PHIL308F: The Aesthetics of Comics

07/11/05-07/29/05  M/Tu/W/Th/F 1:00-3:40 pm  Skinner 0108
University of Maryland, College Park  Summer 2005, Session II

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Office Hours: I will be available after each class for further discussion; otherwise, by appointment.

Outline
The primary aim of this course is to investigate the aesthetic issues at play in the medium of comics, beginning with determining what, exactly, qualifies as a comic. From here, we will investigate a number of topics of particular philosophical interest, including the language and form of comics, as well as the metaphysics and ontology of the medium. We will look to differentiate comics from similar and related art forms, including film, literature, and the visual arts (with ‘pop’ art in particular), and we will investigate how comics operate with regard to expression, function, and aesthetic experience. Readings for the course will be taken from Scott McCloud’s Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, as well as a wide selection of readings on comics and core aesthetics (as listed below). Aside from McCloud’s book, specific comics will generally not be assigned for reading, though a wide range of examples will be used during class. Students are encouraged to discuss and write on comics that particularly interest them, and/or to consult the list of Recommended Comics (below) for suggested reading. Students of this course will receive a 10% discount on purchases at Liberty Books & Comics on Rte. 1 in College Park.

Course Requirements
Regular class attendance and careful study of assigned readings. There will be a term paper (30%), a cumulative final exam (30%), and two short writing assignments (15% each). Class attendance and participation will make up the final 10%.

Required Reading
Other readings, as listed below, will be handed out in class and available in the Philosophy Lounge. Readings are subject to change.
Absences
You need not e-mail me to let me know you will miss a class unless there is an assignment due or an exam on that day. In that case, you will need to provide a university-approved justification for your absence in order to be allowed to take a make-up exam or to hand in the assignment late.

Special Accommodations
Students with disabilities that require special class or exam accommodations must present a form from Disabilities Services specifying their needs during the first week of classes.

Classroom Courtesy
Please be courteous to your fellow students and avoid unnecessary disruptions. Arrive on time, leave on time, and turn off your cell phone during lecture.

Class Schedule
Materials must be read before the day for which they are listed.
Writing assignments listed are due at the beginning of class.

July 11/05: Defining Comics
July 12/05: The Vocabulary of Comics
  • McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics, Chapter 2 “The Vocabulary of Comics”
  • Lacassin, Francis. “The Comic Strip and Film Language” in Film Quarterly (26: 1, 1972)
July 13/05: Word & Image
  • Harvey, R.C. The Art of the Funnies, Chapter 1 “The Aesthetics of the Comics: A Preamble through History and Form”
  • McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics, Chapter 6 “Show and Tell”
  • Mitchell, W.J.T. Picture Theory, Chapter 3 “Beyond Comparison: Picture, Text, and Method”
July 14/05: The Metaphysics of Comics
  • McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics, Chapter 3 “Blood in the Gutter”
  • McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics, Chapter 4 “Time Frames”
July 15/05: Identity and Iconography
  • Jezer, Martin. “Quo Peanuts?” in White & Abel The Funnies: An American Idiom
July 18/05: Likeness & Caricature
  • Töpffer, Rodolphe. Enter: The Comics: Rodolphe Töpffer’s Essay on Physiognomy and The True Story of Monsier Crépin (1965)
  ❖ Writing Assignment 1 due
July 19/05: The Ontology of Comics
  • Carroll, Noël. “The Ontology of Mass Art” in JAAC (55:2, 1997)
July 20/05: Comics & Film
  • Harvey, R.C. The Art of the Comic Book, Chapter 8 “Only in the Comics: Why Cartooning Is Not the Same as Filmmaking”
  • Cwiklik, Gregory. “The Inherent Limitations of the Comics Form as a Narrative Medium” in TCJ 184 (1996)
  ❖ “American Splendor” handout and film screening
July 21/05: High Art, Low Art & Artworlds
- Fortress, Karl E. “The Comics as Non-Art” in White & Abel The Funnies: An American Idiom
- Danto, Arthur C. “The Artworld”
- Cohen, Ted. “High and Low Art, and High and Low Audiences” in JAAC (57:2, 1999)

July 22/05: Expressionism I: Gesturalism & Arousalism
- McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics, Chapter 5 “Living in Line”
- Aldrich, Virgil. “‘Expresses’ and ‘Expressive’” in JAAC (37:2, 1978)

July 25/05: Expressionism II: Idealist Theory & Infection Theory
- Collingwood, R.G. TBD
- Writing Assignment 2 due

July 26/05: Comic Art, Original Art, and Pop Art

July 27/05: The Function of Comics
- Beardsley, Monroe C. “The Relation of Design to Subject” in Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism (1958)
- Stecker, Robert. “Historical Functionalism, or the Four-Factor Theory” in Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value (1997)

July 28/05: The Experience of Comics
- Carrier, David. The Aesthetics of Comics, Chapters 4 “Words and Pictures Bound Together; or, Experiencing the Unity of Comics”
- Carrier, David. The Aesthetics of Comics, Chapter 5 “The Content of the Form; or, Seeing Pictures, Reading Texts, Viewing Comics”

July 29/05: Final Exam

Further Reading on Comics
Interested students will find available a wide variety of texts written on the history of comics, as well as texts focusing on particular comics and creators (from Outcault’s The Yellow Kid and Herriman’s Krazy Kat to the art of Chris Ware). Rarer are texts focusing on the medium and form of comics, generally. Of these, I particularly recommend:
• Klock, Geoff. *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (2002: Continuum)
• McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics* (1993: DC Comics/Perennial Currents)

**Further Reading in Aesthetics**
There is an enormous range of writings in aesthetics, from the ancient to the contemporary, both analytic and continental (and all points in between). For students interested in aesthetics, generally, I suggest visiting the university library and investigating the material available. For those just starting out, however, I recommend the following material in particular:

**Introductory**
• Sharpe, R.A. *Contemporary Aesthetics* (1991: Gregg Revivals)

**Journals**
• *The British Journal of Aesthetics* (Oxford)
• *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Blackwell)

**Anthologies**
• Hanfling, Oswald (ed.). *Philosophical Aesthetics: An Introduction* (1992: The Open University)
• Lamarque, Peter & Stein Haugom Olsen (eds.) *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition* (2004: Blackwell)

**Literary Criticism Anthologies**
• Allen, Gay Wilson & Harry Hayden Clark (eds.). *Literary Criticism: Pope to Croce* (1941: Wayne Books)
• Gilbert, Allan H. (ed.). *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden* (1940: Wayne Books)
Recommended Comics

Although I am open to discussion and/or writing on just about any comic (strips, series, graphic novels), I particularly recommend the graphic novels listed below. The vast majority of these books are still in print, and available at good comics shops or online. To help defer costs, students of this course will receive a 10% discount on purchases at Liberty Books & Comics on Rte. 1 in College Park.

- Brown, Chester. *Louis Riel* (Drawn and Quarterly)
- Chadwick, Paul. *Concrete* (several collections, Dark Horse Comics)
- Ito, Junji. *Uzumaki* (3 vols., Viz)
- Karasik, Paul & David Mazzucchelli. *Paul Auster's City of Glass* (Avon)
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics* (DC Comics/Perennial Currents)
- McKeon, Dave. *Cages* (NBM)
- Mignola, Mike. *Hellboy* (5 vols., Dark Horse Comics)
- Miller, Frank & David Mazzucchelli. *Batman: Year One* (DC Comics)
- Miller, Frank. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (DC Comics)
- Milligan, Peter & Duncan Fegredo. *Enigma* (Vertigo)
- Moore, Alan & Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen* (DC Comics)
- Moore, Alan & David Lloyd. *V for Vendetta* (Vertigo)
- Moore, Alan & Eddie Campbell. *From Hell* (Eddie Campbell Comics/Top Shelf)
- Otomo, Katsuhiro. *Akira* (6 vols., Dark Horse Comics)
- Ralph, Brian. *Cave-in* (Highwater Books)
- Schultz, Marc. *Xenozoic Tales* (2 vols., Dark Horse Comics)
- Seth. *Clyde Fans: Book One* (Drawn and Quarterly)
- Seth. *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (Drawn and Quarterly)
- Sim, Dave. *Cerebus* (16 vols., Aardvark Vanheimer)
- Smith, Jeff. *Bone: One Volume Edition* (collected or in 9 vols., Cartoon Books)
- Spiegelman, Art. *Maus* (collected or in 2 vols., Pantheon)
- Sturm, James. *The Golem's Mighty Swing* (Drawn and Quarterly)
- Talbot, Bryan. *The Tale of One Bad Rat* (Dark Horse Comics)
- Thompson, Craig. *Blankets* (Top Shelf)
- Waid, Mark & Alex Ross. *Kingdom Come* (DC Comics)
- Ware, Chris. *Jimmy Corrigan: Smartest Kid on Earth* (Pantheon)
- Wolfman, Marv & George Pérez. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (DC Comics)

I also recommend investigating a variety of comic strips, many of which are available in collected anthologies. Given the number of good strips produced in the last 100-plus years, this list is by no means comprehensive:

- Breathed, Berke. *Bloom County, Outland, and Opus*
- Foster, Harold. *Prince Valiant and Tarzan*
- Griffith, Bill. *Zippy the Pinhead*
- Groening, Matt. *Life in Hell*
- Herriman, George. *Krazy Kat*
- Johnson, Lynn. *For Better or For Worse*
Finally, I recommend investigating the better “gag” cartoons, particularly those published by *The New Yorker* and *Playboy*. These cartoons are available in a large number of collections.

**Recommended Film Adaptations**

Especially recently, films about popular comic characters abound (Batman, X-Men, Fantastic Four, etc.). Rarer, however, are films that seek to adapt a particular comic series or graphic novel. Of this smaller group, I particularly recommend:

- **Akira** (1988)
  
  Adapted from *Akira* series (1988-1995) by Katsuhiro Otomo

- **American Splendor** (2003)
  
  Adapted from *American Splendor* series (1976 – present) by Harvey Pekar et al. and *Our Cancer Year* (1994) by Harvey Pekar & Joyce Brabner

- **From Hell** (2001)
  
  Adapted from *From Hell* (1999) by Alan Moore & Eddie Campbell

- **Ghost World** (2000)
  
  Adapted from *Ghost World* (1998) by Daniel Clowes

- **Road to Perdition** (2002)
  
  Adapted from *Road to Perdition* (1998) by Max Allen Collins & Richard Piers Rayner

- **The Rocketeer** (1991)
  
  Adapted from *The Rocketeer* series (1982 – present) by Dave Stevens

- **Uzumaki** (2000)
  
  Adapted from *Uzumaki* (vol. 1) (1998) by Junji Ito