Introduction

I offered this course—Art History H 150—at Indiana University, Bloomington, five times between 2002 and 2004. When I was first put in charge of it, I was given nothing but its title and the complete freedom to shape it as I wished. As it was an introductory-level course, I decided not to be too literal about the title's exact wording ("Comic-Book *Art*"), but to make it into a general introduction to comics, with of course higher attention paid to the medium's visual elements as befits a course taught within an art history program. The stronger emphasis on the visual was also meant to compensate for the more text-oriented tendencies of such courses when offered in English, Comp Lit, or Cultural Studies programs.

I chose not to make the course a straight historical survey. However, as I wanted the students to be able to locate all comics under discussion in their proper place within the medium's development, I decided to open with a brief, week-long survey covering the medium's rise from the time of Töpffer to the present. During the first couple of weeks I also introduced such basic concepts as "penciller," "inker," "letterer;" thumbnails, breakdown, layout; and the three systems (Marvel, DC, and EC) of getting from a bare plotline to a finished comic-book. I presented these last not only for their historical value, but to indicate the various ways that even a single cartoonist (putting on, at times, the mantle of writer, penciller, etc.) can conceptualize and organize the creation of a comic.

After this introduction, the first half of the class was largely organized around readings from Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*. Over the five semesters of teaching this course, my lectures grew from simple expositions of McCloud's text to expansions and, occasionally, corrections of his theories. However, I never gave up *Understanding Comics* as a textbook, as I find it provides an excellent introduction to analyzing how comics function formally.

At the end of the first half of the course, we studied all the concepts introduced during the previous weeks as applied to one text that we read in depth. On the occasion of the course (Spring 2004) whose syllabus I offer here, the object of analysis was a set of *Spirit* short stories by Will Eisner. At other times I used Koike and Kojima's *Lone Wolf and Cub*, vol. 1, and Hergé's *The Castafiore Emerald*.

To supplement the various notions introduced by McCloud, I tried to develop the existing vocabulary for the formal analysis of comics by adapting and systematizing concepts from film and literary theory. Most of these appear in the "List of Terms" reproduced here (and which originally was a list of the terms students were expected to know for the midterm exam). I suspect that this list, which could of course be expanded further, may be this course's most important contribution to the study of comics.

The second half of the course shifted, so to speak, from form to content. I decided to cover two important aspects of the history of American comics: the development of the notion of the superhero, and alternative comics. Again, I varied my texts from semester to semester, alternating, for example, *Watchmen* with *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*¸ and at other times using as texts Gilbert Hernandez's *Love and Rockets X* or a number of short stories by Jaime.

My presentation of the rise of the superhero began even before the Golden Age, with the early reception of Nietzsche in America, with the Leopold and Loeb case (as also discussed in Dan Clowes' *Eightball* 22, a.k.a. *Ice Haven*) as an episode in the history of that reception, and with Siegel and Shuster's early (1933) fanzine story "The Reign of the Superman" as itself a response to the Nietzschean discourse. Further analysis of canonical texts, from *Action Comics* no. 1 to the Ditko *Amazing Spider-Man* to *Watchmen*, read them as additional entries in the same continuing philosophical debate, and also traced their increasing complexity through a Bakhtinian prism, as an evolution from the epic to the novel. I should add that my reading of popular-culture texts as philosophically potent was largely inspired by the work of Stanley Cavell, and especially his analyses of Hollywood comedies and melodramas.

During the semester presented here, I decided to limit my discussion of alternative comics to the autobiographical variety. This allowed for a more focused discussion, providing the opportunity for the investigation of all texts from the same philosophical perspective, in this case an inquiry into the relationship between narrative and truth, and the possibility of "authenticity." Many of the texts I chose problematize this very notion, especially Seth's *It's a Good Life if You Don't Weaken* which, as most readers of this note will know, is a fictional tale disguised as autobiography. As such, the genre can be seen to develop its own self-reflective critique.

Given the practical and temporal limitations of a one-semester course, I believe that such a distribution of topics best functions to introduce the students to the widest range of issues, both formal and thematic, in the study of comics. I hope you will agree. I should add that an invaluable teaching tool is a (password-restricted) electronic reserve containing scans of as wide a variety as possible of comics. This allows for, say, a single short story to be

taught, and limits the number of textbooks the students are asked to buy, which can quickly become prohibitively expensive.

HISTORY OF COMIC-BOOK ART

By Prof. Andrei Molotiu

In their juxtaposition of words and images, comic books have fashioned one of the most sophisticated narrative languages in the history of visual art; this course will explore the formation of that language in all its complexity, from the earliest newspaper comic strips to today's graphic novels. We will also study the evolution of comic-book graphic styles, and place the development of the comics in its social context. Special focuses of the course will be the rise and critique of the concept of the superhero in American comic books and American culture in general from the thirties to today, and the question of "authenticity" in recent autobiographical comics.

SCHEDULE:

Week 1   Introduction
         Writers, pencilers, inkers and their ilk: comic-book production
Week 2   A (very brief) history

THE LANGUAGE OF COMIC BOOKS

Week 3   Caricature, cartooning, dynamic anatomy
         The language of lines and shades: line quality, panel frames, lettering, color
Week 4   Narrative breakdown and closure
         Timing
Week 5   Word and image
         Layout: the page as storytelling unit
Week 6   Icon and narrative
         Case study: Will Eisner's *The Spirit*
Week 7   MIDTERM

THE CONCEPT OF THE SUPERHERO

         The birth of the superhero
Week 8   The Golden Age
         From the Red Tornado to Superduperman: Superheroes for laughs
Week 9   Lee & Ditko's *The Amazing Spider-Man*
Week 10 Moore & Gibbons' *Watchmen*
Week 11 Dan Clowes, *Eightball* 22

AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN ALTERNATIVE COMICS

         Introduction to autobiographical comics
Week 12 Autobiography from R. Crumb to Julie Doucet
Week 13 Seth, *It's A Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*
Week 14 Debbie Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl*
Week 15 Ivan Brunetti, *Schizo* 4
         John Hankiewicz, *Tepid*

The FINAL EXAM will be given during exam period.

CLASS REQUIREMENTS AND GRADE BREAKDOWN:

Writing exercise, due week 3: 5%
Midterm, week 7: 20%
Project # 1, due week 11: 15%
Project # 2, due week 15: 25%
Final Exam: 25%
In-class reading quizzes: 10%

TEXTBOOKS:

McCloud, *Understanding Comics*
Lee & Ditko, *The Essential Spider-Man*, vol. 2
Moore & Gibbons, *Watchmen*
Seth, *It's A Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*
Clowes, *Eightball* no. 22
Hankiewicz, *Tepid* Summer 2003

Other required readings may be found on the online electronic reserve.

SCHEDULE OF CLASS READINGS:

Week 3   McCloud *Understanding Comics* (textbook), chap. 2, 5 and 8, plus examples online on electronic reserve
Week 4   McCloud, chapters 3, 4, plus example online on electronic reserve
Week 5   McCloud, chapter 6, plus examples online on electronic reserve
Week 6   Will Eisner, "Spirit" selections (electronic reserve)
Week 7   Nietzsche, "Also Sprach Zarathustra" selections (handout)
             H.L. Mencken, "The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche" selections (handout)
             Siegel and Shuster, "The Reign of the Superman" (electronic reserve)
Week 8   "Action Comics" selection
             "Batman" selection
             "Flash Comics" selection (all on electronic reserve)
              "The Mysterious Mr. Mxyztplk" (electronic reserve)
             "Superduperman" (*MAD* Superman parody) (electronic reserve)
Week 9   *The Essential Spider-Man*, vol. 2 (textbook)
Week 10   *Watchmen* (textbook)
Week 11   *Eightball* no. 22 (textbook)
             John Porcellino, *King-Cat* no. 50, 56
Week 12   Dori Seda, *Dori Stories*
             Dan Clowes, *20th Century Eightball* selections (all electronic reserve)
             recommended: Joe Matt, *Peepshow* no. 1
Week 13   Seth, *It's a Good Life, if You Don't Weaken* (textbook)
Week 14   Debbie Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl* selections (electronic reserve)
Week 15   Ivan Brunetti, strips from *Schizo* 4 (electronic reserve)
             John Hankiewicz, *Tepid*, Summer 2003 (textbook)

HISTORY OF COMIC-BOOK ART

WRITING EXERCISE, DUE WEEK 3

Write a well-structured, carefully considered two-page essay on one of the following topics:

If you *do* have a favorite comic book, which is it and why? Do you like it for the plot, the writing, the art, the characters, or a combination of these factors? Please focus most of your analysis on one single issue (or story arc) of the title, but do bring in information from other issues if you consider it necessary.

If you *do not* have a favorite comic book, go to a local comics store or bookstore and browse the racks. Choose one or more titles that strike your fancy, and ask the people behind the counter to recommend a good issue to start with. Buy it. Write your essay on your impressions of that issue; did you prefer (or dislike) the plot, the writing, the art, the characters, or a combination of these factors?

LIST OF TERMS

--*Writer, Penciller, Inker, Colorist, Letterer, Editor*

--*Panel, Border, Gutter, Caption, Speech Balloon, Thought Balloon, Tail, Tier, Borderless Panel, Splash Page*

--*Cartooning* as simplification and generalization; cartooning and identification

--from McCloud: the triangular schema of *Reality, Meaning, Picture Plane*

--types of visual signs: *Icon* (by resemblance); *Symbol* (by convention); *Index* (by physical connection)

--from McCloud: the different types of *panel-to-panel transition* (and our critique of them)

--from McCloud: the different types of *word-image juxtaposition* (and our critique of them)

--*Diegesis*: the (imaginary) world of the story; adj. *diegetic*

--*Extradiegetic*: adjective applied to elements of the comic that do not belong to the diegesis; for example, the narrator addressing the reader directly, the space of the gutters, etc.

--*Composition*: the distribution of pictorial shapes across the surface of the panel

--*Framing*: the set of choices made by the artist in isolating a part of the diegetic space to illustrate in one panel. They include:

   --*Distance of Framing*: Long Shot, Medium Shot, Close-Up, Extreme Close-up, Extreme Long Shot, etc.

   --*Angle of Framing*: Straight-On Angle (Eye-Level Shot), High Angle (Bird's Eye View), Low Angle (Worm's Eye View)

   --*Canted Framing*: when the horizontal of the represented space is at an angle to the horizontal of the page

   --*Depth of Field*: *Shallow Focus* (everything at approximately same distance "behind" picture plane); *Deep Focus* (elements at varied distances from picture plane can all be seen clearly)

--*Point-of-View Framing*: framing that reproduces or approximates what one character sees

--*Breakdown*: the division of the plotline into separate incidents, "moments," or narrative beats, each of which is to be illustrated in one panel

--*Sequence*: a series of consecutive panels united by a common narrative link

--*Shot/Reverse-Shot Sequence:* in a two-person scene, the alternation of panels focusing first on one character, then on the other

--*Crosscutting*: the alternation of sequences focusing on two or more different (but usually simultaneous) actions in different locales

--*Held-Frame Sequence*: sequence of panels characterized by the same or closely similar framings of the background, in which only the characters change from panel to panel

--*Pan Sequence (Panoramic Breakdown)*: sequence of panels that divides an otherwise unified diegetic space, which continues from panel to panel and can be seen "behind" the gutters, as it were; usually occupies one tier of panels

--*Following Pan*: Pan sequence in which the same character recurs in every panel

--*Tilt Sequence, Following Tilt*: like Pan Sequence, Following Pan, but vertical rather than horizontal

--*Montage Panel*: panel that combines several iconographic elements that otherwise do not belong together in the same spatial relationship; creates conceptual (extradiegetic) space

--*Montage Sequence*: sequence of panels meant to be read quickly, almost simultaneously, to suggest a unified action or a unified idea or concept

--*Layout*: the formal arrangement of panels within the space of the page

--*Story (Narrative) Layout*--usually grid-shaped, panels independent from each other

--*Poster Layout*--not grid-shaped, more interdependence between or unification of panels, perhaps breaking down of panel borders

--*Figures of Substitution*: *Metonymy* (by association--e.g. batarang standing in for Batman)
   Synecdoche (part for whole--e.g., only hand or only foot visible),
   Metaphor (by simile--e.g. wolf and cub standing in for Lone Wolf and Daigoro)

--*Timing*: *Panel-to-Panel* and *Page-to-Page* Rhythm

--*Polyphony*: the inherent ability of the comic-book medium to juxtapose two or more simultaneous narrative threads (be they visual, or verbal, or both)

HISTORY OF COMIC-BOOK ART

WORKSHEET FOR MIDTERM EXAM

Midterm questions may include:

--*term definitions* (with brief examples and discussion). You are responsible for all the italicized terms in the "List of Terms" handout.

--*the visual analysis of a one- or two-page comic-book sequence*. You will be handed photocopies of the strip and asked to describe its overall visual style and its degree of cartooning or realistic rendering, the composition and framing of each panel, the type of each panel-to-panel transition, the types of word/image interaction, as well as how all these elements combine to give a specific character to the entire sequence. For example, is the overall effect one of quick or slow pacing? Is the storytelling smooth and continuous or more discontinuous/episodic? How does the sequence invite viewer participation and identification? How does the formal language contribute to the emotional character of the sequence? Etc.

--*discussing one of the concepts above in terms of one or several stories by one creator* . For example, you may be asked to discuss polyphony in one story by Eisner, timing in one story by Kurtzman, or layout and montage in Koike and Kojima. NOTE: please bring with you to the exam printouts of the assigned readings.

--*discussing one concept by providing three different examples from three different strips* . For example: provide and discuss examples of three different types of word/image interaction. You may choose to discuss an EC comic, Batman: The Dark Knight Returns, and Gon. Similar questions may be asked about : timing, layout, figures of substitution (e.g., find examples of metonymy, or examples of synecdoche, in three different stories), style of rendering, and polyphony. NOTE: prepare ahead of time suitable examples for each one of these possibilities.

Here are some EXERCISES you might find useful when reviewing:

When reading any comic, pick out any striking examples you find of the concepts designated by the above terms, then compare them side-by-side. How does, say, one comic's use of grid layout compare to another's? How about two comic-books that have similar penciling/inking styles but completely different uses of layout? Etc.

Pick two comics of a similar genre (superhero, funny animal, etc.). Compare the respective jobs done by the writers, the pencilers, the inkers, the colorists. Which one used more captions? Which one used more silent panels? How did the words complement the visuals in each story? Which story moved more quickly or more slowly? Why? Who used more emphatic anatomy/detailed backgrounds/deep focus/etc.? Whose work was more "realistic" from the point of view of day-to-day reality? How about from the point of view of "Superhero reality," let's say? Which story used a wider range of styles, from very realistic to very cartoony? Which one was more homogenous? Which inker used more inflected lines? Which one used more areas of solid black? Which comic had flatter colors/a wider range of tints? Etc.

Try to put into words as accurately as you can the stylistic differences you perceive. Generally, how do these stylistic differences affect your overall reading experience?

HISTORY OF COMIC-BOOK ART

PROJECT #1, DUE WEEK 11

Your task for this project is simple: create your own superhero. Please provide a list of the following, with as much background information as you deem necessary for each point:

> --his or her superhero name
> --secret identity (together with friends/colleagues/love interest)
> --costume (please attach a sketch, no matter how rough)
> --origin story
> --superpowers and scientific/pseudo-scientific explanation thereof
> --sidekick (if appropriate)
> --super foes

Feel free to add any other rubric you believe relevant, as well as to discard any that do not apply to your conception. You may also choose to consider your own person as the superhero's secret identity.

Your superhero should be conceived so as to address a specific social issue or so as to present a specific philosophical position. You can consider, for example, a feminist superhero, one that represents a racial or sexual-preference minority, one based on a specific religious point of view, a democrat or republican superhero (hint: in such instances a little bit of humor might help), or one created so as to address a single social issue, such as domestic abuse.

In a separate 2 ½ to 3 page essay, please explain your choices. Of course, we have reached a point in the history of comics where no new superhero has much of a chance at originality; nevertheless, try to imagine yourself as the writer of your superhero's adventures, and explain why you would rather script this specific superbeing than any other. How are the various choices you have made relevant to your superhero's mission and message? Do you envision a light and humorous, or else a dark and gritty, tone to his or her adventures, or something in between? Why? Lastly, how is this superhero relevant to your own life and interests, and why would you enjoy reading his or her adventures? (If you have no interest whatsoever in superhero comics, or believe a superhero is too frivolous a means of addressing serious issues, you are welcome to say so, as long as you support your point with a well-reasoned argument; in that case you may choose to create some kind of anti-hero or parody.)

HISTORY OF COMIC-BOOK ART

WORKSHEET FOR FINAL EXAM

The final exam will consist of two essay questions, 40 minutes each. For each question you will have a choice of two topics. Study guides are available on the college online academic resource system. When you answer the essay questions, however, be sure to illustrate all your points with references to specific sequences in the readings. To study, reread and think critically about all of the reading assignments for the second half of the semester in light of the interpretive and historical discussions of them offered in lecture. You will be allowed to bring to the exam copies of all the comics read since the midterm. Here are some sample topics:

--Discuss the origin of the concept of "superman" in Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy, its transformation in early 20th century American culture, and its influence on the work of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster.

--Discuss the principal elements of the superhero mythos and how they vary over time, with reference to the Golden Age Superman and Batman, to the Silver-Age Spider-Man, and to *Watchmen*.

--Discuss the critique of the superhero tradition offered in the Mad Magazine story "Superduperman," and how it can be seen to have paved the way for the new concept of the superhero at Marvel in the 1960's.

--Discuss the transformation and critique of the concept of the superhero in Ditko and Lee's *The Amazing Spider-Man*.

--Discuss how Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen* can be seen as a commentary on the history and the possibilities of the superhero genre. What are the various moral/philosophical positions that the book offers for each of the main characters, and how do these reflect on the moral dilemmas of the genre as a whole?

--Discuss the interrelationship of subject matter and visual-narrative technique in Daniel Clowes' *Eightball* 22. Please refer to at least three specific sequences in the book.
PLEASE NOTE: a similar question can be asked of any of the texts studied in class since the midterm.

--Discuss how the idea of "authenticity" figures in the construction of the auto-bio genre of comics. How do cartoonists such as John Porcellino and Joe Matt indicate the authenticity of their own autobiographical stories? What is Dan Clowes' position on this issue, as seen in his story, "Just Another Day…"?

--Discuss how the notion of autobiography is transformed in the work of Debbie Drechsler and Ivan Brunetti. What does each of these authors add to the "simpler" understanding of autobiography seen, for example, in the work of Matt and Porcellino? Why?

--Discuss the interplay of fact and fiction in Seth's *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*. Can the book still be seen as having any autobiographical value? How do the fictional elements he introduces reflect upon the character and self-presentation of the narrator? How do the various paradoxes it highlights help us understand the contradictions of the autobiographical genre as a whole?

--Discuss the relationship of memory, autobiography, and poetic, non-linear style of narration in John Hankiewicz's *Tepid*.

HISTORY OF COMIC-BOOK ART

FINAL WRITING ASSIGNMENT, DUE WEEK 17

You have two choices.

A) Write a 4-6 page paper on the following question:

For your final writing exercise, analyze a comic of your choice from both a thematic and a formal perspective, *with particular attention paid to the way in which the comic's formal devices echo its themes*.
     If you are writing on a series, focus primarily on one single issue of the title, while integrating it into the overall storyline as necessary. If you are writing on a graphic novel, make sure that you address specific sequences within it, rather than discussing it at a high level of generality. In either case, attach to your paper *photocopies* of at least two sequences you analyze (it is *not acceptable* to attach the original comic, or pages ripped out of it). If you write on a superhero or autobiographical comic, be sure to relate your analysis to the thematic issues brought up in class about these two genres.

B) Alternately, for your final project you can plot, script and lay out a 2-3 page autobiographical comic strip. Turn in the following:
     a) For *each* page of your envisioned comic, hand in a page on which you have drawn the exact layout, as well as written out in full the captions and the word balloons, etc. Draw the characters as stick figures, which however should be easily identifiable (through the use of labels, if need be). If your drawing abilities are up to par, you are welcome to draw your comic in more detail.
     b) a one-paragraph plot outline, as well as a brief explanation of the visual aspects of your comic that you feel your sketch does not convey (eg, setting, costume, framing).
     c) a separate 2-3 page essay explaining your choice of incident to illustrate, as well as the visual-narrative decisions you have made.

[*Additionally, here is another assignment I have used at other times when I offered this class:*]

HISTORY OF COMIC-BOOK ART

Project #1

Adapt as a two or three page comic strip one of the following stories:

--The Three Little Pigs
--Little Red Riding Hood
--Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer (the story in the song, not the TV special)
--The Tortoise and the Hare
--Or else another universally known tale of your choosing, preferably one whose plot can be summarized in no more than two sentences.

You do not have to draw the strip (though you are welcome, if you feel up to it). Proceed as follows:
--Indicate on individual sheets of paper the layout of each page by drawing the outlines of each panel. Don't forget to leave a space on the first page for the title.
--Number the panels sequentially.
--Provide separately the strip's script (typed): For each panel (designated by page and number) describe the characters, the action, the setting, the composition (including angle and distance of framing), then, if applicable, write the text of the captions, of the speech and thought balloons, and the sound effects. Also briefly describe at the beginning of your script the graphic style you would choose (very realistic, very cartoony, etc.); you may attach a photocopy of a comic page drawn in the style you would like to use for your own strip
. --Additionally, provide a 2-3-page essay (double-spaced) supporting the choices you made in adapting the tale.

Keep the following important points in mind:
--Feel free to make changes to the plot or the moral of the tale, as long as you explain your reasoning in your essay.
--The strip has to be exactly two pages or three pages long (i.e. it can't stop halfway on the third page). Think carefully about which incidents you want to place at the beginning and end of each page.
--You may use any numbers of layouts, from, e.g., 3 by 3 regular grids to panels of irregular shape and varying size. Which layout best fits the tale you are adapting, and why?
--Think carefully about the word-and-image interrelationship throughout your strip. Do you want to use long captions or no captions at all? Do you want to do a section of the strip (or maybe all of it) in silent panels? Do you want to use thought balloons? Etc.
--Think about timing. Do you want to use primarily action-to-action transitions, or moment-to-moment or aspect-to-aspect ones? Why?
--If you trust your drawing abilities enough to actually sketch in the scenes, you may provide correspondingly less information in the script.
--Don't forget: every single point made in lecture or in your reading about the language of comics will have some bearing on the choices you make for your adaptation. Use this occasion to review your notes (this will also come in very handy for the midterm).