Comics in American Culture

Spring 2003 (B931)
Prof. Toupance

Course Description:

An historical survey of American comic art and artists from the 1950's to the 1990's. The course is primarily concerned with how comics has developed and matured as a distinctively American art form, reflecting and commenting on post-W.W. II American society in a variety of narrative forms: comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels. But not simply reflecting American culture, comics themselves have often been at the center of debates about the influence of media in shaping the national character. Equally important to the course are issues of content versus social regulation (which structured the discourse of the Congressional debates concerning juvenile delinquency during the 1950's) and issues involving the Comics Code Authority, which still governs the content of mainstream comics today. Countercultural comics of the 1960's and 1970's as well as alternative comics of the 1980's and 1990's round out our investigation of comics in American culture by helping us to understand comics as a system of cultural representations.

Course Objectives:

- Students will be able to discuss the major developments in the history of American comics since the 1950's.
- Students will understand comics as a system that has been structured by three main ideological/cultural content divisions or publishing groupings: mainstream, underground, and alternative.
- Students will be able to read (i.e. decode semiotically) and analyze critically the major narrative forms of comic art: comic strips, comic books and graphic novels.

Texts:

Watterson, The Tenth Anniversary Calvin and Hobbes.
Scott McCloud, Understanding Comics
DC Comics: Superman in the Sixties.
Marvel: Fantastic Firsts.
Robert Crumb, The Complete Crumb Comics, Vol. 7
Frank Miller, The Dark Knight Returns.
Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, Watchmen.
Art Spiegelman, Maus.
Daniel Clowes, Ghost World.
Plus essays on narrative semiotics by Umberto Eco, R. C. Harvey, Martin Barker and others on ERROL.

Requirements:
Mid-term and Final Exam. Two papers, each a minimum of five double-spaced pages (approx. 1500 words). The first paper will analyze (decode) intensively a short text of sequential art. The second paper may focus on the career of an artist, a title (i.e. Spider-man), a limited series, a graphic novel, the editorial point of view of an entire company (self-published, independent, or companies such as Marvel or DC), or artistic and graphic techniques or processes in comic art. Papers should focus on what the comic in question tells us about American culture/society.

Grading: Papers and exams each count for 25% of your grade. Grading scale: A=100-95, A- =94-90; B+ = 86-89, B= 85, B- = 80-84; C+ = 76-79, C=75, C- =70-74; D+ = 66-69, D=65, D- = 64-60; F = 59 or below.

Statement on objectionable or offensive materials

Some, indeed many, of the works we will read and discuss in this course use language, describe events or actions, or take positions which you may find personally offensive; some of the authors may present ideas that you may find dogmatic or ideological. As a form of communication, comics are often humorous and satirical. Even when they are being serious, comics tend towards parody, caricature, and exaggerated cartoon representations of our political, social, and sexual lives. If you do not wish to risk being offended, or if you are otherwise concerned, you may not wish to take this course.

Be especially careful of expecting authors or characters to know what you know, or to think, believe, or act as you do. I will be discussing the historical and cultural contexts for works and characters in each part of this course, but that will only be useful if you are willing to avoid inappropriately imposing standards and values on works. In the case of underground and some alternative comics, for instance, you will also need to remember that the social norms of particular countercultural or subcultural groups in earlier times may not be those of mainstream groups today or of different groups at the time when these comics were produced. Authors and characters may think, believe, act, or speak in ways -- especially in the area of sexuality -- that are quite different from you.

In any case, if you are concerned about your personal reaction to the course materials, some of which contain sexually explicit images and/ or slang and profanity, or the possible evolution of class lectures, please confer with me during the first week of class. I do not promote the use of offensive language or call needless attention to offensive works or passages (even those that deliberately set out to offend "mainstream" American values as part of their aesthetic intention), but I expect to conduct an open and candid discussion of the graphic materials and ideas we are studying. Our goal is intellectual and critical understanding -- not condemnation -- of a unique American art form.

Lecture Topics and Assigned Readings (for a twenty-one hour television course)
Introduction to the Course
One Hour (Tape #1)

Unit One.  How to Read a Comic/Comics as an Art Form

Readings:

Watterson, *The Tenth Anniversary Calvin and Hobbes.*
Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*
Robert C. Harvey, "The Aesthetics of the Comic Strip" (on ERROL; see below
Web Resources)
Chatman, *Introduction to Story and Discourse*

Five Hours (Tapes #2-6)

During this part of the course, students familiarize themselves with the
critical vocabulary of sequential art by reading selections from criticism
and theory. They learn the basics of how comics use signs both verbal and
visual to communicate narrative meanings (comics are primarily a narrative
art form). They examine semiotic analysis of narrative and learn the
formalist distinction between story and plot (discourse). From Scott McCloud
and Will Eisner they will learn the various ways in which comics represent
time and temporal processes by spatializing them. By reading selections from
R. C. Harvey's *The Art of the Funnies* and Scott McCloud's *Understanding
Comics*, they will learn how to decode a visual narrative, discovering its
denotative and connotative codes; from Eco's readings of Superman they will
learn how to situate a visual narrative in the context of social relations
and processes. Students begin to analyze short narrative forms such as comic
strips, and to examine political cartoons for social content and political
references to American culture as well as literary figuration
(metaphor/symbol). The techniques of humor and joke structures are also
examined. Students will read one collection of comic strips, such as a
Calvin and Hobbes collection. Also discussed are the differences between
comic strips and comic books in terms of audience (adults versus children
and adolescents). After W.W.II, American audiences saw strips as addressing
the entire family whereas comic books were viewed as an inartistic, even
dangerous product directed at children. The history of this aesthetics of
reception is told in the next section.

Unit Two.  The Mainstream Comic Book

Readings:

Martin Barker, "Lucy's Story" (on ERROL)
Nyberg, Association of Comics Magazine Publishers Comics Code (on ERROL)
Electronic readings on the Comics Code:
http://www.sp.uconn.edu/~epk93002/ComicsScholarship/c-crit.html
http://www.cbldf.org/history.shtml
http://www.sigma.net/comichistory/kefauver.html
*SUPERMAN in the Sixties*
Umberto Eco, "The Myth of Superman" (on ERROL)
Marvel: *Fantastic Firsts*.

Note: Unless otherwise indicated, you are to read the entire book during these lectures; readings are not keyed to specific lectures, but you should be able to find particular stories discussed in the lectures on your own.

**Five Hours (Tapes# 7-11)**

During these lectures students learn to analyze narratives beyond the limited range of the strip. They learn to read the comic book as an aesthetic object produced for their entertainment, but also to examine the social codes under which the bulk of these narratives are now produced (i.e. the Comics Code Authority). Students here begin to pick up a history of comic books since the 1950’s, when the Senate Hearings on Juvenile Delinquency implicated crime and horror comics as a factor affecting social deviance. EC comics -- a company that was destroyed as a result of the hearings -- will be taken as a model of a certain aesthetics the short story form (horror) based on formulas and reader expectations which were largely ignored by the Hearings. Students will also read about the comics campaign in Great Britain (Barker’s A Haunt of Fears) which was based on our own and which resulted in legislation regulating comic books.

The primary emphasis however will be on the language and idiom of superheroes as a modern American myth. Students during these lectures will pick up more of the history of the comic book during the Silver Age (post-1950 Code supervised). The lectures survey the development of both the DC (Superman and Batman) and the Marvel (Spiderman) Universes as well as independents. We examine how new narrative structures are created as these universes expand and try to interlock various narrative worlds. We will discuss superheroes as a kind of modern folklore. Students will read a long narrative sequence in continuity or a limited series from one of these narrative universes and strive to understand the superhero genre as providing the most familiar and lasting type of comic book character. Students will be asked to consider the ways in which a story may be woven into the on-going continuity of a narrative universe. Students will learn that a story of this sort may take place over the course of several months, affecting many titles. It may be complexly intertextual. These story may attain complex temporal structures (Éco on "The Myth of Superman"). But they do not yet have novelistic structure.

Midterm Exam/First Paper Due: Sunday, March 9, Cavanaugh 229, 1:00-3:00 PM.

**Unit Three. Underground and Alternative Comics**

Readings:

Art Spiegelman, *Maus*.
Daniel Clowes, *Ghost World*.

Five Hours (Tapes# 12-16)

This unit focuses on comics published outside the code, for adults. We will
discuss "underground" comics produced in the United States from 1965 to 1975, decoding them for their "countercultural" meanings that take on specifically political and ideological forms in the context of protest against mainstream American culture. The work of Robert Crumb is a focus of this section. Alternative (i.e. "subcultural,") comics produced in the late 1970's and early 1980's will also be discussed. Here the work of Art Spiegelman - who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992 - is also given a special scrutiny. Students learn how these comics helped to expand the artistic range of the comics medium by confronting the reality of events like the Holocaust. We also consider the subcultural function of such graphic magazines such as RAW and Weirdo in presenting new women artists and alternative visions of America.

Unit Four. The New Mainstream

Readings:

Frank Miller, The Dark Knight Returns. 
Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, Watchmen. 
Five Hours (Tapes# 17-21)

The concluding unit will explore new directions in comic art during the eighties and nineties, including the developments of separate lines of comics -- DC's Vertigo, for instance -- which have captured the young adult audience with more mature content by deliberately publishing outside the code. The rise of independently published comics such as Todd McFarlane's Spawn will be discussed. In these lectures, students are expected to bring to bear everything they have learned about the social semiotics of comic book heroes to their reading of a graphic novel. Extensive analysis of both Frank Miller's The Dark Knight Returns and Moore and Gibbons' Watchmen will be provided so that students can distinguish a narrative which really does employ novelistic structures for political and ideological purposes and one that does not. These two books ushered in the term "graphic novel", and showed that comics can be just as complex as a mainstream modernist political novel. Does the superhero genre have a basis in authoritarian political thought (i.e. even fascism)? Students will see how new social and political content demands new forms of art that enact criticism of the status quo.

Final Exam/Final Paper Due: Sunday, April 27, Cavanaugh Hall 229, 1:00-3:00 PM.

Bibliography of Sources Used in the Preparation of L384


Kennedy, Jay. The Official Underground and Newave Comix Price Guide.

Journals
Electronic Resources

http://www.sp.uconn.edu/~epk93002/ComicsScholarship/c-crit.html
http://www.cbldf.org/history.shtml
http://www.sigma.net/comichistory/kefauver.html
http://www.darkknight.ca/storylines/tdkr.html
http://raven.ubalt.edu/staff/moulthrop/hypertexts/wm/AN/AN_1.htm
http://www.msu.edu/~whitero2/watchmen.html#part11
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