility to familiarize yourself with this basic requirement of scholarly writing.
Sequence of Readings

Week I: Questions of History and Definition ...

Sept. 25  Lecture: Towards A History of Comics  
Reading: Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (first five chapters)

Sept. 27  Discussion: Up In McCloud  
Reading: Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (chapter six to end)

Week II: Questions of Reception and Form

Oct. 2    Discussion: Are Comics Art, Literature, Both, or Neither — And Why Does It Matter?  
Reading: Beaty, Chapter Two, *Comics vs. Art* (PDF/handout)  
           Pizzino, Chapters One and Two, *Arresting Development* (PDF/handout)

Oct. 4    Discussion: Form and/as Content  
Reading: Lemire and Smallwood, *Moon Knight: Lunatic*  
           Excerpts from Groensteen, *Comics And Narrative* (PDF/handout)  
           Hatfield, “An Art Of Tensions,” *The Comics Studies Reader* (PDF/handout)

Week III: Krazy Love

Oct. 9    Lecture: Comics and/as Modernity  
Reading: Essay by Ian Gordon (PDF/handout)

Oct. 11   Discussion: It’s A Krazy World  
Reading: Herriman, *Krazy & Ignatz, 1929-1930*, pp  
           Essay by Robert Harvey

Oct. 13   First Assignment Due

Week IV: Politics and Poetics

Oct. 16   Discussion: Herriman’s Passing  
           Essay by Jeet Heer (PDF/handout)

Oct. 18   Discussion: Herriman’s Poetics  
           Essay by Peter Sattler (PDF/handout)

Week V: Losing All The Time

Oct. 23   Lecture: Re-Introducing *Peanuts*  
Reading: Schulz, *The Complete Peanuts, 1965-66*  
           Essay by Hatfield (PDF/handout)

Oct. 25   Discussion: Sex, Gender, Peanuts  
Reading: Schulz, *The Complete Peanuts, 1965-66*  
           Essay by Saunders (PDF/handout)
Week V (cont.)
Oct. 27  Second Assignment Due.

Week VI: America’s Favorite Teenager
Oct. 30  Discussion: What Can We Learn From Archie?
        Reading: Various Creators, The Best of Archie
Nov. 1   Discussion: Archie, The Dissertation
        Reading: Excerpts from Beaty, Twelve Cent Archie (PDF/handout)

Week VII: Old School Crime
Nov. 6   Discussion: Crime and Punishment
        Reading: Johnny Craig, Fall Guy For Murder, paying special attention to
              “Understudy To A Corpse,” “A Stitch In Time,” “Rocks In His Head,” “On A Dead
              Man’s Chest,” “Stiff Punishment,” “The Execution,” “Sweet Dreams,” “When
              The Cat’s Away.”
        Excerpts from John Scaggs, Crime Fiction (PDF/handout)
        Online readings: “The Sewer,” “Poison.”
Nov. 8   Discussion: Doubles and Dopplegangers
        Reading: Johnny Craig, Fall Guy For Murder, paying special attention to “Split
              Personality,” “Touch and Go,” “Easel Kill Ya!” “Fall Guy For Murder.”
        Online readings: “Murder May Boomerang,” “Dead Ringer.”

Week VIII: Genre-Busting — With Greg Rucka!
Nov. 13  Discussion: When Good Comics Go Bad
        Reading: Brubaker and Phillips, Criminal: Last of the Innocent
Nov. 15  Discussion: That New Black Magick
        Reading: Rucka and Scott, Black Magick

Week IX: Comic Book Magical Realism
Nov. 20  Discussion: Introducing Gilbert Hernandez
        Reading: Gilbert Hernandez, Heartbreak Soup
Nov. 22  NO CLASS — Happy Thanksgiving!

Week X: Profanities and Profundities
Nov. 27  Discussion: Love and Rockets/Sex and Death
        Reading: Gilbert Hernandez, Heartbreak Soup
        Essay by Hatfield
Nov. 29  Recapitulation and Good-Bye
Dec. 1   Third Assignment Due.