

# Comics Studies

Syllabus - Spring 2012

## Course Information

### Professor Contact Information

**Professor** Matthew J. Brown

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**Office Phone** 972-883-2536 (not used much)

**Office Location** JO 4.120

**Office Hours** Wednesday 2:00-4:00pm and by appointment

### Course Description

The language of comics and the medium of the comic book raise a variety of philosophical questions. How do we define “comics” and “comic books”? Can pop culture works count as art? Are they a form of literature? Or are they some sui generis form of expression, reducible neither to visual art nor to literature. What gives art and literature their cultural legitimacy, which comics are generally thought to lack. Does the visual language of comics have a grammar? Can comics be an effective form of journalism, political critique, or history? Can works of literature or scientific knowledge be effectively translated into comics?

We will address these questions philosophically, historically, and by way of an introduction to the interdisciplinary, academic study of comics and comic books. We will read a selection of primary texts from several genres (including classic superhero, deconstructed superhero, indie/underground comix, autobiographical, journalistic, etc.). Each week will be accompanied by different scholarly approaches to the study of comics, including historical, philosophical, literary, visual, and communication analyses.

## Student Learning Objectives

## Textbooks and Materials

### Required Texts: Theory

- McCloud, *Understanding Comics*
- Duncan and Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form, & Culture* [PC]
- Heer and Worcester, *A Comics Studies Reader* [CSR]
- Duncan and Smith, *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods* [CAC]
- Online Readings at <http://comicsstudies.pbworks.com/> [ER]

Use the codes in brackets to find the readings in the course schedule.

### Required Texts: Comics

- *Supermen!: The First Wave Of Comic Book Heroes 1936–1941*
- *All Star Superman* vol. 1 & 2
- *Watchmen*
- *Maus* (complete or vol 1 & 2)
- *Ghost World*
- *Fun Home*
- *Safe Area Gorazde*
- *Wonder Woman Chronicles* (or Archives) v. 1 & 2
- Ottaviani, *Suspended in Language*
- *Scott Pilgrim* vol. 1 & 2
- Porcellino, *Thoreau at Walden*
- *Akira* vol. 1
- Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth*

### Suggested Texts

You are encouraged to buy at least one of these for help with your research paper.

- Heer and Worcester, *Arguing Comics*
- Wolk, *Reading Comics*
- Jeff McLaughlin, *Comics as Philosophy*
- Magnussen, Anne and Hans-Christian Christiansen, eds. *Comics & Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*
- Wright, *Comic Book Nation*
- McCloud, *Reinventing Comics*

## Assignments

1. **Research Paper** [50%] - Multi-stage assignment including topic sketch, abstract, annotated bibliography, and extended abstract. Final paper will be conference-length, 3000 words max. More info to come. Timeline will be included in the paper handout.
2. **Comics Studies Database** [20%] - A major function of the course will include creating entries in the comics studies database on the course wiki <http://comicsstudies.pbworks.com/>. Students will create at least three pages: (a) on a major primary source, (b) on a significant historical or contemporary comics creator, (c) on a major approach to comics scholarship. Entries should be detailed summaries in encyclopedic format, 800–1200 words in length. Students may substitute an entry on a critical approach with a book review on a major secondary source.
3. **In-class presentations** [10%] - Students contributing to a topic in the database to be covered in a certain week must be prepared to give a 5-minute overview presentation in-class, and must prepare at least 3–4 discussion questions, well-crafted so as to generate discussion amongst the class. A draft of your related database entry must be posted on the evening prior to your presentation.
4. **Weekly Assignments** [10%] - Some weeks will include brief assignments, either done in-class, listed on the schedule below, or announced at least one week in advance.
5. **Class participation and citizenship** [10%] - All seminar participants are expected to attend class each week, having done all of the reading and scheduled assignments. You are expected to contribute to class discussion, come prepared each week with questions or discussion points based on the readings, and to be respectful of everyone in the classroom learning community.

## Course Schedule

1. Understanding Comics - Defining a Medium
  - McCloud, *Understanding Comics*
  - “How to Read Nancy” [ER]
  - “Should We Discipline the Reading of Comics?” [CAC]
  - “Defining Comic Books as a Medium” [PC]
  - “How Comics Came to Be” [CSR]
2. Golden Age Superheroes & the History of Comics
  - *Supermen!: The First Wave*
  - “The History of Comic Books, Part I: Developing a Medium” [PC]

- “The History of Comic Books, Part II: The Maturation of the Medium” [PC]
- “History: Discovering the Story of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster” [CAC]
- Inge, “Two Boys from the Twin Cities” [CSR]
- **Assignment:** Course Wiki <http://comicsstudies.pbworks.com/> – Request access, create a profile, and sign up for database/presentation topics.

### 3. Modern Superhero & the Superhero Genre

- *All Star Superman*, vol. 1 & 2
- “Comic Book Genres: Classifying Comics” [PC]
- “Comic Book Genres: The Superhero Genre” [PC]
- Coogan, “The Definition of the Superhero” [CSR]
- Coogan, “Genre: Reconstructing the Superhero in All Star Superman” [CAC]
- Umberto Eco, “The Myth of Superman” [ER]
- *Further Reading:* Saunders, “Superman: Truth, Justice, and All that Stuff” [ER]
- **Assignment:** Do you agree w/ Coogan’s definition of “superhero”? If not, can you come up with a better definition? If so, what is good about his definition?
- **Assignment:** List all the examples of the superhero genre in other art forms besides comic books.

### 4. Deconstructed Superheroes & the Comics Industry

- *Watchmen*
- Smith, “Auteur Criticism: The Re-Visionary Works of Alan Moore” [CAC]
- “The Comic Book Industry” [PC]
- Rogers, “Political Economy: Manipulating Demand and “The Death of Superman” ” [CAC]
- Iain Thompson, “Deconstructing the Superhero” [ER]

### 5. *Maus*, History, and Ideology

- *Maus*
- “Comic Book Creators” [PC]
- “Comic Books and Ideology” [PC]
- “An Examination of ‘Master Race’ ” [CSR]
- “History and Graphic Representation in *Maus*” [CSR]
- **Re-read:** Smith, “Auteur Criticism” [CAC]

### 6. Alternative Comics & The Techniques and Experience of Comics

- *Ghost World*
- “Creating the Story” [PC]
- “Experiencing the Story” [PC]
- Neil Cohn, “What is Visual Language?” [ER]

- Cohn, “A Visual Lexicon” [ER]
- Cohn, “Extra! Extra! Semantics in comics!” [ER]
- Canis & Canis, “Jean-Paul Sartre Meets Enid Coleslaw” [ER]
- **Assignment:** Watch some of the videos at <http://emaki.net/research.html> and read some posts at <http://blog.emaki.net/>.

## 7. Indie Comics & Comics Readers

- *Scott Pilgrim* vol. 1 & 2
- “The Comic Book Readers” [PC]
- “Ethnography: Wearing One’s Fandom” [CAC]
- “Critical Ethnography: The Comics Shop as Cultural Clubhouse” [CAC]
- **Assignment:** Visit a comic book specialty shop — if possible on a Wednesday night. Buy at least one comic book (any format). Bring the book and the receipt to class, along with a one-page reflection on your observations of the shop and its customers.

## 8. Comics as Autobiography & Narrative Analysis

- *Fun Home*
- Beaty, “Autobiography as Authenticity” [CSR]
- Chute, “Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative” [ER]

## 9. Comics as Journalism

- *Safe Area Gorazde*
- Nyberg, “Journalism: Drawing on Words to Picture the Past in Safe Area Gorazde” [CAC]
- Williams, “The Case for Comics Journalism” [ER]

## 10. Comics and Adaptation

- Porcellino, *Thoreau at Walden*
- Thoreau, *Walden* (excerpts) [ER]
- Coughlan, “Paul Auster’s City of Glass: the Graphic Novel” [ER]
- Ferstl, “Novel-Based Comics” [ER]
- Zanettin, “Comics in translation studies. An overview and suggestions for research” [ER]
- **Assignment:** Pick a short prose story (e.g., Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants”) and adapt it into a comic book. Rough sketches w/ word balloons is fine, or a script with thumbnail sketches is ok too.

## 11. Science through Comics

- *Suspended in Language*

- Tatalovic, “Science comics as tools for science education and communication,” *Journal of Science Communication*. [ER]
- Cheesman, “Using Comics in the Science Classroom” [ER]
- Interview: Jim Ottaviani [ER]
- Ottaviani, “Why comics about scientists?” [ER]

#### 12. Chris Ware

- *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth*
- Kannenberg, “The Comics of Chris Ware” [CSR]
- **Re-read:** “Jean-Paul Sartre Meets Enid Coleslaw,” “Deconstructing the Superhero” [ER]

#### 13. Manga & Cross-Cultural Analysis

- *Akira* vol. 1
- The Acoustics of Manga [CSR]
- Manga vs. Kibyoshi [CSR]
- Cohn, “A Different Kind of Cultural Frame” [ER]
- Cohn, “Japanese Visual Language” [ER]
- ”Comics Culture Around the World [PC]
- **Assignment:** As you read *Akira* (but before you read the secondary materials), write down all of the differences (formal, artistic, narrative, etc.) you notice between Otomo’s work and the work of the Western (mostly American) creators that we’ve studied previously.

#### 14. Comics, Feminism, & Science

- *Wonder Woman* Chronicles/Archives
- Wertham, “Seduction of the Innocents” [CSR]
- Bunn, “The lie detector, Wonder Woman and liberty: the life and work of William Moulton Marston” [ER]
- Rhodes, “Wonder Woman and Her Disciplinary Powers: The Queer Intersection of Scientific Authority and Mass Culture” [ER]
- **Assignment:** Final versions of your database entries must be posted online before the last day of class.

## Course Policies

### Email Policy

You are expected to check the email account you give me regularly for announcements related to the course. Crucial information will be emailed out at least 24 hours ahead of

time.

Email is the best way to contact me. I will generally try to return your emails within 24 hours (often sooner) Monday through Thursday, and within 48 hours on the weekends or holidays. You are welcome to email me a followup or reminder *if* I have not done so within this time frame. You should not count on being able to get in touch with me less than 24 hours before a major assignment is due.

### **Late Work / Make-up Exams**

No late work or make-up exams will be allowed without consent of the professor *prior* to the due/exam date, except in situations where University policy requires it.

### **Class Attendance**

While reading and writing are crucial parts of the course, the central philosophical activity is live discussion. While class will occasionally involve bits of lecture, this is merely an instrument to a more well-informed discussion and other structured activities. *Attendance is thus considered **mandatory***. Missed classes will count against your participation grade, and egregious absenteeism will be grounds for an **F** in the course at the professor's discretion. In-class assignments and activities likewise cannot be made up unless the professor agrees to it before the class is missed. Disruptive late arrivals or early departures are poor classroom citizenship and will also negatively impact your participation.

### **Classroom expectations**

You are expected to have read the assignments *before* class, and it would be to your benefit to also read them again after class. You are expected to bring *all* of the texts assigned for each day's class, and have them available to refer to. You are expected to listen respectfully to the professor and your fellow students, and participate in class discussions and activities.

**Further standard University policies can be found at**

<http://go.utdallas.edu/syllabus-policies>

*These descriptions and timelines are subject to change at the discretion of the Professor.*