

# The Graphic Novel: Redrawing Boundaries & Rewriting Conventions

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## Introduction/Premise:

Graphic novels are complex works of both art and literature that particularly engage with popular culture, and are certainly *not* just for kids anymore. The form of the graphic novel, which developed out of comics, has forced many critics to rethink the position that comics are less complex, less culturally relevant, and of less value than "real" literature. This course takes the graphic novel as its object of study: we will examine the history from which it develops, its formal construction, its themes, and its concerns. However, the course also uses graphic novels as a way to ask questions about the ways literature and art can represent, affect, and explain the histories and culture that produces them. We will work through many themes that are essential to graphic novels (gender, sexualities, race, class, history, high and low culture, alienation, violence) and conclude with a study of the recent upswell in filmic adaptations of graphic novels.

## Objectives:

We will engage with every element of the graphic novel: art, text, themes, marketing, publishing, artist/author statements, critical works, film adaptations, etc. In so doing, we will attempt to construct myriad answers to the question: *what cultural work does the graphic novel do and how does it do this?* We will explore this through different kinds of assignments, including writing, multi-media projects, group work, outside research, film screenings, informal writing, and a final project. In the process, we will ask many questions of our own, and hopefully finish the semester with a thorough knowledge of the graphic novel, as well as our own, individual ideas about the genre's place and importance in culture and literature.

## Policies

### Participation & Attendance:

Participation and attendance are not optional in this course; in order for every student to get the most out of class time, everyone must be in class, prepared, and engaged. Because it is unavoidable that people may get sick, oversleep, etc., your first three absences will not affect your grade. However, your final grade will be lowered by 10 points for each absence after your third.

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### Deadlines:

Deadlines for all assignments are listed on your syllabus. Please have your work ready to turn in at the beginning of class the day it is due. I will not accept late work. If you run into a problem, please talk to me in advance and I will grant an extension at my discretion. All readings are to be read for the day they are listed on the syllabus. Please bring all readings to class on the day we will discuss them—it's easier to discuss them this way.

### Plagiarism:

"The Indiana University Code of Student Rights, Responsibilities, and Conduct (2005) indicates that students may be disciplined for several different kinds of academic misconduct. In particular the code states: Plagiarism is defined as presenting someone else's work, including the work of other students, as one's own. Any ideas or materials taken from another source for either written or oral use must be fully acknowledged, unless the information is common knowledge. What is considered 'common knowledge' may differ from course to course. a. A student must not adopt or reproduce ideas, opinions, theories, formulas, graphics, or pictures of another person without acknowledgment. b. A student must give credit to the originality of others and acknowledge an indebtedness whenever: 1. Directly quoting another person's actual words, whether oral or written; 2. Using another person's ideas, opinions, or theories; 3. Paraphrasing the words, ideas, opinions, or theories of others, whether oral or written; 4. Borrowing facts, statistics, or illustrative material; or 5. Offering materials assembled or collected by others in the form of projects or collections without acknowledgment." (quoted from Code of Student Rights, Responsibilities, and Conduct, Part II, Student Responsibilities, Academic Misconduct)

### Assignments: (find attached assignment sheets for details)

This course will involve several different kinds of assignments in an attempt to reinforce material and give you a chance to flex different kinds of scholarly and creative muscles. Those assignments will include short, fairly informal response papers, more formal analytical writing, a creative project of your choice, a chance to lead discussion, and a final project that may include all of these approaches and others.

- 1.) **AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF YOUR INTEREST IN GRAPHIC NOVELS: Whether we read comic strips as kids or didn't know graphic novels existed until the hullabaloo over the film version of *Sin City* hit entertainment news, everyone in this class (presumably) has a first experience when comics or graphic novels compelled them.** For your first assignment, I want to get to know your writing as well as you and your interests. Write a short autobiographical account of that first compelling experience (minimum: 2 pages; maximum: as long as you need). You can dramatize it as a short story or simply relate what happened. And if you feel the need to illustrate, please do so.
- 2.) **1 PAGE RESPONSES:** Beginning in the fourth week (when we begin exploring themes), you will do 5 short response papers (about 1 page) to be turned in at our first class meeting of the week. You may choose which 5 weeks you will address, but 2 responses are due by midterm—this will assure that you don't get crunched at the end of the semester, as well as provide fodder for other projects. These are responses to the readings or explorations of your ideas, so they do not need to be

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research-based or make an argument. They should, however, be well thought-out and well-written. Each response paper should engage with one or more of the assigned readings for the day. Your response paper might attempt to answer one or more of the questions I have posed on the syllabus, or it might draw some connection between the day's texts and others that we have looked at.

- 3.) **LEADING DISCUSSION:** Each of you will lead part of the class discussion (15-20 minutes) once during the semester. Your job in leading discussion is to come up with 2 or 3 specific discussion questions that will get class discussion going (HINT: on a day with multiple readings, often a good way to spark discussion is to synthesize the readings or ask comparative questions about their differences.) You will email the questions to me at least one day before you lead discussion so that you and I have a chance to talk about them if they need to be altered.
- 4.) **CREATIVE INTERPRETATION:** One of the most interesting things about graphic novels is that they combine many different art forms. This Creative Interpretation asks you to do the same. You are to design a non-essay-based project that engages with one theme or issue that we have studied. This is a project you will work on in-depth, although its parameters are up to you. You will write a short proposal (1 page) outlining what you plan to do, which I will need to approve before you can proceed. This is our first major assignment and you will complete it after we have looked in depth at the artistic techniques, styles, and history of the genre of the graphic novel.
- 5.) **OUTSIDE EXAMPLE (GRAPHIC NOVEL) & SHORT PAPER:** Unlike your 5 response papers, this writing assignment asks you to answer several questions that I pose. First, you will choose a graphic novel that we are not reading for class. This should be one that is not concerned with violence. This doesn't mean it cannot have a moment of violence in it, but the level should be very low. Then, you will write a short paper that engages with the questions I pose and how they apply to your outside example. Your paper should be structured with a introduction, middle, and conclusion, as opposed to numbered responses to the questions.
- 6.) **POINT/COUNTERPOINT LETTERS:** There have always been complaints against comics and graphic novels: they rot your brain; they're too violent; they're worthless trash, etc., etc., etc. This assignment will address these concerns through two letters, in which you will take both the negative and the affirmative sides of the argument. These should be formatted as letters, and you should make each believable. If it helps you, you can make up characters and write as those characters.
- 7.) **ANALYTICAL PAPER:** As the semester progresses, we will have read several scholarly analyses of graphic novels. Just as a creative project can help you expand your thinking about the material, analytical writing helps you focus your thinking. For this paper you will analyze the representation of one theme (gender roles, sexuality, queerness, violence, class, race, etc.) that we have studied in a graphic novel of your choosing. This will be a thesis-based paper, so you will be developing

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that thesis throughout the paper. Most analyses grow out of questions you have about elements of graphic novels; for this reason, it is likely that this paper will emerge from one of your response papers, so look to them for ideas. It will be 4-5 pages long and will include a rough draft, a peer review, and a conference with me.

- 8.) FINAL PROJECT: Your final project for this class will develop of our last unit, the (now quite common) translation of graphic novels to film. You will choose a pairing (graphic novel and film) that interests you and do an in-depth comparison of how the two address an issue of your choice. This will be modeled in class before you are asked to do this project. This is, above all, an analytical project. However, it is up to you how you present this analysis. You could write a formal paper, create a PowerPoint presentation, make a "special feature" DVD where you do commentary—as long as your focus is a comparative analysis, I welcome your creative approaches. Again, you will need to submit a proposal to me that I will approve before you can proceed. Lastly, everyone will briefly present their project to the class (5 minutes), so if you have written a paper, you will need to prepare a very short presentation of that paper; if you have done a full-length PowerPoint presentation, you will need to make a 5 minute version of it for the presentation. This is the capstone of our class, so it will be really interesting for everyone to get a chance to see what everyone else has been working on.

The point breakdown of these assignment is as follows:

Autobiography of Interest in Graphic Novels		25 points
Leading Discussion & Discussion Questions		50 points
Outside Example & Short Paper		75 points
Response Papers (5)	20 points each	100 points
Point/Counterpoint Letters		100 points
Creative Interpretation		175 points
Analytical Paper (& peer review)		175 points
Final Project & Presentation (& peer review)		300 points
		1000 points TOTAL

### Weekly Syllabus and Readings

#### Required Texts:

Daniel Clowes' *Ghost World*

Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, Volume I: *Preludes and Nocturnes*

Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*

Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (maybe)

Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell*

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Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *The Watchmen*

Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, volume I (maybe)

Brian K. Vaughan and Pia Guerra's *Y: The Last Man*, volume I: *Unmanned*



### E-reserves:

*To allow us to access a large variety of works and still keep the cost of texts down, we will be studying excerpts from other graphic novels, which will appear here. If you are interested, feel free to purchase these graphic novels on your own. All articles and other readings are listed here.*

### **PANEL 1: THE SETUP: DEFINITIONS, HISTORY, & FORM**

#### Week 1: Introduction/Definitions & Antecedents / History

*We will begin by introducing the course and its aims, ask and answer some of the basic questions about what a graphic novel is, then look at the comics and "picture novels" that preceded the graphic novel as it is defined today*

- In what ways are graphic novels distinct from comics?
- What is the history of that distinction?
- Who uses the term "graphic novel"? Who resists it? Who or what does it exclude?
- How did the graphic novel get to where it is today?
- What trends can we see throughout the material that got us here?
- What consistencies do we see? (we'll talk about deviations throughout the semester, once we've read more)

#### Reading:

- Selections from Roger Sabin's *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels: a History of Graphic Novel*, e-res.
- Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, Chapter 1: "Setting the Record Straight"; Chapter 2: "The Vocabulary of Comics."
- Eddie Campbell's "Graphic Novel Manifesto," e-res.
- The original text of the "Comics Code," e-res.

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### Week 2: How Do They Tell Their Story?

*Now that we know what are considered to be the criteria that make a graphic novel, we will turn to issues of form, which will be continued throughout semester. We will examine the formal components of the graphic novel: panels, text, order of frames, etc.*

- How do text and graphics interact?
- What vocabulary do we need to talk about the formal makeup of a graphic novel?
- What classic artistic strategies are working here? What new strategies are being utilized?

### Reading:

- Introduction to *The Language of Comics: Text and Image*, Eds. Robin Varman, Christina T. Gibbons, e-res.
- Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, Chapter 4: "Time Frames"; Chapter 5: "Living in Line"
- Some samples of art through the ages: illuminated manuscripts through funny pages, e-res.

### Assignment:

Autobiography of Your Interest in Comics or Graphic Novels DUE

## PANEL 2: GENDERS AND SEXUALITIES OF ALL PERMUTATIONS

### Week 3: Gender Roles, Part I: Comic Antecedents (1940s-1970s)

*This week will transition us from the history out of which graphic novels emerged, to the modern graphic novel itself by considering the ways gender was represented in comics, and comics were gendered.*

- In what ways are comics separated along gender lines?
- How are men and women represented? Are these representations always the same?
- What elements of men and women are exaggerated in the artwork? Which are underplayed?
- Who seems to be the audience for these different genres of comics? Is there a pattern?

### Reading:

- Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, Chapter 8: "A Word About Color"
- Trina Robbins' *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of Women's Comics from Teens to Zines* (selections), e-res.
- Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's *Superman* (a representative sample), e-res.

### Assignment:

Your proposal for your Creative Project is due at the beginning of the week. I will return it to you at the end of the week with comments: if I approve your project, get to work; if not, we will meet and strategize how to refocus it.

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### Week 4: Gender Roles, Part II: How Have Things Changed?

*Now we move into the different categories of inquiry for the graphic novel (as for much of literature, film, etc.). We begin with examining how gender roles appear in a selection of graphic novels.*

- In what ways are male, female, androgynous, asexual characters portrayed?
- In what ways are those portrayals similar to one another? In what ways do they differ?
- Are these gender roles portrayed mainly through the text, the artwork, or through a combination?
  - Sub-question (to keep in mind throughout the semester): Are there mainstream female graphic novelists? Where are they? Non-mainstream ones? How does their work differ from much of what we are reading in this class?

#### Reading:

- Daniel Clowes' *Ghost World*
- Allan Moore & Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* (part 1)
- Brian K. Vaughan and Pia Guerra's *Y: The Last Man* (first half)
- "Teen Girls Resistance and the Disappearing Social in *Ghost World*" by Henry A. Giroux, e-res.

#### Assignment:

Creative Project DUE at the end of the week.



### Week 5: Queerness In the Graphic Novel & The Graphic Novel as Queer

*The graphic novel is often referred to as an inherently queer genre by graphic novelists, artists, readers, and critics alike. In this unit we will explore where queerness appears in graphic novels and how it functions.*

- What does it mean to describe graphic novels as "queer"?
- In what ways are the sexualities and sexual orientations of characters important?
- How are those sexualities represented queerly in the graphic novels?
- How might we describe the genre of the graphic novel as queer itself?

#### Reading:

- Allan Moore and David Lloyd's *V For Vendetta* (selections)
- Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, Volume 1: *Preludes and Nocturnes*
- Andy Mangels' article "Out Of The Closet and Into the Comics" (in *Amazing Heroes* #143 & #144—*Fantagraphics*, June 1988), e-res.

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### PANEL 3: RACE, NATIONALITY, RELIGION: FEARS & FANTASIES

#### Week 6: Heroes & Villains & Extras, Oh My!

*Just as gender and sexuality mark characters in graphic novels, so do race, nationality, and religion. These categories are often portrayed realistically, but sometimes they are represented through a race of aliens or monsters.*

- How do differences of race, nationality, and religion inflect the stories? The artwork?
- Do stereotypes inhere along the categories we might expect?
- Are there trends regarding which characters are a certain race, nationality, or religion? That is, are all the heroes one race; the villains another?
- Are differences of race, nationality, or religion aligned with monstrosity?

#### Reading:

- Allan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*
- Frank Miller's *Sin City* (selections), e-res.
- Art Spiegelman's *MAUS* (selections), e-res.

#### Assignment:

Rough Draft of Analytical Paper DUE (bring enough copies for your Peer Review group members as well as for me).

### PANEL 4: CLASS: REPRESENTED & MARKETED

#### Week 7: Voices of the Artists

*As we have now discussed, the term "graphic novel" has often been used simply to refer to more expensive comics. This week we will hear from the artists and authors of graphic novels, many of whom have strong opinions about the way graphic novels are marketed. This may also inform our readings of the portrayals of class within the graphic novels themselves.*

- In what ways are class distinctions inherent in the genre itself?
- How are class differences shown in the readings for this week?
- Is class tied to any of the other themes we've looked at: gender, sexuality, race, religion, nationality, etc.? That is, who is upper class? Who is lower class? Who is in between?

#### Reading:

- Interviews with Daniel Clowes, Alan Moore, and Frank Miller (their problems with the genre and their thoughts about marketing the graphic novel), e-res.
- Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (part 1)
- Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* (selections)

#### Assignment:

Final Draft of Analytical Paper DUE

**PANEL 5: NORMALCY VS. ALIENATIONS: THE MARGINS**



Week 8: Another Genre of the Alienated Hero?  
*We have examined many themes (gender, sexuality, race, religion, nationality), all of which can focus on ways that characters are marked as "other" or as outside mainstream culture. This week we will ask ourselves the important question: Is this a coincidence, or is there something more significant going on that might explain this trend?*

- In what ways are normalcy and. alienation working in graphic novels?
  - Does the graphic novel necessarily offer a home to the alienated, the abnormal, the deviant—both characters and readers alike?
  - In what ways do graphic novels redefine our ideas of normalcy?
  - Whose ideas of normalcy (if any) do they value? Whose do they reject?
- Who is alienated: the protagonist, the antagonist? From what/whom are they alienated?
  - Does the age of the characters play into their feelings of alienation? How about the age of the readers?
  - In comics, superheroes' super powers often alienate them even while elevating them; is this the case in graphic novels?

Reading:

- Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, Chapter 3: "Blood in the Gutter."
- Frank Miller's *Batman: the Dark Knight Returns*

**PANEL 6: VIOLENCE REPRESENTED**

Week 9: Graphic Representations of Violence

*One thing that practically all the graphic novels we've looked at (except Ghost World) have in common is their (sometimes extreme) violence. This trend of violence has been one of the constant critiques to be leveled against the genre of the graphic novel.*

- How is violence functioning throughout the genre of the graphic novel?
- Has violence always been an inherent element of comics and graphic novels?
- When (do we think and do critics think) is violence gratuitous? Is it ever? How can we know?

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- Is the violence in concert with the stories or does it work on its own for other purposes?
- Is this violence like cartoon violence (violence without consequence where Roadrunner always lives) or does it acknowledge its own consequences?

Reading: (this week's readings will be outside examples brought in by the class)

Assignment: (\*\*NOTE: Don't use this week for one of your 5 response papers.\*\*)

First day:

Outside Example of Graphic Novel DUE:

Bring in an example of a graphic novel that does not have violence at its center. You may bring in the actual graphic novel itself, or you may make copies, or (if you start early enough) you might be able to get it from the library (NOTE: Interlibrary Loan usually takes 1-2 weeks).

Last day:

Short Paper DUE

Week 10: Spring Break—No Class

### PANEL 7: WHO HAS A RIGHT TO HISTORY?

Week 11: Rewriting History

*Many graphic novels represent and dramatize events or eras that actually happened (the bombing of Hiroshima, suburban adolescence, the case of Jack the Ripper). Like all literature, when we read them we are exposed to a new version of those happenings.*

- How do graphic novels rewrite those historical happenings or historical moments?
- Do they use realism? Fantasy?
- What views of those events do we get?
- How do those retellings make us question the events themselves?
- In the graphic novelistic representations of historical events, who has power? Who has none?
- Why might the graphic novelists and artists choose to express their ideas using historical events or moments?
- What does that choice afford them? What does it deny them?

Reading:

- Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* (selections)
- Alan Moore's *Watchmen*
- "The dual nature of Apocalypse in *Watchmen*" by Jeffrey Lewis (in *The Graphic Novel*, edited by Jan Baetens), e-res.
- "The Violence of Criticism: The Mutilation and Exhibition of History in *From Hell*" by Barish Ali, e-res.

Assignment:

Point/Counterpoint Letters DUE

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### PANEL 8: TRANSLATION

#### Week 12: The Concept of Translation: From Classic Lit to Graphic Novel

*We've examined the way graphic novels retell historical events or stories; now we'll turn to the ways they retell literature and popular stories. Graphic novels have retold such divergent pieces of literature as Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Anne Rice's *The Vampire Lestat*. We'll look at what it means to translate and adapt stories or pieces of literature, as well as what we can tell about the original stories based on the strategies of translation/adaptation. We will also ask many of the same questions we asked in Panel 6: who has the right to translate these stories?*

- How can we tell what is essential about a story?
- Which pieces survive translation?
- How can we use what survives translation to make a claim about what was essential about those stories?
- How might a graphic novel retelling of *King Lear*, for example, help us see things about the story that we might not have been able to see before?
- Where does the impulse to retell a novel or play as a graphic novel come from?
- To whom does it grant access that may have been denied before?

#### Reading:

- Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" (in *Illuminations*), e-res.
- We will look at examples from literature: *The Vampire Lestat*, *King Lear*, *Dracula*, etc., e-res.

#### Week 13: Further Translation: The Films

*This week we will screen two films that have recently been made from graphic novels. We will begin thinking about film as a medium that is different from the graphic novel.*

#### Reading:

- review *From Hell* and *Ghost World*; take notes during the films comparing the graphic novels and the films
- "From Hell or Hollywood, or Ripper In Pieces: How Ho\\ywood Slashed the Script" by Rodney Sharkey, e-res.



#### Film Screenings:

- *From Hell* (directed by Albert and Allen Hughes, 2001; adapted for the screen by Terry Hayes and Rafael Yglesias, based on the graphic novel by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell)
- *Ghost World* (directed by Terry Zwigoff, 2001; adapted for the screen by Daniel Clowes, based on his graphic novel)

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### Week 14: Further Translation: From Graphic Novel to Film

*Recently, with quick-release DVDs, Netflix, and second run theaters, the medium of film has become able to reach more people than ever before. Also recently, many graphic novels have been adapted and translated into film. Our last unit will explore these translations as we did the translation from literature to graphic novel.*

- We've read *From Hell* and *Ghost World*. Now, having viewed their translation to film, what was translated? What was lost? What was altered?
- Were these alterations intentional?
- What purpose or ideal did they serve?
- Was the essence of these graphic novels translated? How can we tell?
- What can we conclude the translator thought was important about the graphic novel? What did he/she think unimportant or problematic?
- How does the media of film necessarily offer/provide/exclude/change the way certain things are communicated?

#### Reading:

- Q & A With Terry Zwigoff and Daniel Clowes, e-res.

#### Assignment:

Your proposal for your Final Translation Project is due at the beginning of the week. I will look it over and give it back to you with comments: if I approve your project, go to town; if I tell you it needs revision, come see me to strategize.

### Week 15: Final Translation Projects: From Graphic Novel, to Film, to Your Projects

*By this time, everyone will have chosen the pairing (graphic novel and film) that they will be doing their final projects on and will have gotten them approved by me or been told to rethink them. Everyone will bring their rough drafts to share. We will workshop them in groups, answer general questions, raise issues, etc.*

First day: Rough drafts of Final Translation Project DUE. Please bring enough copies for your group and for me (if it is on paper) and make it available if it is not (through e-mail, computer disk, CD, etc.). You will do a peer review of the projects in your group and they will peer review yours.

Last day(s): Everyone will give a prepared presentation of their projects (5 minutes) for the class.

### Week 16: (Finals Week)

#### Assignment:

Final Translation Projects DUE