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English 333: Comics & Graphic Novels

Prof. Charles Hatfield

<http://moodle.csun.edu> (Moodle site)

<http://333comix.wordpress.com> (Prof. H's class blog)

Comics is a form of narrative art and visual literature in which image-making (most often cartooning) commixes with text and design in order to tell stories, share memories, evoke settings and situations, make arguments, or analyze processes. It combines graphic design, visual rhetoric, and narrative drawing—in sum, it's a dynamic form of *imagetext*. In 333 we will study (and practice using) comics' unique ensemble of formal techniques, and also discuss the recent history of comics and consider why its cultural status has changed so much over the past forty years or so. We'll round off the semester by focusing on book-length comics that purport to be based on or inspired by real-life events: in other words, nonfiction works, including autobiography, history, journalism, and argument. This is seventh time this course has been offered at CSUN, and each time out is a great experiment. Welcome aboard!

OBJECTIVES

- Informed appreciation of comics as a literary and artistic practice;
- Familiarity with and ability to discuss analytically the comics form, including sequentiality, ellipsis, layout/design, word/image synergy, and style;
- Greater awareness of word/image relationships;
- Basic familiarity with comics culture and with select resources for doing comics research;
- Broad knowledge of recent comics history;
- Sharper reading, writing, and communication skills (as in any English course).

REQUIREMENTS

1. Class participation.

2. Group presentation: You must join with three or four other students to give a talk (15 minutes) in response to a chapter of Scott McCloud's book of theory, *Understanding Comics*. In this talk, you should seek to explain, apply, and problematize McCloud's ideas and to generate and facilitate class discussion.

3. Blog: Each of you must design and maintain an individual blog from about the first week of February to the end of the term. This blog should include: your responses to readings, class discussions, and specific questions raised by me; a review of a book-length comic of your choosing; and any other content you deem relevant and appropriate to 333 that you want to include. The blog will be your constant companion throughout the course.

4. Minicomic and self-reflection: You must create a comic that tells an ostensibly true story witnessed by you—autobiographical, journalistic, or anecdotal. You will have to reproduce this comic in sufficient quantity to supply a copy to every other member of class. This comic must be accompanied by a self-reflection presented on your blog in which you describe and reflect on the creative process behind your comic and come to some conclusion about the end results.

5. Critical essay: The climax of your work in 333 will be a critical essay (think 4 to 5 pages, or 1500 words) analyzing one of the comics from our required reading list. This essay will be due very late in the term, on May 4. We'll discuss specific topic ideas and approaches in class, but most of the decision-making will be up to you. You'll be submitting the essay on paper, though I will offer extra credit to encourage everyone to post the essay on their blogs in well-formatted, navigable, readable form, with embedded links and media.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Besides readings in PDF form that will be made available via Moodle, and other texts you select for your own individual study, we'll be reading and discussing the following books, probably in this order:

- McCloud, Scott, *Understanding Comics*
- Barry, Lynda, ed., *The Best American Comics 2008*
- Green, Justin, *Binky Brown Sampler*
- Pekar, Harvey, et al., *American Splendor*
- Spiegelman, Art, *Maus*, Vol. 1 and Vol. 2
- Sacco, Joe, *Palestine*
- Satrapi, Marjane, *The Complete Persepolis*
- Bechdel, Alison, *Fun Home*
- Neufeld, Josh, *A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge*
- Guibert, Emmanuel, Didier Lefèvre, and Frédéric Lemerrier, *The Photographer*