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ENG 4775-001: Literature, Culture, Theory

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Comics and Graphic Narratives as/versus Literature

English 4775 Fall, 2016
Coleman 3160 11:00 – 12:15, T/R

Instructor: Tim Engles
Email: tdengles@eiu.edu
Office Hours: 12:30 – 1:30 T/R and by appointment

TRR Texts

Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art (1993), Scott McCloud
Unflattening (2015), Nick Sousanis
I Think I Am in Friend-Love with You (2013), Yumi Sakugawa
Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery (2009), Mat Johnson & Warren Pleece
ONE! HUNDRED! DEMONS! (2002), Lynda Barry
Nat Turner (2008), Kyle Baker
Shortcomings (2007), Adrian Tomine
Jimmy Corrigan (2003), Chris Ware
Fun Home (2006), Alison Bechdel
American Born Chinese (2006), Gene Luen Yang

Course Policies and Procedures

EIU Catalog Description: Basic principles of evaluating the standard literary genres, or tenets of a specific school of criticism, or the examination of major aesthetic questions. Topics to be announced.

Our topic/focus: Although comics have long been thought of as something best left behind in childhood (and at times as something that children shouldn’t even read), they’re now taken seriously by many adults, especially in the form of “graphic novels.” The scholarly consensus about comics has become that the form itself never deserved its traditional relegation to realms below that of art. Indeed, the form itself raises fundamental questions about just what “art” is, as well as about what “literature” is. We will take up these and other issues that have accompanied the recent explosion of adult enthusiasm for comics and graphic narratives, as well as theoretical explanations of how they convey meaning differently from the ways in which single-track written narratives do.

We will also address other questions raised by this medium: How and why have certain kinds of “comics” ascended to the lofty sounding status of “graphic novel”? How do the visual and verbal tracks of graphic narratives work together to create meaning? How does the medium’s anti-elitist tradition mesh with (and mess with) highbrow literary traditions? What have literary and other scholars had to say about the recent resurgence of graphic narratives, and how have their studies contributed to that resurgence? Our texts include recent scholarly and meta-graphic considerations of such matters as well as a range of graphic narratives, both renowned and obscure.
Our course will be conducted as an inquiring conversation on these matters, with your active participation central to our work. Because the success of our conversations will depend so heavily on everyone’s participation, it’s crucial that you keep up with the reading, and that you do so with careful attention. Also, the rule regarding attendance is: be here. If you have more than three absences this semester, your course grade will drop a full letter grade for each absence beyond three. Your tasks will include occasional quizzes, two formal essays, a presentation, and a final exam; you'll also need to read comics a lot more slowly than you probably have before.

Course Objectives/Learning Goals:

§ To read, discuss and better understand comics as an artistic medium.
§ To review the relevant history and reception of comics as a popular and/or artistic medium.
§ To analyze and better understand formal aspects of how comics make meaning.
§ To engage effectively in and with scholarly research.
§ To hone skills related to written analyses that support strong thesis arguments, and to present research results effectively in a visually supported oral presentation.

Course Requirements

5-7 page critical essay (20% of final grade) This paper will focus on any one of our syllabus readings from the first half or so of the semester. Focus your close interpretation of the work in any way you choose, taking your reader beyond what most are likely to realize when first reading the text. You are welcome to incorporate points and insights raised during class discussion, but if you do so, do your best to add further insight. Like the longer essay, this one will follow traditional conventions for academic essays (e.g., unity, coherence, proper formatting and MLA-style documentation, and so on). You are welcome to use any secondary sources, but they are not required for this paper. [For graduate students: 7-8 page essay. This essay will count as 15% of your final grade; graduate students will lead also the first half-hour of one class session for another 5% of their final grade. Assignment details coming soon.]

10-12 page research essay: focused comparison/contrast (25%) This paper will focus on one of the other literary texts on our syllabus (in other words, you may not write about the same text in both essays), and another work not on our syllabus. A 250-400 word proposal will be required beforehand, and the paper will cite at least two scholarly sources. The essay must reflect your close attention to and understanding of insights and interpretive concepts that will have arisen throughout the semester, and of course, it must be an entirely new essay (not something you wrote for another course). [Graduate students: 12-15 page essay.]
All writing assignments are due at the beginning of the class period on the day they are due, whether the student attends class that day or not. **Late-paper penalty:** fifteen points each day late.

**Presentation of final project** (15%) Orally summarize your final paper’s findings with a PowerPoint or similar visual program. Be succinct and focused—don’t plan to speak for more than twelve minutes. Practice ahead of time, and speak to us engagingly—you can of course use notes as you present, but do not merely read your writing to us.

**Final exam** (25%) Take home—details will be provided later in the semester.

**Active, thoughtful class participation and good reading-quiz grades** (15%) I will not spend much time lecturing in this course. Therefore, and because we are a relatively small group, we must all contribute to a positive, challenging, interesting learning environment. Doing so will call for your careful concentration before class of each assigned reading, and your willingness to share your thoughts, questions, and feelings with others about what you read and hear.

Because your careful preparation for class is so crucial, I will begin some sessions with a reading quiz. I know that because you are advanced students I can trust most of you to keep up with our heavy reading load, but past experience has demonstrated that reading quizzes are the best way to ensure that everyone is prepared to participate in class discussion. Questions on the quiz can also function at times as a good lead-in to class discussion. Because the answers to unannounced quizzes tend to arise during class, and because one purpose of the quizzes is to encourage punctual class attendance, these quizzes cannot be made up (even if you come to class late). These quizzes also function as a reward for those who attend class regularly and on time. On the other hand, I recognize that students must miss class at times and therefore might miss a quiz through no fault of their own, so at the end of the semester I will drop your lowest quiz grade before calculating the average. Be aware that most of our texts are intense, concentrated, demanding readings, and schedule your study time accordingly.

**Other Matters**

**Classroom Environment:** In class, I expect all of you to participate in discussions (class participation will be figured into your final grade). The best way to demonstrate that you are active, engaged, and interested is by contributing regularly to class discussions, and by paying close, respectful attention to what everyone else has to say. If you have questions, no matter how simple or complicated, please go ahead and ask—chances are that other people have the same question. If you do not volunteer to respond, there’s a good chance I will call on you, so be sure to pay attention in class.

In the interests of keeping everyone in class focused and undistracted, be sure to silence your phone and put it away before class begins, and do not check or write text messages during class. Also, do not read outside materials, chew gum, or eat food in class (drinking beverages is okay),
and do not use a computer or tablet in class. If you happen to be expecting an important or emergency call or text, stepping out to answer it is okay, but be sure to let me know about your situation before class begins. Finally, as in all of your classes, refrain from “packing up” during the last few minutes; I will signal when the discussion is finished, and I promise to end each class by the scheduled ending time of our class period.

**Email Activity:** Enrollment in this class requires use of your EIU email account, and you must check it frequently, preferably every day, for messages pertaining to the course. Email is the quickest, easiest way to reach me if I am not in my office; I welcome any and all questions and comments. See F AUG 26 below on the Daily Schedule for what to include in this message.

**Regarding tardiness:** This is a small class, so late arrivals are disruptive—if for some bizarre reason you wish to get on my bad side, you can easily do so by developing the habit of arriving late for class. If you will not be able to arrive for this class on time because of other commitments, you will need to drop it and register for another section.

**Academic honesty:** I expect you to act honestly and do your own work in this class, and so does Eastern Illinois University. It is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with the English Department’s policy on plagiarism: “Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism—‘The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and/or thoughts of another author, and representation of them as one’s original work’ (Random House Dictionary of the English Language)—has the right and the responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignment of a grade of F for the course, and to report the incident to the Judicial Affairs Office.”

**The Writing Center:** Tutoring services at the English Department’s Writing Center are free to students at any stage of their time at EIU. Students may drop in any time or schedule appointments during the Center’s working hours. To schedule an appointment, you can drop by the Center (3110 Coleman Hall) or you can call 581-5929. The writing center is open Monday through Thursday, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., and 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. On Friday hours of operation are 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Members of the helpful, friendly Writing Center staff recommend that you schedule consulting sessions ahead of time to ensure you get the time you want and to get a full session (40 minutes), but they also welcome walk-in appointments. If you have problems with grammar, punctuation, spelling, organization, thesis development, or other parts of the writing process, I strongly recommend that you make use of this free and valuable service. I may recommend that certain students do so. Let me know if you have any questions about the Writing Center.

**For students with disabilities:** If you have a documented disability and wish to receive academic accommodations, and if you have not already contacted the Office of Student Disability Services (581-6583), please do so as soon as possible.

**Student Success Center:** Students who are having difficulty achieving their academic goals are encouraged to contact the Student Success Center (www.eiu.edu/~success) for assistance with time management, test taking, note taking, avoiding procrastination, setting goals, and other skills to support academic achievement. The Student Success Center provides individualized consultations. To make an appointment, call 217-581-6696, or go to 9th Street Hall, Room 1302.