University of Western Ontario ☆ Winter 2020

MIT3282G COMIC BOOK CULTURE
FROM PULP FICTION TO POSTMODERN LEGITIMACY
☆ **Wednesday 3:30-6:30** ☆ **FNB1220** ☆
☆ **Dr. Doug Mann** ☆ dmann@uwo.ca ☆

The journey of comic books in the twentieth century was one from throwaway pieces of ten-cent pulp fiction to twenty-dollar graphic novels with a glossy postmodern legitimacy. Comics have always acted as a social and political mirror of the society that created them, from World War II and the Cold War through the turbulent 1960s and conservative 1980s. We'll spend about half the course on a close examination of comics as social mirror, including how they've adapted in various ways to a changing youth marketplace. Along the way we'll chart the moral and social meaning of the superhero. Secondly, we'll reverse the causal nexus and look at how comics have influenced the wider popular culture, especially the way that they've been adapted for film and television (notably in Marvel blockbusters and TV series) and how in the mid-twentieth century they created a moral panic centered on their supposed power to "seduce the innocent." Thirdly, we'll attempt to understand the aesthetics of comics, how what Will Eisner has called "sequential art" tells stories in a way that separates them from print, film and TV. Along the way we'll read a history of the comic books in America, Scott McCloud's book *Understanding Comics,* plenty of actual comics and watch a few clips from TV and film adaptations of comic book stories.

Course Books (☺ buy for yourself / ☁ you need this, but consider sharing or borrowing a copy)
- Scott McCloud. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art.* HarperCollins, 1994. ☺
- Bradford W. Wright. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. ☺
- Doug Mann ed. *Comic Book Culture Reader.* Courseware: contains the readings listed in the synopsis below but not in the other books. ☺
- *Amazing Fantasy #15, The Amazing Spider-Man #1, 3, 4, 6, 9. Marvel Masterworks: The Amazing Spider-Man Volume 1,* Marvel Comics, 2009 OR www.marvel.com. *ASM* #17 & 18 (in reader). ☁
- Chris Claremont & John Byrne. *X-Men: The Dark Phoenix Saga.* Marvel Comics 2006. ☁
- Frank Miller. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns.* DC Comics, 2016. ☁
- Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen.* DC Comics, 1995. ☺
- Daniel Clowes. *Ghost World.* 4th edition. Fantagraphic Books, 2015. ☁

Film and Television (you don't have to buy these: the cartoons are on YouTube)
- Max and Dave Fleischer's 1940's *Superman* cartoons [5 out of 17]
- Ron Mann's *Comic Book Confidential* (1988) [clip]
- *Spider-Man* cartoon (1967), *Spider-Man* (2002) [clips]
- Bryan Singer's *X-Men* (2000) and *X-2* (2003) [clips]
- Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989), *Batman Returns* (1992) [clips]
- *Batman* (1989), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) [clips]
- Time Permitting: Terry Zwigoff's *Ghost World* (2001)
- Time Permitting: Netflix's *Daredevil, The Punisher,* Amazon's *The Boys* [clips]

Workload
- **Class Participation**: 10% (with report option: see below)
- **Reports** (one before break, one after): 15% each, 30% total
- **Essay** (9-10 pages, due in last class, no extensions) OR your original comic book (8-12pp) with 2-page commentary: 30%
- **Final Exam** (2.5 hours): 30%

Course Schedule (Numbers are units, not weeks. Some material may be cut if we get behind. 📖 Courseware, 🖥 Owl or DCM.)

1. Up, Up and Away! Superman and the Birth of Comic Books
- **History:** Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation,* Chapter 1 (on 1933-1941). Comic Book eras.
- **Video:** Max and Dave Fleischer/Famous Studios *Superman* cartoon shorts (5 out of 17).
- **Theory:** 📖 Jeffrey S. Lang & Patrick Trimble, "Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow? An Examination of the American Monomyth and the Comic Book Superhero," *Journal of Popular Culture (JPC)* 22.3 (1988): 157-173 (courseware).
- McCloud Chapter 1 – Defining Comics.

2. Comic Books as Propaganda in the Golden and Atomic Ages
- **History:** Wright Chapters 2, 3, 5 (pp. 109-134).
- **Comics:** 🖥 Sheena in *Jumbo Comics:* "Dancing Skeletons", "Vandals of the Veldt", *Jumbo* #79, 107. *Atomic War!* #1: "Sneak Attack".
- **Theory:** 📖 Max J. Skidmore & Joey Skidmore, "More Than Mere Fantasy: Political Themes in Contemporary Comic Books," *JPC* 17.1 (1983): 83-92.
- McCloud Chapter 2 – The Vocabulary of Comics.

3. The Seduction of the Innocent!
- **History:** Wright Chapters 4, 5 (pp. 135-153), 6.
- 📖 Frederic Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent,* Chapter 1, pp. 1-16, Chapter 4, pp. 83-118, Chapter 7, pp. 173-193, pictures (courseware).
- **Comics:** 📖 Pre-Code Horror: "The Brain-Bats of Venus", "Nightmare World", "Tag, You're It", "Vampires? Don't Make Me Laugh!", "The Body Maker", "The Wall of Flesh", *Underworld Crime* #7.
- 📖 EC Comics: "Made of the Future", "The Maidens Cried", "They'll Be Some Changes Made", "The People's Choice", *Weird Science* # 5/10/14/16; "Judgment Day"; "Hate", *Shock SuspenStories* #5.
- **Video:** Clip from *Comic Book Confidential* (1988) on Wertham.
- **Theory:** McCloud Chapter 3 – Blood in the Gutter (transitions).

4. Spider-Man & the Marvel Silver Age
- **History:** Wright Chapters 7, 8 (pp. 226-245) (summary of the Hulk, FF, Thor, Iron Man, etc.)
- **Comics:** Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *Amazing Fantasy* #15; *The Amazing Spider-Man,* #1, 3, 4, 6, 9, 17, 18 (various sources: *Marvel Masterworks: Amazing Spider-Man V1,* online).
- **Video:** *Spider-Man* movie (2002), clips. *The Avengers* (2012), trailer.
- **Theory:** 📖 Donald Palumbo, "The Marvel Comics Group's Spider-Man is an Existentialist Super-Hero; or 'Life Has No Meaning Without My Latest Marvels!' ", *JPC* 17.2 (1983): 67-87.
- 📖 Niall Richardson, "The Gospel According to *Spider-Man," JPC* 37.4 (2004): 694-703.
- McCloud Chapter 4 - Time Frames.

5. The X-Men & the Bronze Age Superhero
- **History:** Wright Chapters 8 (pp. 245-253), 9 (pp. 254-266).
- **Comics:** 📖 Selected pages from *X-Men* issues #57-59 (Sentinels, Neal Adams art) (1969).
- John Byrne and Chris Claremont, "The Dark Phoenix Saga," *X-Men* #129-137 (1980/2006).
- **Video:** *X-Men* (2000) and *X-2* (2003) movies, clips.

- **Theory:** 📖 John M. Trushell, "American Dreams of Mutants: The X-Men, 'Pulp' Fiction, Science Fiction, and Superheroes," *JPC* 38.1 (2004): 149-168.
- McCloud Chapter 5 – Living in Line.

6. Batman Dialectic: The Dark Knight as Proto-Fascist Plutocrat or Populist Avenger
- **History:** Wright Chapter 9 (pp. 266-281), Epilogue. The Platinum Burst and Chrome Age.
- **Comic:** Frank Miller, *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986 graphic novel).
- **Video:** Clips - *Batman, Batman Returns, Batman Begins, The Dark Knight, The Dark Knight Rises.*
- **Theory:** 📖 Michael Brody, "Batman: Psychic Trauma and its Solution," *JPC* 28.4 (1995): 171-178.
- On *Dark Knight Returns:* short articles by Jordan Zakarin, Catherine Shoard, Steve Lafleur.
- McCloud Chapter 6 – Show and Tell.

7. Watchmen: The Graphic Novel & Postmodern Legitimacy
- **Comic:** Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (1986 graphic novel).
- **Theory:** 📖 Matthew Wolf-Meyer, "The World Oxymandias Made: Utopias in the Superhero Comic, Subculture, and the Conservation of Difference," *JPC* 36.3 (2003): 497-517.
- **Comics:** 📖 Jhonen Vasquez, "Meanwhiles" (3), *Squee!,* 1998.
- **History:** The Steel Age. McCloud Chapter 7 – The Six Steps.

8. The Ghost World of Everyday Life (if we have time)
- **Comics:** 📖 "I Tried to Buy Love – With Kisses", *T-A Romances* #16.
- 📖 Kevin Huizenga, "Time Traveling," "The Litterer," *Ganges,* 2006.
- 📖 Jhonen Vasquez, "Wobbly Headed Bob" (2), *Squee!,* 1998.
- Daniel Clowes, *Ghost World* (graphic novel).
- **Video:** *Ghost World* movie (2000), clips.
- McCloud Chapter 8 – A Word about Color.

9. The Gritty Realism of TV Superheroes (if we have time)
- **Television:** 📖 Clips from the recent TV series *Daredevil, Jessica Jones, The Punisher, The Boys.* We'll focus on *Daredevil* season 2 and *The Boys* season 1.
- McCloud Chapter 9 – Putting it All Together.

Participation: I'll keep track of your participation in each class then use the following marks schema:

- **0:** You never participate OR I have no idea who you are OR you miss half or more of the classes OR play video games, or text on your cell phone during class.
- **1-2:** I know who you are AND you participated 2-3 times OR you missed 5+ classes but participated regularly.
- **3-4:** You attend most classes AND participate 4-6 times OR missed 4+ classes but participated regularly
- **5-6:** You attended most classes AND participate meaningfully in at least half of them.
- **7-8:** You say something meaningful in *every* class but one or two and know the texts.
- **9-10:** You *always* participate meaningfully, skipped *at most* one class, show clear evidence that you know the readings, and aren't afraid to critique your classmates. You're a superhero of MIT!
- For mark ranges your actual grade will be based on the frequency and quality of your participation. A high premium will be placed on **knowledge of the texts** and willingness to **engage with key issues** (even if your fellow students disagree with you!), while uninformed opinions will be lightly regarded.

The Digital Zombie Apocalypse! To encourage students to pay attention, take their studies seriously and show respect to the lecturer, I reserve the right to deduct a **1% penalty** from your **participation grade** each time you are seen using your cell phone, social networking web sites or playing video games during lecture. No **warning** or **notification** will be given of this penalty. This penalty will be applied to your **report grade** if you chose that option instead. Multi-tasking is a myth: *please* turn your gadgets off for 45 minutes during lecture. Don't be a digital zombie!

Essays

Write a 9-10 page essay on one of the following topics. Worth 30%. Due April 8 in class, no extensions. Essays must be printed off, not e-mailed. You cannot write an essay on a topic that's similar to one of your reports. Read my essay-writing hints at http://publish.uwo.ca/~dmann, and make sure you take some sort of position in your papers. Include a bibliography. I prefer MLA citation style. Late penalty = 2% per day from when it's either stamped by a secretary or I get it, no excuses please! You may use the *third report option* to reduce the length of the essay to 5-7 pages and its value to 20%.

Alternative to standard-length essay: draw and write your own 8-12 page comic book with an original story and characters, adding a 2-page commentary explaining your influences and goals in creating it that cites McCloud and other course readings. You must hand in the original art plus a photocopy to avoid problems with plagiarism. You should discuss your comic a bit with me before forging ahead.

1. Is Superman a mythic hero or merely a comic-book fantasy for children? How is his character related to the social and political circumstances in American society when he was created?

2. Were World War II comic books purely and simply racist and xenophobic, or to a degree a legitimate part of the Western democracies' battle against fascism and Japanese imperialism?

3. Using a selection of pre-Code horror or crime comics or Frank Miller's *Sin City,* evaluation Wertham's argument that these genres seduce the innocent with excessive sex and violence.

4. Are the jungle comics of 1940-1955 imperialist, racist and sexist, as William Savage and Bradford Wright claim? Focus on 2 or 3 jungle queens.

5. Working with a representative sample of at least ten scifi or horror stories of the early 1950s, can we say that a fear of ideological subversion of American life is their major theme?

6. Was Spider-Man a new type of superhero? How did he and the other Silver Age Marvel heroes reflect a greater social and political awareness than DC characters of the same period?

7. What is the cultural and sociological significance of the X-Men series? What political messages can one find in the comic books and the movies? Include at least one major X-Men continuing story e.g. *The Dark Phoenix Saga, Days of Future Past* or Morrison's *New X-Men* run.

8. Compare the Batman in Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* to either that in Tim Burton's 1989 and 1992 films or Christopher Nolan's 2005 and 2008 films in terms of each Batman's response to psychic trauma.

9. Compare Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* to at least three of the 1989, 1992, 2005, 2008 and 2012 Batman films: is Batman a proto-fascist or a populist avenger?

10. How is *Watchmen* a deconstruction of the superhero genre? What messages do Moore and Gibbons want to tell us about the history of superhero comics in the book?

11. Who is the hero of *Watchmen?* What is his or her moral and political philosophy? Explain why.

12. Does Enid's search for identity in *Ghost World* utterly fail? Why or why not? Does this search imply a critical attitude toward consumerism?

13. Should the state censor the sexuality seen in fantasy and adventure comics like *Belladonna, Lady Death, Tomb Raider, Witchblade* and/or *Danger Girl* if they objectify women's bodies? Does the same rule apply to male bodies?

14. Is McCloud right that comics are sequential art? Or are they merely a form of mass entertainment geared at the youth marketplace with the occasional pretension to high art? Use several comics series to prove your point either way.

15. Compare the art of two of the following artists in terms of McCloud's ideas of about iconography, emotional expression, transitions and time: Steve Ditko, Jack Kirby, Neal Adams, Jim Steranko, John Byrne, Frank Miller, Dave Gibbons, Darick Robertson, John Cassaday. Include examples.

16. Discuss the work of Jhonen Vasquez, Warren Ellis *(Planetary, Black Summer),* Garth Ennis *(The Boys)* or Jimmie Robinson *(Bomb Queen)* as a critique of superhero comics and/or fandom in the Silver, Bronze or Chrome Ages. Can we still take superheroes seriously as paragons of moral virtue?

17. Are the Marvel Netflix series the last word in the realistic depiction of superheroes (to date)? Focus on two of *Daredevil, Jessica Jones, Luke Cage, The Punisher, The Defenders.* Watch at least 8 episodes.

18. Write a screenplay on the following topic. Three of the following characters from recent Marvel and Amazon series meet in a cafe in Hell's Kitchen in NYC. They debate the following question: "Why do I fight crime?" Your choices: Matt Murdoch, Jessica Jones, Luke Cage, Frank Castle, Danny Rand, the Homelander, A-Train, Billy Butcher, Starlight. See my screenplay sample on Owl for formatting. You may include a fourth character from this list, and/or an ancillary character such as Foggy Nelson, Karen Page, Misty Knight, Colleen Wing, Hughie Campbell or Madelyn Stillwell.

Reports: Under normal circumstances, students will be expected to write **two** reports, one before the February break, one after, each about four pages in length. These should be formatted as short essays that include a bibliography and proper citations: I prefer MLA style. I'll announce the details of each topic on Owl, including individual deadlines. There will be four topics posted before the break, five or six after it. The first topic in each half of the course will be graded more leniently; the last one more strictly. Late penalty = 5% per day from when I get it (you have to print it off, but can send me a PDF as a marker).

You absolutely must show you've read **the course readings** listed in the topic or face losing at least a full grade level. Also use proofreading and technology to reduce language errors. Most topics will refer to a comic/film AND a historical/theoretical reading. Some will be screenplays or diaries. For screenplays, don't use Courier font: single-space speeches and scene descriptions, leaving spaces between these.

Report #1 **The Man of Steel** (see Owl for due dates and further topics): Write a review of the Fleisher/ Famous Studios Superman cartoons: are they insidious American propaganda, or mostly harmless youth-orientated entertainment? You may cover ones we didn't watch. These are widely available online. Required readings: Wright chapters 1 & 2 (the sections on Superman and war propaganda), Lang & Trimble.

Third Report Option: You may, but don't have to, write a third report. It can be used to (a) replace your participation grade or (b) reduce the length of your final essay to 5-7 pages and its value to 20%. You may pick any topic other than the ones you wrote regular reports on. Clearly indicate what it's for.

Exam: The exam will cover all material in the course, so it's **very important** you have a good set of lecture notes to study from (i.e. not just the Power Point notes in the courseware), and that you at least try to keep up with the readings. About three-quarters of its grade will be based on essays.

Bibliography

Benton, Mike. *The Comic Book in America.* Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1993. Contains a detailed year-by-year analysis from the Golden Age to the early 90s.

Goulart, Ron. *Comic Book Culture: An Illustrated History.* Portland: Collectors Press, 2000. Features color covers and a history of the Golden Age.

Daniels, Les. *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics.* NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1991. Detailed analysis of the modern Marvel universe.

DeFalco, Tom et al. *Marvel Chronicle: A Year by Year History.* DK Adult, 2008. A massive in depth history of all the major heroes, villains, and story lines.

McCloud, Scott. *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology are Revolutionizing an Art Form.* Perennial, 2000. McCloud's follow up to his classic, focuses more on the industry itself.

Overstreet, Robert M. *Official Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide.* New York: House of Collectibles, every year. Full of useful information, including essays on the history of comic books.

Morris, Tom ed. *Superheroes and Philosophy.* Chicago: Open Court, 2005. Essays on the moral and political dilemmas of comic book superheroes.

Mann, Douglas. *Great Power and Great Responsibility: The Philosophical Politics of Comics.* Hamilton: Wolsak and Wynn, 2015. Essays on select series, geekdom.

Grand Comic Book Database (very comprehensive, best Internet resource on comics): www.comics.org.

The Comic Book Database (flexible search categories, less comprehensive than above): www.comicbookdb.com.

The Comic Vine (combination news site, data base and wiki with articles on major characters and story lines): www.comicvine.com

The Digital Comics Museum (Golden Age public domain downloads, very comprehensive, highly recommended): digitalcomicmuseum.com/index.php

Comic Book Plus (more public domain comics): www.comicbookplus.com

Annotated Watchmen website: www.capnwacky.com/rj/watchmen/chapter1.html

Company sites: www.marvel.com, www.dccomics.com, www.darkhorse.com, www.imagecomics.com, www.avatarpress.com, www.dynamite.com/htmlfiles.

Learning Outcomes

Students who attend class and do the readings will come out of this course with a rigorous knowledge of the history of English-language comics from the 1930s until the end of the century, and of how these comics acted as a social mirror of major social and political events like the Depression, World War II, the Cold War, the Psychedelic Sixties, conservatism in the 80s, and disenchantment and alienation in the 90s. They will also learn not a little history along the way. Second, they will learn the basics of the aesthetic mechanics of how comics are structured from Scott McCloud's book and numerous examples. This will take on some practical DIY training if they choose to produce their own comic. Third, it will encourage students to appreciate a form of popular art that most people only encounter second-hand through superhero films, and to understand the rich social, political and philosophical themes in that art form. In short, it will make them comics literate.

Policies and Notes (please read these over)

Class Attendance: Announcements having to do with the course will be given during lecture. You'll be tested on the lecture materials, videos, readings, and class discussions. It's up to you to make sure you keep up to date on such things by attending class: don't expect any extra notes to be sent to you by e-mail to cover missed classes. Note that the Power Points notes online are *not* a textbook!
I consider **cell-phone use, video-game playing and social media surfing** during class to be rude: expect a zero for participation if I see you doing this. Remember that the Law of Karma applies to you too!

Comic Books Resources: Graphic novels and book-length collections can be ordered on Amazon.ca or from Chapters for reasonable prices. Also try Heroes at 186 Dundas Street (a veritable supermarket of geek culture), LA Mood at 350 Richmond, and City Lights Books at 356 Richmond. In east London visit Worlds Away at 664 Dundas. You're sure to find some of the main course texts in their sales bins if you look hard enough. Also consider sharing texts.

For checking covers, publication dates, writer and artist credits, www.comics.org is excellent. For downloading free and legal copies of comics from the Golden and Atomic Ages, try the Digital Comics Museum (digitalcomicmuseum.com) or Comic Book Plus (www.comicbookplus.com). Most of the scifi, horror, jungle and crime comics from this period are no longer in print but still well worth reading.

E-Mails: I would like to conduct as much of class business as possible in person to avoid misunderstandings and electronic message overload. Please don't email me complex questions about course content or your assignments: it's far more *efficient* for both of us if you come to speak to me in person to avoid e-mail exchanges that last several days without answering fully your questions (e-mail me to set up the meeting). Short questions about the course, a recommendation of interesting comics, or a follow-up discussion of issues raised in the lecture are, however, *entirely fine.* I will delete with Flash-speed complaints concerning **grades** and requests for extensions - present the former in person!

The same **standards of civility** apply to electronic communication as apply to personal conversations or letters. If I receive a rude or impolite e-mail I will blacklist your e-mail address. Don't rely on e-mail for any communication you think is important: thoughtless e-mails lead to bad feelings, though kind words and reading suggestions are welcome!