

## Comics and Animation

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We must seek out such artists as have the talent to pursue the beautiful and the graceful in their work, in order that our young men shall be benefited from all sides like those who live in a healthy place, whence something from these beautiful works will strike their eyes and ears like a breeze that brings health from salubrious places, and lead them unawares from childhood to love of, resemblance to, and harmony with, the beauty of reason. Plato, *The Republic*

Perhaps it might have seemed to him that I was dissociating myself from the view that you destroyed an entire world when you destroyed yourself. As if I would threaten to destroy a world -- I who lived to see the phenomena, who believe that the heart of things is shown in the surface of those things. I always said -- in answering Ravelstein's question 'What do you imagine death will be like?' -- 'The pictures will stop'. Meaning, again, that in the surface of things you saw the heart of things. Saul Bellow, *Ravelstein*

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This course will place the cartoon arts -- comic books, comic strips, editorial cartoons and animation -- in an explicitly critical and scholarly framework. More specifically, the course will emphasize the *historical*, *formal*, *aesthetic*, and *cultural* aspects of comics and animation.

Although comics and animation are ubiquitous features of the world we live in, they attract relatively little attention from intellectuals or scholars. The term "comic book" is routinely used as a term of abuse by book and film critics, and animation hardly fares any better. Whenever a distinction is drawn between high and low forms of art, comics and animation are found at the low end of the spectrum. And yet many of us will intuitively appreciate that artists working in these media have been capable of extraordinary feats. To what extent, then, can we identify possibilities and limitations inherent in the comics and animation media? Furthermore, how have historians and social critics approached the study of comics and animation?

Each week we will consider different aspects of comics and animation, from Chuck Jones and Plastic Man to visual cognition and the importance of closure. By the end of the course we will have encountered a variety of perspectives on visual popular culture, as well as many fascinating popular culture artifacts. Readings from scholarly journals and monographs will be supplemented by video screenings and guest speaker presentations.

There are three main texts for this course: (a) the campus course pack; (b) Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993); and (c) Stefan Kanfer's

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*Serious Business: The Art and Commerce of Animation in America from Betty Boop to 'Toy Story' (1997).*

Students are expected to attend all classes and complete the assigned reading. Class attendance and participation are essential and will be taken into account in determining your final grade. Grades will be calculated as follows: attendance and participation (10%); cartoon diary (20%); comparative paper (20%); web-site resource guide (20%); final examination (30%).

The cartoon diary is a revised version of a weekly diary that discusses the films shown in class. The diary can be relatively informal in nature but should follow standard college English and provide insights into each film. The comparative paper considers two or more comics that have been pre-approved by the instructor. At least one of the comics should be issued by an alternative publisher, such as Drawn and Quarterly, Top Shelf or Fantagraphics. The cartoon diary and the comparative paper are both due on the last day of class. The final exam will be in-class, on the last day of class.

The web-site resource guide should provide an annotated guide to ten or more comics and/or animation-related web-sites. Students are encouraged to be creative and adventuresome in completing this assignment. This assignment is due June 26<sup>th</sup>.

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## Course Outline

June 3 Introductory lecture

June 5 Disney animation; Art Spiegelman, "Forms Stretched to Their Limits"; Jenni Scott (*Comics Forum*)

June 10 Tex Avery animation; Richard Gregory, "Visions of Vision," "Light," and "Realities of Art"; David Carr, "Rise of the Visual Puts Words on the Defensive"

June 12 Chuck Jones animation; Hugh Kenner, "A Flurry of Drawings," "Life in a Comma Factory"; Norman Klein, "How Money Talks in Cartoons"

June 17 Alex Robinson (*Box Office Poison*); Thierry Groensteen, "Why are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimation?"; Robert Harvey, "The Aesthetics of the Comics"

June 19 Jules Feiffer, "The Great Comic Book Heroes"; Paul Warshow, "Paul, the Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham"; Andy Medhurt, "Batman, Deviance and Camp"

June 23<sup>rd</sup> 11 am ? 7 pm MOCCA Festival, Puck Building (293 Lafayette St)

June 24 Bart Beaty (*Comics Journal*) on European comics; Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, chapters one to three

June 26 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, chapters four to eight

July 1 Stefan Kanfer, *Serious Business*, chapters one to five

July 3 Film showing

July 8 Stefan Kanfer, *Serious Business*, chapters six to ten; Daniel Clowes, *Eightball 22*

July 10 Final examination