

**Department of English
The Chinese University of Hong Kong**

Course Title: Superheroes in Graphic Novel, Comics and Film

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Room 319, Fung King Hey

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course aims to provide a historical and cultural overview of the genre of superheroes and the Marvel empire. Narratives of superheroes began to circulate in popular culture during the 1930s with the DC comics phenomenon. The visual artistry and matching of illustrations with text and plot produced a uniquely new form of weekly reading material. The development of the DC and Marvel superheroes of the 80s and 90s built on Asian illustrated traditions and forged new relationships between East and West comics and graphics styles. Today, the genre is among the most dominant cultural forms worldwide. This course will introduce you to the comics and graphic novel literary genre and their movie spin-offs. The course will also have a workshop element and seek graphic and illustrated responses from students. Above all, the course will investigate the role of the superhero. Who is this superhero, or rather what is a superhero? Why does the fantasy of an individual with supernatural powers generate such fascination in modern society? These are some of the questions we will explore during this course. The genre's transformations over the last nine decades reflect both political, cultural, and social changes. We will explore a broad variety of different superhero incarnations in both film, texts, and graphic novels. Subjects to be discussed include mythology, genre, science and technology, crime and vigilantism, identity, gender and sexuality as well as transnationalism and geopolitics. Anyone interested in popular culture, animation, DC comics, the graphic novel, fantasy and superheroes are welcome to attend this course.

THE AIM OF THE COURSE

To provide students with the critical tools to understand, analyze and interpret the genre of superheroes and its wider social, political and historical ramifications.

HOW WILL I BE EXPECTED TO APPROACH THE COURSE CONTENT?

You will be expected to:

- Prepare for classes by reading the texts in advance
- Participate in each week's discussion
- Prepare for and complete all assessment tasks in a timely manner

This course will encourage you to:

- Read critically
- Understand the historical context of the works included in the syllabus
- Apply theoretical approaches and concepts to the works included in the syllabus

- Make connections between your own everyday life and themes in the works included in the syllabus
- Expand your own critical perspective, and
- Develop your capacity to provide reflective, well-considered responses to the works discussed during this course

EXPECTED LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- gain an understanding of the historical developments of the genre of superheroes
- gain an understanding of how to approach and read works belonging to the genre of superheroes
- gain an appreciation of the importance, relevance and value of superhero narratives as cultural documents
- produce a well-reasoned essay
- gain hands-on experience of the animation process with an award-winning and Oscar-nominated animation
- company
- gain hands-on experience of key life skills such as interpersonal communication, interaction, problem-solving,
- group collaboration and critical thinking

THE DEPARTMENT'S EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENTS

- Communication with staff and other students, by letter, phone, email, or in discussion, should be conducted with courtesy, consideration and discretion
- The department expects students to read their course outline carefully, to know the name of the tutor and course coordinator, to know the name and number of the course they are doing and to be able to locate the Department office
- Essays and other assessments must be handed in on time, properly presented and free of any plagiarism. Failure to complete and/or submit assessment tasks in a timely manner may result in the automatic award of an "F."

TEACHING STRATEGIES USED AND THEIR RATIONALE

This course is run as a 1 hour and 45 minutes lecture with a complementary 45 minutes tutorial. However, within this time a number of different teaching strategies will be drawn upon in order to introduce, discuss, and consolidate the new thoughts and ideas raised by our study texts.

COURSE MATERIAL

Mandatory Texts:

- Baetens, Jan. 2014. *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press. [excerpt]
- Cocca, Carolyn. 2014. "The Sexier the Outfit, the Fewer Questions Asked": Negotiating the Third Wave of Feminism in Wonder Woman." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 47 (1).

- Dittmer, Jason. 2005. "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95 (3): 626–43.
- Eco, Umberto. 2004. "The Myth of Superman." *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium*. Eds. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. [1972]
- Garrett, Dan. 2014. "Superheroes in Hong Kong's Political Resistance: Icons, Images, and Opposition." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 47 (1).
- Hatfield, Charles, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester, eds. 2013. "Introduction." *The Superhero Reader*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Nama, Adilifu. 2011. *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*. Austin: University of Texas Press. [excerpt]
- Worcester, Kent. 2012. "The Punisher and the Politics of Retributive Justice." *Law Text Culture* 16 (1): 329–52.
- Yockey, Matt. 2012. "Wonder Woman for a Day: Affect, Agency, and Amazons." *Transformative Works and Cultures* vol. 10.
- Selections of graphic novels

Film

- *Superman*. Dir. Richard Donner (1978)
- *Spider-Man*. Dir. Sam Raimi (2002)
- *The Dark Knight*. Dir. Christopher Nolan (2008)
- *The Avengers*. Dir. Joss Whedon (2008)
- *Captain America: The First Avenger*. Dir. Joe Johnston (2011)
- *Wonder Woman*. Dir. Patty Jenkins (2015)
- *Deadpool*. Dir. Tim Miller (2016)

Recommended Reading

- Dalton, Russell W. 2011. *Marvelous Myths: Marvel Superheroes and Everyday Faith*. St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press.
- Denison, Rayna & Mizsei-Ward, Rachel, eds. 2015. *Superheroes on World Screens*. Jackson: The University of Mississippi Press.
- DePaolo, Marc. 2011. *War, Politics and Superheroes*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company.
- Gray II, Richard & Kaklamanidou, Betty, eds. 2011. *The 21st Century Superhero: Essays on Gender, Genre and Globalization in Film*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company.
- Jeffery, Scott. 2016. *The Posthuman Body in Superhero Comics: Human, Superhuman, Transhuman, Post/Human*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lawrence, John Shelton, and Robert Jewitt. 2002. *The Myth of the American Superhero*. New York: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Reynolds, Richard. 1994. *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Robinson, Lillian S. 2004. *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes*. London: Routledge.

There will be a PDF Reader available for this course, which contains all mandatory reading.

Week 1: Introduction, course structure, requirements, major themes

Week 2: DC Comics: its origins, social and political context. The origins of the superhero in ancient folk legends and myths [Ulysses, Cu Chulainn, etc.]

Readings: Extracts from DC Comics, *The Odyssey*, *Irish Myths and Legends*

Week 3: The Graphic Novel: Influence from Japanese Manga and Anime. How American illustrators and writers adapted to the demands of the ‘American Dream’

Readings: Baetens, Jan. *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction*. [excerpt]

Week 4: Political Graphic Novels: *Maus I and II*

Readings: Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*

Week 5: The Changing Role of the Superhero after WWII

Readings: DePaolo, Marc. *War, Politics and Superheroes*. [excerpt]

Week 6: Comics and Illustration Workshop with local illustrator

Week 7: Class test

Week 8: The Representation of Gender in Marvel

Readings: Cocca, Carolyn. “‘The Sexier the Outfit, the Fewer Questions Asked’: Negotiating the Third Wave of Feminism in Wonder Woman.”

Week 9: Marvel and Race: The “Whitewashing” debate in culture and film

Readings: Nama, Adilifu. *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*. [excerpt]

Week 10: Film week: Selections from Marvel and Superhero films

Week 11: The Postmodern Superhero: *Deadpool*

Readings: Hatfield, Charles, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester, eds. “Introduction.” *The Superhero Reader*.

Week 12: Marvel and The Machine: New Technologies and AI in Marvel and the Superhero genre

Readings: Jeffery, Scott. *The Posthuman Body in Superhero Comics: Human, Superhuman, Transhuman, Post/Human*. [excerpt]

Week 13: Conclusion and Course Summary

ASSESSMENT SCHEME

There are four distinct elements to the assessment for this course. Taken together, they are designed to enhance your overall learning experience. That is to say, strong commitment to each assessment task will not only improve your overall knowledge of the subjects discussed, but also your independent research skills, your oral and written communication skills, and

your ability to conceptualize and deliver a sustained argument. The four elements of assessment are:

- Preparation, Attendance, Participation: 20%
- Student Presentation: 10%
- In-class Test: 20%
- Course Essay: 50%

GRADE DESCRIPTION

- Grade A
 - Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes.
- Grade A-
 - Generally outstanding performance on all (or almost all) learning outcomes.
- Grade B
 - Substantial performance on all learning outcomes, OR high performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance.
- Grade C
 - Satisfactory performance on the majority of learning outcomes, possibly with a few weaknesses.
- Grade D
 - Barely satisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes
- Grade F
 - Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements.

CONTACT DETAILS

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ACADEMIC HONESTY AND PLAGIARISM

There are two levels of plagiarism:

- Less than 200 words of unacknowledged material
- More than 200 words of unacknowledged material

Students should note that plagiarism is regarded very seriously as a violation and that the Head of Department will be responsible for administering penalties for plagiarism. In order to increase awareness about plagiarism, CUHK has produced a video about plagiarism. Please take a few minutes to watch it:

http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/clear/tnl/Plagiarism_English.html

HOW DO I KNOW WHETHER OR NOT I HAVE PLAGIARISED?

If you have copied somebody else's words without acknowledgement, even less than 200 words of unacknowledged material, you are guilty of plagiarism. Plagiarism is intellectual theft. *Should you have any queries regarding plagiarism, or the fear that you are committing it, please contact your tutor, lecturer, or Head of Department.*

Please note that every formal essay submitted for evaluation is analysed through VeriGuide, the University's plagiarism and document analysis software. This is done for a number of reasons foremost of which is to ensure that all students are graded fairly. Secondly, VeriGuide is used to maintain the good reputation and prestige of the degree you will earn.

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