

LIT 307: Graphic Novel

Monday and Wednesday 1:50-3:05
Stuart Building 213

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Office Hours: Monday and Wednesday, 4:45-5:45 (except university holidays and finals week)

Introduction

This course will serve as an introduction to comics studies and sequential art in the Western tradition. We will read and discuss four prominent English-language texts in that genre.

Graphic novels are essentially the same as comic books that you read as a child (or maybe still read!), but they are treated and discussed as separate entities from serial superhero comics largely due to subject matter. What was once a genre that was associated with detective stories, action heroes, and pulp fiction has evolved to include authors that address weighty philosophical issues and serious subject matter.

If you have no interest in comics, this may not be the class for you (but you might want to give it a shot). Likewise, if you are only interested in reading graphic novels in the Frank Miller style or you were hoping for mostly manga, you will be disappointed by the selection of readings in this course. We are looking at books that push the boundaries of the graphic novel as a genre in Western culture, and we will also tackle several theoretical readings. The world of comics is vast, and while we will see examples from many genres, there's not enough time to cover it all.

By the end of this course you should be able to:

- Think of comics as a medium (as opposed to content type) and recognize the visual vocabulary and storytelling techniques used by major authors in this medium.
- Perform analysis of story, contextual production factors (e.g. method of publication, background of author, etc.), and drawing styles.
- Demonstrate a familiarity with the vocabulary of literary and visual analysis.
- Apply what we have learned to insightful and interesting critiques of sequential visual art.
- Meaningfully integrate scholarly criticism into your written arguments as support and intelligently rebut scholarly criticism using evidence from primary texts.

Required texts

- McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. ISBN: 006097625X (UC)
- Spiegelman, A. (1973). *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History*. ISBN: 0394747232 (MAUS I)
- Spiegelman, A. (1986). *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*. ISBN: 9780679729778 (MAUS II)
- Baker, K. (2005). *Nat Turner*. ISBN: 0810972271 (NT)
- Ferris, E. (2017). *My Favorite Thing is Monsters*. ISBN: 1606999592. (MFT)
- Ware, C. (2003). *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*. ISBN: 9780375714542 (JC)

Notes on the readings

In addition to the above required readings, there will be other short readings provided by me.

While comics take less time to read for content, they take a great deal of time to appreciate visually. Expect to read and reread the comics texts in this course. Likewise, there is no shortage of theory and literary criticism to read. Carefully review the reading schedule to make sure you allow yourself enough time to complete the readings before class discussions. Most students that perform worse than expected in this course do so because they fail to keep up with the readings.

Content in this course may contain material that is upsetting or difficult for some people to view. I recommend you preview the content prior to committing to this course.

I strongly advise against sharing books. If you use e-books, make sure they are in a format that you can access during exams. I don't lend out copies of my books or allow book passing during exams for obvious reasons, so bring your texts on exam days.

Required technology

You need the following to complete the assignments in this class:

- A Dropbox account;
- Access to Adobe Photoshop, GIMP (free software), or a comparable image manipulation application of your choice;
- Sufficient OTS printing credits to print several color pages, or access to a high-quality color printer.

Assignments and grading

I will post detailed project descriptions as the semester progresses.

Discussion leaders (10%)

Working in pairs, discussion leaders will formulate at least **six discussion questions** for the week's readings. For primary texts, the questions should help the class develop deep understandings of the text and major themes addressed by the author. For critical readings, questions should address the main points of the author(s) and foster a discussion as to merits of the author's argument. Discussion leaders will **present their questions during class** and **encourage students to participate** in answering the questions. Finally, discussion leaders will take notes during the class discussion and **write up a summary** of points addressed in class discussion, then **post that summary on Blackboard** for the benefit of the entire class. Classmates who contribute regularly during class or in comments on Blackboard will improve their grade, so it's to your benefit to participate even if it is not your assigned week.

Midterm Exam (20%)

An in-class (75 minute) exam that will test your comprehension of comics theory and the readings up to that point in the semester.

Final project (30%)

You'll create a website that contains a collage of images, text (both written by you and appropriated from other texts), analysis, and opinion, artfully arranged to make an impression on the reader. This is your big chance to showcase everything you learned about graphic novels and sequential art. We will have time in class to explore the concept and work with tools that you will need to make this project happen.

Final Exam (25%)

A comprehensive exam that takes place during the final exam period.

In-class participation (15%)

I expect everyone to come to class ready to participate, which means that you have done the readings and are ready to contribute to the discussion. We will break up into small groups for discussion occasionally, but a lot of the course will consist of large group discussion. The following behaviors are unacceptable and will result in a significant grade reduction:

- Phone in your face during class (or artfully concealed under desk)
- Constant chit chat with friends while everyone else is trying to learn
- Doing work for another course during our class meetings
- Sleeping
- Regularly arriving late or leaving early
- Sitting silently day after day and contributing nothing to the discussion. There are no points handed out to people who don't have anything to say, so speak up or forego an "A" grade

I have a zero-tolerance attendance policy. You can miss three class meetings for whatever reason. After that, I will reduce your final grade in the course by one letter grade per absence. If you miss more than six total class meetings, you will receive an 'E' as your final course grade.

Having a lot of work in your other classes is not an excuse for missing this class, nor are extracurricular activities that are not related to official university events or professional development.

Family and health emergencies happen and are excused absences; however, you must notify me as soon as reasonably possible if such a situation arises. If you stop attending class without a notification, I will assume you are not coming back and issue a grade of "E" for the semester. If you receive an email from me regarding absences and you do not reply, I will make the same assumption.

FAQ and tips for a successful semester

- I don't accept late work, but I will grant extensions given reasonable extenuating circumstances (I decide what is reasonable). If your assignment is not in by the deadline and I don't hear from you, I will give you a zero.
- If I give you an extension due to an extenuating circumstance and you fail to meet the agreed upon deadline, you will receive a zero on that assignment.
- There is no extra credit in this course.
- You cannot fail to submit assignments by their respective deadlines and then turn everything in at the end for partial credit. Refer to the first bullet point in this section for clarification.
- **Take notes.**
- Please refer to the syllabus/course schedule/assignment guide before emailing me with questions. Questions about submission method, dates, or requirements that can be answered by the above documents will result in a polite reminder to refer to the course documents.
- No one will handhold you through the readings or provide summaries if you miss class. We'll operate on the premise that everyone has read and our discussions will be on that

- level. Don't make the mistake that you can pack all of the readings in right before the exam—that won't work out well for you.
- Make friends with a classmate so you can borrow notes if you are absent.
 - **If you are having trouble with the coursework or understanding the material, come talk to me.** I have office hours and I'm happy to talk after class. If you have a conflict and can't make it to office hours, send me an email to set up an appointment to meet in person.

Plagiarism

You are expected to adhere to all IIT rules regarding academic honesty and conduct. Please familiarize yourself with the [Student Handbook policies](#). Plagiarism is the appropriation of ideas without appropriate attribution of those ideas to the original author. Reordering words or sentences but conveying the same ideas as another author and representing those ideas as your own still constitutes plagiarism. If I detect any plagiarized content in your work, you will automatically fail the assignment and, depending on the severity of the infraction, the course. Additional penalties may be imposed by the University, such as academic sanctions and/or expulsion. If you are concerned that your work might constitute a breach of academic integrity, contact me via email before turning in your assignment and I will advise you. I will report plagiarism to the appropriate university authorities without exception and issue failing grades as necessary to prevent academic dishonesty.

The Writing Center (SH 232-233)

The Writing Center is a tutoring service that helps students develop writing skills critical to success in academic and professional pursuits. I strongly encourage any student to visit the Writing Center if you are having difficulty with any part of the writing process or if you simply want some feedback on your writing from another writer. Since you will be writing a great deal in this class (and, presumably, your entire life), it is to your benefit to take advantage of this free service to help you become a better writer.

Accommodation for students with documented disabilities

Reasonable accommodations will be made for students with documented disabilities. In order to receive accommodations, students must obtain a letter of accommodation from the Center for Disability Resources. The Center for Disability Resources (CDR) is located in Life Sciences Room 218, telephone 312.567.5744 or disabilities@iit.edu.