Carleton University
Winter 2018
Department of English

READING COMIC-CON

ENGL 4115A: Culture and the Text/ENGL 5900X Selected Topic in English Studies I
Prerequisites for ENGL 4115: fourth-year standing or permission of the department.
Prerequisites for ENGL 5900: graduate standing or permission of the department.
Preclusions: None

Wednesdays / 11:35-2:25
Location: 3202 Richcraft Hall (formerly River Building)

Instructor: Brian Johnson
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Office Hours: Mondays 12:00 pm-2:00 pm or by appointment

Course Description

Comic conventions and festivals have become ubiquitous in contemporary urban North American culture. As temporary annual hubs for the convergence of a variety of media industries, cultural producers, retailers, consumers, and fan communities, events like the San Diego Comic-Con International or the Toronto Comic Arts Festival play a critical role in the circulation and promotion of a geek culture that is not only consumable, but participatory, collective, and internally differentiated. At the same time, however, and like geek culture itself, Comic-Cons have also become objects of popular representation that magnetize an often stereotyped constellation of values and meanings. Our goal in this class will be to describe and analyze the cultural semantics of the Comic-Con sector in North America in order to better understand the symbolic roles these nodal events play within our contemporary cultural imaginaries. Our analysis will move along a dual track. On the one hand, we will examine representations of actual conventions, taking account of how organizers, attendees, and the press market, participate in, report, and reflect upon this genre of media event. On the other hand, we will concern ourselves with how Comic-Cons have been represented in fictional contexts across a variety of media including film, television, and prose fiction. As part of a larger SSHRC-funded project headed by Dr. Benjamin Woo (Carleton, School of Journalism and Communication) that investigates the internal and external factors that shape the production of comic-cons and festivals, the ultimate aim of the class will be to develop as rich and detailed a picture of the symbolic space that Comic-Cons occupy in contemporary culture as possible in order to better understand the potential impacts of this symbolic space on these events and

their publics. Students can expect to engage in close reading, discourse analysis, and autoethnography, as well as to participate in an end-of-term mini-symposium.

Texts (available at the campus bookstore)

Salkowitz, Rob. *Comic-Con and the Business of Pop Culture: What the World's Wildest Trade Show Can Tell Us About the Future of Entertainment* (McGraw Hill)
Proehl, Bob. *A Hundred Thousand Worlds* (Viking)
Dorkin, Evan. *The Eltingville Club* (Dark Horse)

Mira Grant's *San Diego 2014: The Last Stand of the California Browncoats* is an ebook that can be purchased here: https://www.miragrant.com/books/san-diego-2014-last-stand-california-browncoats/

All other texts will be available through the electronic reserves at the library (ARES) or at the reserve desk.

Method of Evaluation

Attendance and Participation (10%)
As a matter of course you are expected to: (1) attend all seminars, (2) complete the scheduled readings beforehand, (3) arrive prepared to discuss what you have read, (4) bring the relevant text(s) to class. .

Annotated Bibliographies on Critical Articles (2 x 5% = 10%)
These are **due IN CLASS January 24th** and **January 31st**. Note the following requirements:
4th year students: each annotated bibliography must contain 1 entry of roughly 300-400 words. Each entry should list the article's author, title, and publication information, and must include a concise summary of the argument as well as some comment on the article's claims.
MA students: As above, but each annotated bibliography must contain 2 entries.
PhD students: As above, but each bibliography must contain 3 entries.

Media Analysis/Autoethnography (20%)
Students will employ either discourse analysis or autoethnography to examine one of the following topics in a pithy 500-750 word paper:
- Discourse analysis of the website and/or marketing materials of a specific comic-con
- An autoethnographic account of students' own fandom
- An autoethnographic account of a student's own experience of a comic-con or fan convention

Regardless of the topic, each Media Analysis should be informed by theoretical readings from the course (or other pertinent critical sources). **Papers are due on Monday, February 26th by 10:00 am in an email to me (either in .doc or .pdf format).** I will upload these onto cuLearn. These assignments are required reading for all seminar members and will form the basis of our

discussions on Wednesday, **February 28th**. Assignments submitted after 10:00 am on the due date will be considered late and will be penalized by a full letter grade.

Presentation on Popular Representations of Comic-Con (30%)
Students will sign up early in the term to develop an analysis of how a comic-con is represented in one (or several) comics, films, or television shows. The analysis will concern (1) how comic-cons and fans are represented in the text(s) (i.e. what tropes, issues, concepts, discourses they foreground); (2) the narrative and ideological functions of comic-cons in the text(s) (i.e. what sorts of stories or projects the enable and serve); (3) how (1) and (2) are related to the text(s)'s genre and audience (for example: why are comic-cons so frequently featured in "quirky" crime dramas and adult cartoons? What generic conventions of those shows overdetermine their representation of comic-cons?); and (4) how the text(s) participate in larger cultural/historical trends in the representation of comic-cons within contemporary media culture (for example, why are comic-cons so prevalent in crime shows of the 90s? How have representations of Cons changed since the 90s? Etc.). This analysis will be presented to the class **sometime between March 7th and 21st**. These presentations will form the basis of our synthesizing/comparative discussion of tropes, sensitizing concepts, and preliminary cultural history of the representation of Comic-Cons on **March 28th** and ultimately will be the basis for the final group mini-symposium presentations on **April 4th**. Presentations for this assignment should be about 10 minutes (no longer than 12!) and should, when possible, include audio-visual material.

Mini-Symposium and Group Presentations: Wednesday, April 4th (30%)
In lieu of a final essay, students will develop group presentations for the mini-symposium that will refine and extend the work done in the course. Some of these will focus on the Media Analyses conducted for Assignment 1. Others will focus on the Analysis of Representations of Comic-Con conducted for Assignment 2. The exact nature of the mini-symposium presentations and groups is something we will strategize about on **March 28th**, as it will be contingent on the outcomes of the class's research and general conclusions. The mini-symposium will be open to other students and faculty. Each group presentation should be approximately 15 minutes in length, and must be comparative and synthetic—that is, it must draw together the research of all three presenters in ways that allow the group to make broader claims than were possible to make in the individual presentations that were done in March for the class.

Future Work: The research conducted for this class will likely result in an academic paper, which will be written in summer 2018. Any student research from the class that informs the essay will be credited; and students who wish to take a more active role in co-authoring the essay are invited to discuss that with me once all coursework has been submitted.

Course Procedures, Grades, and Grading

Emergencies and Extensions: Because the major assignments for the course are directly tied to seminar presentations on specific dates, it is especially important that you plan ahead and be prepared to present your work on time. Requests for extension may be granted in extraordinary

circumstances. Please be considerate of your fellow seminar-members when planning your time this term.

Grading Criteria: Grades for term work will be based on insightfulness, originality, focus, organization of ideas, clarity of expression, scholarly rigor, correct use of MLA style, spelling, and grammar.

Grade Scale:

Letter	%	GPA
A+	90-100	12
A	85-89	11
A-	80-84	10
B+	77-79	9
B	73-76	8
B-	70-72	7
C+	67-69	6
C	63-66	5
C-	60-62	4
D+	57-59	3
D	53-56	2
D-	50-52	1
F	0-49	0

Plagiarism: Plagiarism means passing off someone else's words or ideas as your own or submitting the same work in two different academic contexts (self-plagiarism). The consequences of plagiarism are severe and are issued by the Dean and the University Senate. In order to avoid plagiarism, you must correctly attribute the sources of the ideas you pick up from books, the internet, and other people. For additional information, consult the section on Instructional Offenses in the Undergraduate Calendar.

Requests for Academic Accommodation

You may need special arrangements to meet your academic obligations during the term. For an accommodation request the processes are as follows:

Pregnancy obligation: write to me with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details see the Student Guide.

Religious obligation: write to me with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details see the Student Guide.

Academic Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: The Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities (PMC) provides services to students with Learning Disabilities (LD), psychiatric/mental health disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), chronic medical conditions, and impairments in mobility, hearing, and vision. If you have a disability requiring academic accommodations in this course, please contact PMC at 613-520-6608 or pmc@carleton.ca for a formal evaluation. If you are already registered with the PMC, contact your PMC coordinator to send me your *Letter of Accommodation* at the beginning of the term, and no later than two weeks before the first in-class scheduled test or exam requiring accommodation (*if applicable*). **Requests made within two weeks will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.** After requesting accommodation from PMC, meet with me to ensure accommodation arrangements are made. Please consult the PMC website (www.carleton.ca/pmc) for the deadline to request accommodations for the formally-scheduled exam (*if applicable*).

Schedule of Readings

General Structure: Weeks 1-6 have two broad goals: (1) to introduce students to the history and features of comic-cons and (2) to introduce students to the frameworks, methodologies, and questions of fan studies and media industry studies that will help them explore the representation of comic-cons in film and television in weeks 7-12 of the course. Weeks 7-12 will focus on the analysis of media representations of comic-cons and related fan conventions in comics, film, and television. The course will culminate in week 11 in a comparative discussion of the tropes and concepts that have emerged from course discussion and presentations; this concluding class will inform the students' final projects, which will be group presentations on specific representational fields or genres that they will deliver at a Mini-Symposium/final class the following week.

Jan. 10   **Introduction to the Course**
             Screening: Spurlock, Morgan, *Comic-Con Episode IV: A Fan's Hope* (2011)

Jan. 17   **A Brief History of Comic-Cons: 1964-2018**
             Primary Texts:
             from Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans, and Friends
             Salkowitz, Rob. *Comic-Con and the Business of Pop Culture: What the World's*
                    Wildest Trade Show Can Tell Us About the Future of Entertainment

Jan. 24   **Scenes, Subcultures, Nerds, Geeks, and Fans**
Proehl, Bob. *A Hundred Thousand Worlds* (2016)
Straw, Will. "Cultural Scenes." *Society and Leisure* 27.2 (2004): 411-22.
Lioi, Anthony. *Nerd Ecology: Defending the World With Unpopular Culture*.
          (Chapter 1: "Nerd Ecology")
McArthur, J. A. "Digital Subculture: A Geek Meaning of Style"
Woo, Benjamin. "Nerds, Geeks, Gamers, and Fans: Doing Subculture on the
          Edge of the Mainstream."
McCain, Jessica, Brittany Gentile, and W. Keith Campbell, "A Psychological
          Exploration of Engagement in Geek Culture"
Kington, Candie Syphrit. "Con Culture: A Survey of Fans and Fandom"
Hanna, Erin Melissa. "Making Fandom Work: Industry Space and Structures of
          Power at the San Diego Comic-Con" (Chapter 1: Introduction)

Jan. 31   **Gender, Fandom, and Comic-Con**
Grant, Mira. *San Diego 2014: The Last Stand of the California Browncoats*
          (2012)
Penny Arcade, the Dickwolves controversy, and rape culture (readings TBA)
Hills, Matt. "Twilight' fans represented in commercial paratexts and inter-
          fandoms: Resisting and repurposing negative fan stereotypes." *Genre,
          reception, and adaptation in the Twilight series. Farnham:
          Ashgate* (2012): 113-131.
Kohnen, Melanie. "'The Power of Geek': Fandom as Gendered Commodity at
          Comic-Con." *Creative Industries Journal* 7.1 (2014): 75-78.
Busse, Kristina. "Geek hierarchies, boundary policing, and the gendering of the
          good fan." *Participations* 10.1 (2013): 73-91.
Catalfu, Cameron. "'Ask me about my zombie plan': Fan Dissection and Female
          Participation in RedvsBlue." Bolling, Ben and Matthew J. Smith, eds., *It
          Happens at Comic-Con: Ethnographic Essays on a Pop Culture
          Phenomenon* (116-127).

Feb. 7   **Research Methods: Discourse Analysis**
Berger, Arthur Asa. *Applied Discourse Analysis: Popular Culture, Media, and
          Everyday Life.* (selected chapters)
from Ballmann, J. *The 1964 New York Comicon: The True Story Behind the
          World's First Comic Book Convention*
from *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans, and Friends*
SDCC Website

Feb. 14   **Research Methods: Ethnography and Autoethnography**
Ellis, Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner. "Autoethnography: An
          Overview." *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12.1 (2011).
          http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095
Evans, Adrienne and Mafalda Stasi. "Desperately Seeking Methodology: New

Directions in Fan Studies." *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 11.2 (2014): 4-23.

Bolling, Ben and Matthew J. Smith, eds., *It Happens at Comic-Con: Ethnographic Essays on a Pop Culture Phenomenon* (selected essays)

Anderson, Kane. "Becoming Batman: Cosplay, Performance, and Ludic Transformation at Comic-Con." Matt Omasta and Drew Chappell, eds. *Play, Performance, and Identity: How Institutions Structure Ludic Spaces.*

Feb. 21   **Reading Week (no class)**

Feb. 24   **Ottawa Queercon**

Feb. 26   **Media Analysis/Autoethnography due via email to class**

Feb. 28   **The Discourse of Comic Cons and Fan Autoethnographies**
Discussion of student discourse analyses and autoethnographies. These will available on cuLearn by noon on Monday, February 26th. Read all of these short papers and come prepared to discuss.

Note: The films, TV shows, and comics listed below are provisional and represent an ongoing bibliographic project about which your input is welcome. If there are additional popular texts representing Comic Cons that you are aware of, please let me know and we will add them to the list of possible presentation topics.

Mar. 7   **Fictional Comic-Cons: Before 2000**
Invincible Iron Man #72 (1974)
Kasman, Ron. *The Tower of the Comic Book Freaks* (2016)
The Simpsons "Three Men and a Comic Book" (Season 2, Episode 24) (1991)
3rd Rock From the Sun "Hotel Dick" (Season 2, Episode 3) (1996) [SF Convention]
Smith, Kevin (dr.), *Chasing Amy* (1997)
Parisot, Dean (dir.), *Galaxy Quest* (1999) [SF fan Convention]

Mar. 14   **Fictional Comic-Cons: The 2000s**
The O.C. "The Escape" (Season 1, Episode 7) (2003)
Hamill, Mark (dir.), *Comic Book: The Movie* (2004)
Entourage "I Love You Too" (Season 2, Episode 9) (2005)
Numb3rs "Graphic" (Season 4, Episode 9) (2007)
Beauty and the Geek (Season 4, Episode 6) (2007)
C. S. I.: Crime Scene Investigation "A Space Oddity" (Season 9, Episode 20) (2009) [SF Convention]
Newman, Kyle (dir.).*Fanboys* (2009)
Supernatural "The Real Ghost-Busters" (Season 5, Episode 9) (2009) [Fan Convention]

Futurama "Lrrreconcilable Ndndifferences" (Season 6, Episode 11) (2010)

Mar. 21 **Fictional Comic-Cons: The 2010s**
The Guild (all of Season 5) (2011)
Mottola, Greg (dir.), *Paul* (2011)
Castle "The Final Frontier" (Season 5, Episode 6) (2012)
Community "Conventions of Time and Space" (Season 4, Episode 3) (2013)
The Big Bang Theory "The Bakersfield Expedition" (Season 6, Episode 13) (2013)
The Big Bang Theory "The Convention Conundrum" (Season 7, Episode 14) (2014)
Bob's Burgers "The Equestranauts" (Season 4, Episode 17) (2014) [Bronies]

Mar. 28 **Reading Comic-Con/ Reading Comic-Con: Key Tropes and Sensitizing Concepts**
Dorkin, Evan. *The Eltingville Club*. (2016)
Guigar, Brad. Chris Giarrusso, and Scoot McMahon. *The Complete Tales from the Con* (2017) (webcomic compilation)

Apr. 4 **Reading Comic-Con: Mini-Symposium**
Groups and Program TBA