

San Francisco State University: Humanities  
**HUM 325.1 Comics & Culture**  
Spring 2017

Class Meetings: M/W 12:35-1:50

Classroom: HUM 203

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Office Hours: Monday 2-3, Wednesday 11-12, or by appointment

This course will introduce the scholarly study of comic books and graphic novels, with a particular focus on the formal elements that differentiate comics from other forms including prose, film, and poetry, and the history of the comic book format from its inception in the 1830s to today. The different ways that meaning is made in comics form will be demonstrated through close readings and discussion of significant global texts alongside readings of comics scholarship. Students will also get a first-hand understanding of what it means to make comics through various in-class and homework activities.

**Student Learning Objectives:**

- To examine how comics uniquely convey meaning;
- To gain an understanding of comics as a distinct medium (in part, by comparison to other media, including literature, film, visual art, poetry, etc.);
- To have a broad understanding of the history and evolution of the comics medium, an awareness of existing and emerging genres and styles of comics across the globe as well as historically significant creators;
- To consider ways in which we can draw on what we've learned from comics and apply it to our work, to reconsider how we approach writing, art, presentations, etc.;
- Students should be able to describe the formal features of the comics form, and ways in which comics are distinct from film, visual art, and poetry;
- Be able to place a comic in its cultural context through close readings of its formal details;
- Articulate cross-cultural differences, similarities, and relationships between comics and related forms produced across the globe;
- Perceive and articulate – both in discussion, writing, and in comics – formal and historical relationships.

**Required Readings** (available at SFSU bookstore. Also, Comix Experience and Comix Experience Outpost near campus will offer discounts on these readings and all comics for class members who present a printout of their syllabus – check out these and other SF comics shops!):

Sara Varon: *Robot Dreams*

David Mazzucchelli, Paul Karasik: *City of Glass*

Gene Luen Yang: *American Born Chinese*

Marjane Satrapi: *The Complete Persepolis*

David B.: *Epileptic*

Inio Asano: *Solanin*

John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell: *March Book One*

Mariko Tamaki & Jillian Tamaki: *Skim*

G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona: *Ms. Marvel Volume 1: No Normal*

\*Herge: *TinTin* Volume of your choice \*This will not be on order at the bookstore – but is readily available. Any volume/edition you track down will be acceptable.

Highly recommended, but not required Scott McCloud: *Understanding Comics*

In addition to these required texts, we will supplement discussion with short comics from other authors, as well with as additional texts of a theoretical or critical nature, all of which will be available via the web or iLearn.

**Required Materials:** Since we will regularly be drawing and sketching out comics in this course, you will need to have a few simple and readily available materials on hand. You can of course get more than these if your interest allows, but here are some basics:

- A notebook/journal/sketchbook of some sort
- Drawing tool of your choice (pen, pencil, brush pen, etc.) (Color options are nice too)

**Assignments and Evaluation:**

25% Ongoing mini-assignments  
20% Visual analysis/annotation project  
20% Midterm take home exam  
5% Proposal for final project  
30% Final project

**Ongoing Mini Assignments (25%):**

A key component of this course will consist of frequent in-class or take home quick drawing and comics-making exercises. You will keep a composition notebook or journal in which to do the majority of these assignments and then upload them to iLearn. Please note that **prior drawing experience is not necessary**, and that every exercise can be done by anyone of any skill level or background in drawing. It is expected that these activities will provide additional insight into understanding a comic and what goes into making them. And, from past experience, I know that they will not only be fun to do, but they will likely awaken your interest in drawing. Student evaluation will be based entirely on *completion not skill*. Emphasis will be placed on inventiveness, curiosity, effort, and willingness to dive in and try with vigor something you haven't – we want to build a portfolio of your explorations that should be rich in its depth.

You will submit these assignments by first taking a quick, clean digital photo of the work, and subsequently posting each assignment to iLearn before the start of class on the day it is due. For each assignment you will enter your last name first, followed by your first, then post your image(s), add any reflective text required (I will specify for each assignment the particular requirements), or upload a PDF, PPT, or other composite file. This will serve as a gallery to share with your classmates, as well as a place for me to respond to your work over the term. For each assignment, I will specify by name where you should upload it to so everything ends up in the right place. While accommodations will be made for excused absences, you cannot make up assignments without first making specific arrangements with me.

**Visual Analysis/Annotation Project (20%):**

For this early-term assignment, you will choose an instructor-supplied comics page along with another of your choosing to visually annotate and analyze. This means that you will either trace the two pages on tracing paper, redraw in your own hand, or make photocopies. You will then annotate the pages with notes and diagrammatic elements, in which you explain the effect of the various stylistic and other creative elements of the page. In other words, you will need to offer analytical commentary about why certain interesting creative decisions seem to have been made, and what they do to your understanding of the comic. The emphasis here is on observation—how much can you notice?—and what you can deduce from everything you have observed. The assignment is designed to help you think about the construction of a comic—how is it made, why is it made in this way, and what is the effect of it being made this way?

**Midterm Exam (20%):**

The midterm take home exam will cover all of the readings and lecture material from the first half of the course. The exam will be a mixed format, and will include visual analysis, a brief essay assignment, and a comics construction exercise.

**Proposal for Final Project (5%):**

Before you begin the final project, you will be required to submit a formal proposal outlining your motivations, goals, and the form the project will take. The proposal must be between 100-150 words long, and should clearly state how your project relates to course material. Finally, it should indicate the working thesis of your proposed project.

**Final Project (30%):**

The final project may take any of the following three forms:

**1) Traditional Essay:**

For this assignment, you will draw on everything you have learned about the comics form to write a traditional analytical essay of 1500-2000 words. Your essay should have a clearly-outlined thesis—that is, it should have an argument, and be an attempt to convince the reader of something concerning the comic. What does this comic mean, how does it achieve its effects, and what is the value of reading the comic the way you do? Your essay must focus on a primary text (or texts, if your approach is comparative) we have read for the course, and while you are welcome to include secondary material (whether historical, theoretical, etc.), you are not required to do so.

**2) Review Comic:**

For this assignment, you will pick a comic from outside the class material to review in comics form—that is, you'll be creating your own comic that describes, reflects on, and evaluates another comic. Your comic can take any form you like, but the result should display awareness, understanding, and use of the comics form as discussed in class. In addition, it should have a clearly-defined opinion about the quality of the comic that goes well beyond a simple binary (this is awesome/this sucks) evaluation. There is no specific length requirement, but your comic should represent a substantial engagement with the comic under review. If you genuinely feel like it is long enough to achieve this, it probably is. You are welcome to create the comic any way you like (by hand or digitally), but you must bring a hard copy to hand in for our final class.

**3) Invent Your Own Project:**

Finally, you have the option of inventing your own final project. While there is no required format and we encourage you to be creative, your project needs to address course material in some fundamental way. That is, your project should indicate an advanced understanding of the academic study of comics, whether or not it directly references course readings or in-class lectures and discussions. In order to ensure that your project will fulfill the requirements, you will need to meet with me during office hours to discuss. In addition to your project itself, you are required to submit a reflective essay of 500-1000 words that outlines your motivations and aims for the project in relation to the overall course content. Some examples might include a narrative in comics, a syllabus or lesson plan for using comics in the classroom, ...

**General Assignment Information and Late Policy:**

Late assignments will be penalized with the loss of a third of a grade (from A- to B+, for example) for each business day that the assignment is overdue. If you are concerned that you will not be able to make a due date, contact me in advance, and we may negotiate an extension. Extensions will not be granted after a due date has passed, and barring documentable extenuating circumstances, assignments more than a week late will not be accepted if no extension has been negotiated.

**Course Outline:** Some changes to our outline may occur as we may end up devoting more time to some things than expected or make room for ideas I hadn't anticipated. You will be apprised in class via email and

iLearn of what's coming up so that we all remain on the same page, and you are expected to regularly check iLearn and your **sfsu.edu email account** to ensure you are on top of things.

- Week 1: 1/23 1/25 NO Nick/NO Class
- Week 2: 1/30 2/1 Intro: History
- Week 3: 2/6 2/8 McCloud
- Week 4: 2/13 2/15 Time/Space
- Week 5: 2/20 2/22 Wordless Comics: Robot Dreams
- Week 6: 2/27 3/1 City of Glass, Adaptation – **Visual Analysis** project assigned
- Week 7: 3/6 3/8 Persepolis Film
- Week 8: 3/13 3/15 Persepolis Book
- Spring Break 3/20 3/22
- Week 9: 3/27 3/29 American Born Chinese, Multimodality, **Midterm Assigned**
- Week 10: 4/3 4/5 TinTin, intro to Bandes Dessinées
- Week 11: 4/10 4/12 Epileptic
- Week 12: 4/17 4/19 Intro to Manga: Solanin
- Week 13: 4/24 4/26 March
- Week 14: 5/1 5/3 Skim
- Week 15: 5/8 5/10 Ms. Marvel
- Week 16: 5/15 Wrap and loose ends
- FINAL Exam Period: Monday 5/22: 10:45-1:15 **Final Projects DUE**, Share final projects with all...

### ***iLearn***

We will be using the iLearn website for this class. Those of you unfamiliar with iLearn can find resources and assistance online as well as with the office of Academic Technology. You are automatically enrolled in iLearn for all of your courses registered at SFSU.

Academic Technology website: <http://at.sfsu.edu>

iLearn log-in page: <https://ilearn.sfsu.edu/login/index.php>

### **Course Policies**

**Classroom approach:** I consider learning as acquiring the tools to follow one's own curiosity, and thus teaching means providing a framework, establishing an environment for participants to explore and thrive. Rather than being out in front, I see my role as accompanying students on a journey we all make together.

**Classroom Policies:** Because many of the ongoing activities will be done in-class, attendance is important and expected. Of course, sometimes obligations, illness, or other unforeseen events make attendance impossible. If you know of an upcoming obligation or ongoing health/personal challenges that that will preclude your attendance, let me know in advance and we will make alternative arrangements. In addition, repeatedly coming late to class is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. We want this classroom to be a great learning environment for everyone, so we need to all take care of each other to make it so. Laptops and smart devices, if used well, can complement discussion and so are permitted. If they are being used in a way that detracts from the overall environment, the instructor will address that.

### **Late Papers and Homework Assignments**

An assignment is considered late if it is not turned in at the beginning of class on the day it is due. Assignments that are turned in up to a week late will be marked accordingly and receive a full-grade deduction. Medical or family emergencies are valid excuses and will be accepted with written documentation. Also, assignments will not be accepted over email unless special arrangements are made with me.

### **Contact and Feedback**

You are encouraged to visit office hours or make an appointment to discuss the topics covered in class, and to clarify any questions you may have about assignments and requirements. When sending emails to me, please use your "sfsu.edu" account when possible, and put "HUM 325" followed by your subject in the subject line so I am sure to address it more quickly.

### **Plagiarism**

Plagiarism is a form of cheating or fraud; it occurs when a student misrepresents the work of another as his or her own. Plagiarism may consist of using the ideas, sentences, paragraphs, or the whole text of another without appropriate acknowledgment, but it also includes employing or allowing another person to write or substantially alter work that a student then submits as his or her own. Any assignment found to be plagiarized will be given an "F" grade. All instances of plagiarism in the College of Liberal & Creative Arts will be reported to the Dean of the College, and may be reported to the University Judicial Affairs Officer for further action.

### **Accommodations for Students with Disabilities**

Students with disabilities who need reasonable accommodations are encouraged to contact the instructor. The Disability Programs and Resource Center (DPRC) is available to facilitate the reasonable accommodations process. The DPRC is located in the Student Service Building and can be reached by telephone (voice/TTY 415-338-2472) or by email [dprc@sfsu.edu](mailto:dprc@sfsu.edu).

### **University Policy on Sexual Harassment & Violence**

SF State fosters a campus free of sexual violence including sexual harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and/or any form of sex or gender discrimination. If you disclose a personal experience as an SF State student, the course instructor is required to notify the Dean of Students. To disclose any such violence confidentially, contact:

**The SAFE Place** - (415) 338-2208; [SAFE Place website http://www.sfsu.edu/~safe\\_plc/](http://www.sfsu.edu/~safe_plc/)

**Counseling and Psychological Services Center** - (415) 338-2208; [Counseling and Psychological Services Center website http://psyservs.sfsu.edu](http://psyservs.sfsu.edu)

For more information on your rights and available resources see: [Title IX at SF State http://titleix.sfsu.edu](http://titleix.sfsu.edu)