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EN 103 Proposal

The Comic Book and the Cartoon Panel: Analyzing the Political and Social Arguments of Visual Rhetoric

Blurb: This class will teach students to analyze the visual rhetoric and political and social arguments implicit in comic books and cartoons, using classic argumentation strategies. From the considering how “heroes” represent American individualism, how the role of the criminal justice system and government at large affect citizens’ lives, and how we constitute and react to displaced or victimized groups, we can become more critical consumers of our culture and the visual rhetoric which reflects on it. Come prepared to read, discuss, and write about graphic novels such as *V for Vendetta*, *Maus*, and other various superhero comics.

Expanded Overview & Objectives:

Scott McCloud, in his seminal text *Understanding Comics* once wrote, “Why...are...we ...so...involved? Why would *anyone* young or old, respond to a cartoon as much or more than a realistic image? [Because] cartooning isn’t just a way of *drawing*, it’s a way of *seeing!* ...” But how does this medium, so often discounted by academic communities for either existing as mere escapism or for privileging its visual elements over its written compositions, help us to see things differently? Because the argumentative rhetoric of comic books—both visual and textual—allows for both subtle and explicit critiques of the world we live in, socially and politically. Alan Moore’s *V for Vendetta* and *The Watchmen* address the role of government involvement in individual’s lives and the role of citizen dissent, as well as the sociopolitical ramifications of nuclear warfare. Lesser known graphic novels like *Maus* and *Palestine*, address how surviving the Holocaust affects intergenerational family dynamics or how members of displaced groups form personal and political identities. Even “superhero” comics dictate our beliefs about the criminal justice system, American individualism, and the sociological causes of crime. Using various styles of argumentation (Aristotelian, Toulmin, Rogerian), we’ll come to analyze these texts and become critical consumers of visual rhetoric at large.

By the end of the semester, students will be able to perform all the standard goals of an EN 103 course, including:

- Understanding and using the processes of writing and revision as tools for analyzing topics and evaluating their own writing
- Learning to collaborate productively
- Becoming exposed to a wide variety of rhetorical strategies and processes of analyzing and understanding how to use these strategies and processes to analyze and write about issues aimed at different audiences and crafted for different purposes
- Understanding their part in the university discourse community and how its written conventions operate
- Understanding and applying the elements of formal argumentation, especially understanding the differences between Aristotelian, Rogerian or post-modern argumentation styles and how different disciplines apply these principles

- Learning to locate, evaluate, analyze and synthesize sources in order to write extended papers
- Demonstrating the appropriate, ethical use of academic research, understanding how citation formats vary across disciplines and using at least one citation format correctly
- Becoming conscious of their own development as writers

Possible Texts:

- Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference*, Sixth Edition
- Annette Rottenberg's *The Structure of Argument*, Sixth Edition
- Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*
- Either Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* or Alan Moore's *The Watchmen* (depending on student cost and interest)
- Provided excerpts from Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*
- Provided excerpts from Joe Sacco's *Palestine*
- Other, student-selected, comic book materials

Unit One: Myths, Magic, and the Literacy Narrative

Reading texts such as Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, students will come to examine how their reading has affected the way they process information and approach the world. They will think about what kinds of audiences the early books they read might have been geared towards, how early reading teaches particular lessons about the culture and the self, and how they've come to understand, accept, return to, or reject comics, cartoons, or picture books as a medium of composition. The corresponding assignment will be the literacy narrative.

Unit Two: The Politics of Cartoons and Rhetorical Analysis

Reading pieces such as excerpts from *Maus* and *Palestine* as well as essays such as Paul Cantor's "The Simpsons: Atomistic Politics and the Nuclear Family," students will examine the visual and textual rhetoric of graphic novels or cartoons in terms of their appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos. Students should also be able to determine in which places the text or visual components of the comics or cartoons incorporate logical fallacies. The corresponding assignment will be a rhetorical analysis.

Unit Three: Film Adaptations and the Toulmin Argument

Because many comic books are reproduced into films, students will have the opportunity to discuss how the political arguments of a text change when the medium (or main rhetorical strategy) changes. Reading texts like *V for Vendetta*, students will see that when directors reappropriate the comic narrative, the argument of the piece changes. (The directors of *V for Vendetta's* film adaptation, for instance, used the remake as a way to critique not just big government, but the War on Terror). The corresponding assignment will be a Toulmin Argument.

Unit Four: Critical Criminal Compromise and the Rogerian Argument

Because comic books often make implied arguments about the criminal justice system or explicit arguments about vigilante justice, students will be able to identify in which places those arguments come to compromise, and in which places they merely critique existing systems. The corresponding assignment, then, will be a rogerian argument in which students either come to a compromise between a villain and a hero or a criminal and the justice system (including the legal system, prison system, and mental institutions.)

Unit Five: The Cultural Implications of Comics and the Research Paper

Comics reflect a variety of cultural myths and arguments, making implicit judgments or reconfirmations about body types, gender roles, rugged individualism, nuclear warfare, socioeconomic status, etc. For the final assignment, the research paper, students will have to research one of these larger topics and apply it to a comic book they've read, critiquing how the comic book confirms or advances problematic cultural positions.

Assignments:

- Weekly Response Journals
- Personal/Literacy Narrative
- Rhetorical Analysis (will incorporate research of a television show/comic book)
- Toulmin Argument (will incorporate research of a film)
- Rogerian Argument
- Research Essay (will incorporate research on a larger cultural issue)
- Personal Reflection (meta-cognitive final)

Technology

Technology will involve the very occasional screening of films or shows for the class, as well as displaying comic panels for argument analysis in class.