

Serious Comics: Graphic Narratives and History

KHC RH 101 A1

Spring 2011

Tuesday/Thursday

3:00Pm - 4:30 PM

Room: KHC 107

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Course Description

This course explores the use of long-form comics (also known as graphic narrative) to represent devastating events in history. Although students are encouraged to read broadly in the rapidly expanding comics field, assigned texts will include book-length works that depict (in words and images) the events that we have come to know as the Holocaust, Hiroshima, the Iranian Revolution, the Palestinian Conflict, and 9/11. In particular, we will ask why comics, a form traditionally associated with childish or unserious content, is increasingly used to depict traumatic history.

We will begin by investigating the nature and grammar of comics: How do comics work? What techniques and strategies do comic-book artists use to produce meaning? In what ways do colors, shapes, panels, borders, gutters, perspective, page-layout, and speech bubbles influence content? How do comic-book artists encourage forward and backward reading? What is the role of the reader in constructing meaning from these verbal and visual texts? What are the fundamental differences between reading a comic (a series of “still” shots) and watching a film?

As students become increasingly sophisticated readers of comics, we will turn to the questions underlying the course: In what ways do comics lend themselves to the representation of what Art Spiegelman calls “the faultline between Personal History and World History”? That is, how do serious comics negotiate the relationship between individual and collective experiences of trauma? In what ways, and to what effect, do the texts juxtapose personal memory and public narrative? Likewise, given the frequent inclusion in nonfiction comics of documentary evidence (actual photographs, letters, and diagrams), what is the relationship in these works between history and art? Finally, how can we explain the recent surge in the production of, and academic interest in, serious comics? Is the contemporary interest in comics connected to the rise of new digital media? Are comics, as former [New York Times Book Review](#) editor Charles McGrath suggests, “what novels used to be—an accessible, vernacular form with mass appeal”?

Course Requirements

Scholarship on comics is a relatively recent phenomenon. Though young, the field is growing rapidly. As active participants in this class, you are poised to enter and influence these early conversations. Indeed, the energy and focus that you bring to the course readings and discussions will be the difference between “taking a class” and contributing to an emerging field.

Grading

In addition to your active participation in class, the course requires four short essays, a longer research project (10-12 pages), and a final in-class presentation. The shorter essays will focus on close reading and analysis of primary texts, with reference to secondary source material. The longer paper will involve research in an area of your choosing, based on the work that we have done in the course. A detailed proposal including a bibliography and list of key questions will be due by the midterm; rough drafts will be due two weeks before the end of the term; final drafts will be due on the last day of class. Any student interested in creating his or her own graphic narrative, with accompanying 5-7 page discussion and analysis, is invited to do so in lieu of a traditional research paper.

Readings

Graphic Narratives (BU Barnes and Noble and on reserve at Mugar) Art Spiegelman, Maus, vols. 1-2

Gusta and Martin Lemelman, Mendel's Daughter

Keiji Nakazawa, Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima, vols. 1-2

Marjane Satrapi, Persepolis vols. 1-2

Joe Sacco, Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia, 1992-95

Art Spiegelman, In the Shadow of No Towers

Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon, The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation

Alissa Torres, American Widow

Josh Neufeld, A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge

Comics Theory (BU Barnes and Noble and on reserve at Mugar)

Scott McCloud, Understanding Comics Will Eisner, Comics and Sequential Art Thierry

Groensteen, The System of Comics

On the Rise of Graphic Narrative (in course packet)

Chute, Hillary. "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative." PMLA 123.2 (2008): 452-65.

McGrath, Charles. "Not Funnies." New York Times Magazine. July 11, 2004.

Studies in Word and Image (BU Barnes and Noble and on reserve at Mugar Library) W.J.T.

Mitchell, Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation

James A.W. Heffernan, Cultivating Picturacy: Visual Art and Verbal Interventions

Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography

Susan Sontag, On Photography

Trauma and Visual Representation (in course packet)

Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas, eds., The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory, and Visual Culture

Special Issues/Anthologies on Graphic Narrative (on reserve at Mugar Library)

Graphic Narrative Special Issue. Modern Fiction Studies 52.4 (2006) Graphic Literature Special Issue. World Literature Today 81.2 (2007)

A Comics Studies Reader. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009.

Attendance

Attendance is required.

Academic Conduct

All students are expected to maintain high standards of academic honesty and integrity. It is the responsibility of all students in the Kilachand Honors College to be aware of the Academic Conduct Codes of their respective Colleges and to abide by their provisions. Cases of suspected misconduct will be reported to the appropriate authority.

<http://www.bu.edu/academics/resources/academic-conduct-code/>

Course Outline

I. The Holocaust: Spiegelman and Lemelman

Awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1992, Art Spiegelman's Maus established comics as serious art. Despite the work's extraordinary critical and popular success, the notion of a comic book about the Holocaust remains jarring. Can a work that portrays Jews as mouse-headed and Nazis as cat-headed be serious enough to represent mass killings? Do the cartoon elements of the work undermine its relentless commitment to historical accuracy? In what ways does the work distance the reader from the events portrayed, even as it permits access to deeply private thoughts and experiences?

In comparison to the multi-layered complexity of Maus, Martin Lemelman's graphic memoir Mendel's Daughter seems straightforward: Lemelman transcribes his mother's video-taped memories, adding drawings and photographs. As straightforward as the work appears, how would this graphic memoir of Gusta Lemelman's escape from Nazi persecution have been received in the absence of Maus? In what ways do the works differ, and what conclusions can be drawn about the use of graphic narrative to represent personal and public history, based on these differences?

Supplementary Essays (in course packet)

Brown, Joshua. "Of Mice and Memory." Oral History Review 16.1 (1988): 91-109. DesPres, Terrence. "Holocaust Laughter?" Writing and the Holocaust. Berel Lang, ed. New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988. 216-233.

Doherty, Thomas. "Art Spiegelman's Maus: Graphic Art and the Holocaust." American Literature 68.1 (1996): 69-84. II. Hiroshima: Nakazawa

Keiji Nakazawa's Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima is the semi- autobiographical story of what happens to Nakazawa before, during, and after the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Nakazawa's childhood home. The work is an example of manga (Japanese comics), and as such follows different conventions than the works we have encountered so far. What is the impact of these conventions on the material being presented? In what ways do you think the story would change if it were seen through the eyes (and comics) of a Western artist? What is the relationship between Gen's story (individual testimony) and public narratives of this catastrophe?

Supplementary Essays (in course packet)

Hong, Christine. "Flashforward Democracy: American Exceptionalism and the Atomic Bomb in Barefoot Gen." Comparative Literature Studies 46.1 (2009): 125-155. Szasz, F.M., et al.. "Atomic Heroes and Atomic Monsters: American and Japanese Cartoonists Confront the Onset of the Nuclear Age, 1945-1980. The Historian 69.4 (2007): 782-852.

III. Iranian Revolution: Satrapi

Like Barefoot Gen, Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis presents devastating social and political events through the eyes of a child. The simple, woodcut drawings belie the complexity of the events unfolding around the young Marji. As she notes in her introduction to volume 1, Satrapi intends her memoir of growing up during and in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution to counter stereotypes of Iran as a country composed only of fundamentalism and fanaticism. In the wake of the June, 2009 Iranian election crisis, the work has received new attention, as two Iranians living in Shanghai published Persepolis 2.0: "a mini graphic novel telling the story of the last two weeks in Iran, in the style of Marjane Satrapi"

(<http://www.boingboing.net/2009/06/28/persepolis-20-fan-ar.html>). Why do Satrapi's simple, black-and-white drawings prove politically effective? In what ways does autobiography intersect with history?

Supplementary Readings (in course packet)

Chute, Hillary. "The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis." Women's Studies Quarterly 36: 1-2 (2008): 92-110.

Davis, Rocio G. "A Graphic Self: Comics as Autobiography in Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis." Prose Studies 27:3 (2005): 264-279. IV. The Palestine Conflict: Sacco

In Palestine, Joe Sacco offers readers an example of what has become known as "comics journalism." The work covers a two-month period during the winter of 1991-92, when Sacco traveled throughout the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, talking with Palestinians, taking notes and photographs. Sacco's first-person graphic account includes harrowing images of refugee camps and detailed drawings of Palestinians crowded into tight spaces, telling their stories to the American journalist. Sacco comments: "My idea was not to present an objective book but an honest one." His work raises questions about the differences between comics journalism and print journalism, as well as between journalism and memoir. In what ways are drawings more "honest" than photography? In what ways does a personal narrative undermine the perceived objectivity of reporting? Finally, how should we understand "reporting" in relation to personal experience and history?

Supplementary Reading (in course packet)

Kristian, William. "The Case for Comics Journalism." Columbia Journalism Review 43.6 (2005): 51-55.

V. September 11, 2001: Spiegelman, Torres, Jacobson and Colon

Images of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City were seen around the world. Videotape of the events was played and replayed on television and the internet, while personal and professional photographs were published in newspapers and online. Tightly bound to the visual, the event lends itself to representation through a medium that combines words and images. So far, three comic books have been written on 9/11: Spiegelman's In the Shadow of No Towers, a towering book that juxtaposes ten autobiographical episodes from September 11, 2001 through August, 2003 with seven reproductions of classic comic strips from the early twentieth century; Torres's American Widow, a memoir of the days and months following her husband's death on his second day of work at Cantor Fitzgerald on the 101st floor of the North Tower; and Jacobson and Colon's "graphic adaptation" of The 9/11 Report.

Spiegelman's work speaks to the role of comics in a time of personal, social, and political crisis. His work functions alternately as graphic diary, blistering political attack, and nostalgic tribute to the innocence, wisdom, and persistence of American comics. By contrast, Torres implies that comics is a "still" medium out of which the trauma survivor must ultimately emerge. Finally

Jacobson and Colon, both veterans of the comic-book industry (Harvey Comics, Marvel Comics, and DC Comics), use the techniques of comics to bring the official 9/11 report to life. As we examine each of these works, we will consider the role of the comic-book artist in relation to the making of history.

Supplementary Readings (in course packet)

Chute, Hillary. "Temporality and Seriality in Spiegelman's In the Shadow of No Towers." American Periodicals: A Journal of History, Criticism, and Bibliography 17 (2007): 228-244.

Kristiaan, Versluys. "Art Spiegelman's In the Shadow of No Towers: 9/11 and the Representation of Trauma." Modern Fiction Studies 52.4 (2007): 980-1003.

Clark, Mary Marshall. "The September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project: A First Report." Journal of American History (2002): 569-579. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. Kodak Moments, Flashbulb Memories: Reflections on 9/11." The Drama Review 47.1 (2003): 11-48.