

Graphic Cultures

(WST 390: 01)

Professor Lisa Diedrich

Fall 2023; Tu-Th 2:30-3:50

Office hours: Tu 4-5 and Wed 2:30-4:30 (or by appointment)

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Course Description

In recent years, comics and graphic narratives have become a popular and innovative form for telling auto/biographical stories in a medium that artfully combines—co-mixes—words and images. The touchstone text of the form is *Maus*, Art Spiegelman's graphic narrative of his parents' experience of the Holocaust and his own transgenerational trauma. Other key texts in the hybrid genre include Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, which, like *Maus*, have reached a wide readership, garnered popular and critical acclaim, as well as scholarly attention. These texts all share a preoccupation with exploring how subjects come into being in relation to experiences and events that are both ordinary and extraordinary—e.g., childhood, sexuality, war, illness, trauma, shame, stigma, love, hope. Our class will take a multi-faceted and interdisciplinary approach to graphic cultures. We will begin with questions about form, exploring how lines, panels, pages, etc. are drawn, read, and interpreted. We will then turn to many examples of the genre, focusing on graphic family histories of war and migration, graphic activism and politics, and graphic medicine and bodies. Through many multi-modal activities, including annotation, drawing, and creative writing, we will explore a range of aesthetic forms and social and historical contexts.

Learning Outcomes

- Examine, analyze, and discuss questions of form and content in relation to comics and graphic narratives.
- Situate specific graphic narratives in relation to larger social and historical contexts.
- Use a variety of methods (including discourse analysis, annotation, free writing and drawing, visual cultural analysis, interviewing) to explore course themes.
- Enhance group communication skills through in-person and online discussions, small-group work, presentations, and debates.
- Create a comic of one's own or a critical comic commonplace book.

Required texts that you will need to purchase or borrow:

- Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (New York: Mariner Books, 2007).
- Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do* (New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2017)
- Jaime Cortez, *Sexile*
- MK Czerwiec, *Taking Turns: Stories from HIV/AIDS Care Unit 371* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2017).
- Olivier Kugler, *Escaping Wars and Waves: Encounters with Syrian Refugees* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2018).
- Rachel Lindsay, *RX: A Graphic Memoir* (New York and Boston: Grand Central Publishing, 2018).
- Nick Sousanis, *Unflattening* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).
- Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus: 25th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Pantheon, 2011).

Films:

- *Grave of the Fireflies* (Directed by Isao Takahata, 1988; 89 minutes)
- ["I Am With You"](#) (Chanel Miller, 2019; 5 minutes)
- *Persepolis* (Directed by Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi, 2007; 95 minutes)

Additional resources (not required, but you may find useful/interesting):

For critical work on comics and graphic narratives, I encourage you to check out these books by Hillary Chute, who is the foremost critic on the topic:

Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). [Chute reads Barry, Bechdel, and Satrapi, among other women cartoonists.]

Outside the Box: Interviews with Contemporary Cartoonists (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere (New York: HarperCollins, 2017).

Course Delivery Mode and Structure:

This course meets in person but will have some asynchronous components using Brightspace. On October 12 and November 21, we will not meet in person, but will participate in online annotation exercises on Brightspace. Mark your calendars!

Classroom etiquette: A good classroom atmosphere depends upon the behavior of both the instructor and the students. So, we need to respect each other and be courteous to each other. Many of the materials we will explore take up difficult topics and some will likely be upsetting.

Laptops: I permit the use of laptops for notetaking and to consult electronic versions of reading materials. Using your laptop for other things during class time—searching the web, checking social media, etc.—can be distracting to you and others!

How to be successful in this class: As the instructor, my focus is to help you do well in this course. I want to make sure you have every opportunity to learn and to achieve a satisfactory experience engaging with your classmates and exploring new ideas and ways to think about the course material and themes. Here are some tips for the successful completion of the course:

- **Read the syllabus carefully and check it frequently.** Keep track of when assignments are due and be aware of when there is more (and less!) reading.
- **Do the reading!** Keep in mind that there are many interpretations of the materials we will read. You will want to think about both the form (how the story/information is presented) and content (what is presented). But if you don't read the whole thing, then you might miss a key element of the story.
- **Annotate** (which means write in the margins of the books) or jot down questions/comments in your notebook about things that interested, intrigued, excited, disturbed you in the readings. We will do a lot of in-class annotation, writing, and discussion, which will provide a structure that allows everyone to share and contribute. I know that quiet students are often very engaged with the material and discussions but aren't as comfortable jumping into conversations as others. Use in-class annotation/writing to help you formulate your thoughts and join the conversation.
- **Complete all the assignments.** Please be sure to sign up at the beginning of the semester for your lightning presentation. Students have a choice for their final project and will submit a proposal in advance. It's important to be aware of deadlines and plan for your assignments.

Brightspace: This class is on Brightspace (<https://mycourses.stonybrook.edu/d2l/login>) and students are expected to consult Brightspace regularly for updates on readings and assignments. The asynchronous annotation exercises will require students to post on Brightspace and

comment on the posts of classmates. I will post questions on the readings on Brightspace and will also email students through Brightspace with reminders and follow up from class discussions. Make sure that the email listed for you on Brightspace is the one you use. If you find something is amiss on our Brightspace page, please let me know. Like you all, I am new to Brightspace and may get things wrong! Thank you for your patience. ;-)

Email: It is your responsibility to make sure that you read your email in your official University email account. For most students that is Google Apps for Education (<http://www.stonybrook.edu/mycloud>), but you may verify your official Electronic Post Office (EPO) address at <http://it.stonybrook.edu/help/kb/checking-or-changing-your-mail-forwarding-address-in-the-epo>. If you choose to forward your official University email to another off-campus account, faculty are not responsible for any undeliverable messages to your alternative personal accounts. You can set up Google Mail forwarding using these DoIT-provided instructions found at <http://it.stonybrook.edu/help/kb/setting-up-mail-forwarding-in-google-mail>. If you need technical assistance, please contact Client Support at [\(631\) 632-9800](tel:6316329800) or supportteam@stonybrook.edu.

Student Accessibility Support Center Statement: If you have a physical, psychological, medical, or learning disability that may impact your course work, please contact the Student Accessibility Support Center, 128 ECC Building, (631) 632-6748, or at sasc@stonybrook.edu. They will determine with you what accommodations are necessary and appropriate. All information and documentation are confidential.

Students who require assistance during emergency evacuation are encouraged to discuss their needs with their professors and the Student Accessibility Support Center. For procedures and information go to the following website: <https://ehs.stonybrook.edu/programs/fire-safety/emergency-evacuation/evacuation-guide-people-physical-disabilities> and search Fire Safety and Evacuation and Disabilities.

Critical Incident Management: Stony Brook University expects students to respect the rights, privileges, and property of other people. Faculty are required to report to the Office of Judicial Affairs any disruptive behavior that interrupts their ability to teach, compromises the safety of the learning environment, or

inhibits students' ability to learn. Faculty in the HSC Schools and the School of Medicine are required to follow their school-specific procedures.

Plagiarism: Do not plagiarize, which is defined as "to take and use as one's own the thoughts, writings, or inventions of another" (*The Oxford English Dictionary*). This means you have plagiarized if, for example: you copy part or all of another student's paper, or use another student's paper from another class or semester, or if you download part or all of your paper from the internet and claim it as your own, or if you copy from a book and do not quote or cite the author. I take plagiarism very seriously. If you plagiarize, you will be turned in to Academic Judiciary. If you are confused about what constitutes plagiarism, come talk to me about it.

University statement on Academic Integrity: Each student must pursue his or her academic goals honestly and be personally accountable for all submitted work. Representing another person's work as your own is always wrong. Any suspected instance of academic dishonesty will be reported to the Academic Judiciary. For more comprehensive information on academic integrity, including categories of academic dishonesty, please refer to the academic judiciary website at <http://www.stonybrook.edu/uaa/academicjudiciary/>

Course Evaluation: Each semester Stony Brook University asks students to provide feedback on their courses and instructors through an online course evaluation system. Feedback from course evaluations helps me determine what texts, assignments, pedagogical practices work well or not. Course evaluations also help our department continue to deliver a rigorous, exciting, and comprehensive curriculum in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies that prepares students for a diverse range of career, graduate, and professional school options.

Academic Success and Tutoring Center (ASTC): The ASTC provides free academic support services for all undergraduate students, including one-on-one tutoring, small group tutoring, academic success coaching, and public speaking seminars. Learn more about these services and additional campus resources at www.stonybrook.edu/tutoring.

Keep the conversation going, share on Brightspace, & use our course hashtag: #GraphicCultures. Along with regular lightning presentations, there will be a sharing forum on Brightspace to allow us to post materials and announcements on

topics relevant to the course themes. I will also use this hashtag on social media to post articles and commentary related to course themes. Students are encouraged to do the same on Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and other social media.

Questions? Feel free to contact me to discuss the course at any point during the semester. Make an appointment for office hours, send me an email, or see me after class.

Course schedule

Form Matters: Comics/cartoons/graphic narratives and multi-modal pedagogies

Aug 29: Why study comics and graphic narratives? How will we approach this topic?

Sign up for lightning presentations

Start reading Nick Sousanis's *Unflattening*

Aug 31: Getting to know each other: In-class backgrounds and aspirations interviews with take-home drawing/creative self-portrait component (10 points!)



Image attribution and description: René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (1928-29). A painting of a pipe with the words "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" ("This is not a pipe) underneath.

"All comics, from *Peanuts* to *Incredible Hulk* to *Persepolis*, are drawing a map of time."—Scott McCloud interviewed by Hillary Chute

Sep 5: Share creative self-portraits from backgrounds and aspirations interviews

In-class screening and discussion of Scott McCloud's Understanding Comics TED talk: <https://youtu.be/fXYckRgsdJI>

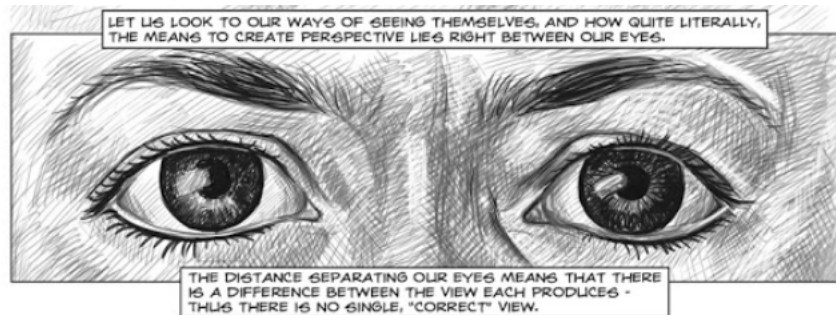


Image attribution and description: A panel from Nick Sousanis's *Unflattening* (p. 31). The drawing is a close-up of a pair of human eyes looking directly at the viewer. The caption describes the fact that because of the "distance separating our eyes...there is a difference between the view each produces."

"Thinking about seeing"—Nick Sousanis in *Unflattening*

Sep 7: Nick Sousanis, *Unflattening*

Sep 12: Nick Sousanis, *Unflattening* cont.

Graphic Identities: Family/History/War/Migration



Image attribution and description: A still from Isao Takahata's animated film *Grave of the Fireflies*. On the right side of the frame a young boy with a cap and satchel carries a little girl on his back. We see the two figures from behind as they and we look at a scene of destruction with smoke rising in the distance.

"Why do the fireflies die so quickly?"—Setsuko in *Grave of the Fireflies*

Sep 14: In-class film screening *Grave of the Fireflies* (please also begin reading *Maus* this week)

Sep 19: In-class annotation exercise and discussion on *Grave of the Fireflies* (continue reading *Maus*)

Sep 21: *Grave of the Fireflies* cont.

"It's important to know how to pack."—Art Spiegelman's father Vladek in *Maus*

Sep 26: Art Spiegelman, *Maus* (We will focus on Book 1, but feel free to read both books)

Sep 28: Art Spiegelman, *Maus* cont.

"As a work of witness and testimony, *Persepolis* is invested in truth and accuracy, and yet it is always deeply stylized, never visually 'realistic.'"—Hillary Chute on Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* in *Why Comics?*

Oct 3: In-class film screening *Persepolis*
Begin reading Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*

Oct 5: *Persepolis* cont.

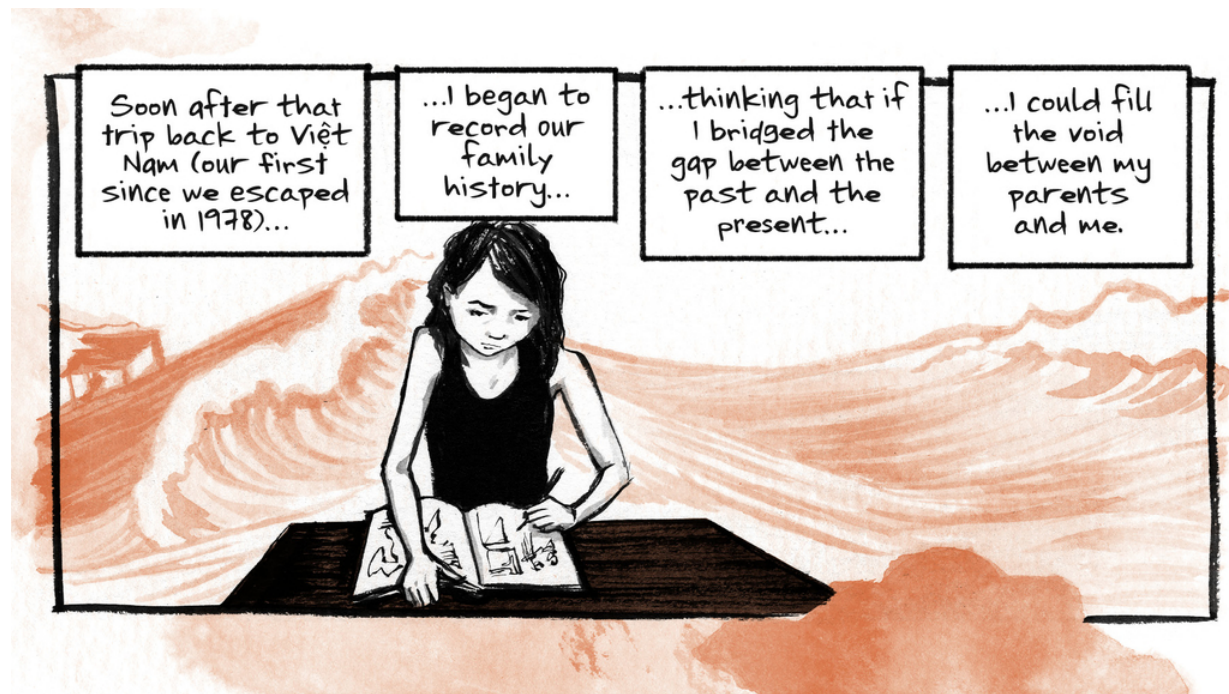


Image attribution and description: detail from p. 36 of Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir* showing the author at a table with a pen and notebook drawing. This is the moment she begins to "record our family history." Thi Bui's avatar, table, and notebook is in black and white. Behind her, in light orange watercolor wash, is what looks like waves in a rough sea with a rickety boat floating on a wave.

Oct 10: Fall break: no classes

Oct 12: We will not meet in person, but students will participate in an online annotation exercise on images from Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*

Storytelling problem: how to "present history that is human and relatable and not oversimplified."—Thi Bui, Preface to *The Best We Could Do*

Oct 17: Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do* cont.

Oct 19: Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do* cont.

Graphic Journalism

Oct 24: Olivier Kugler, *Escaping Wars and Waves: Encounters with Syrian Refugees*

Oct 26: Olivier Kugler, *Escaping Wars and Waves* cont.

Graphic Identities: Sexuality



Image attribution and description: Image found on Wikipedia page for *Fun Home* and depicts two side-by-side images. The image on the left is a photograph of Alison Bechdel dressed in tie and suit jacket. The photo is shot from below and so she appears to loom over the camera. On the right an image of a panel from *Fun Home* with a drawing of her father in a similar outfit and position as she is in the photograph.

"Photographs were a huge resource for me. In many ways photographs really generated the book."—Alison Bechdel interviewed by Hillary Chute

Oct 31: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*

Nov 2: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* cont.

Nov 7: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* cont.

Proposal for final project due!

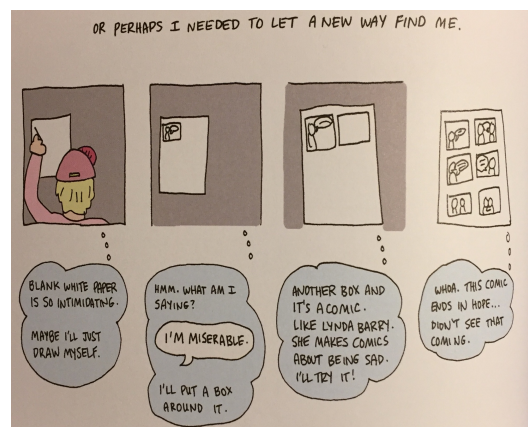


Image attribution and description: A page from MK Czerwiec's *Taking Turns* (p. 166). The page depicts the process by which MK creates her first comic. On the left we see MK from behind leaning over a blank white piece of paper. Moving to the right, we see the white paper being filled with boxes and images culminating in a 6-panel comic on the right. Underneath the sequence of panels are thought balloons about making a comic about being sad.

Graphic Medicine: a caregiver's perspective

Nov 9: MK Czerwiec, *Taking Turns: Stories from HIV/AIDS Care Unit 371*

Nov 14: MK Czerwiec, *Taking Turns: Stories from HIV/AIDS Care Unit 371* cont.

Nov 16: MK Czerwiec, *Taking Turns: Stories from HIV/AIDS Care Unit 371* cont.
Begin reading Rachel Lindsay's *RX: A Graphic Memoir*

Nov 21: We will not meet in person, but students will participate in an online annotation exercise on images from Rachel Lindsay's *RX: A Graphic Memoir*

Nov 23: Thanksgiving: no classes

Graphic medicine: a patient's perspective

"The cartoony-ness of my drawings enables me to have an elasticity to my character—my body and face, especially my eyes—that is the only way I can express the powerful emotions I felt."—Rachel Lindsay in an interview with Sathyaraj Venkatesan and Sweetha Saji

Nov 28: Rachel Lindsay, *RX: A Graphic Memoir*

Nov 30: Rachel Lindsay, *RX* cont.

Graphic medicine: healing from trauma

Dec 5: In-class screening and discussion of Chanel Miller's animated short "I Am With You"

Dec 7: Wrap-up

Assignments

Backgrounds and aspirations interview and creative self-portrait (10 points):

During the first week of class, students will pair up to interview each other on their backgrounds and aspirations. I will provide several questions for the interview. There will also be an at-home creative component where students will create a drawing, collage, poem, etc. self-portrait (be creative!) based on their interview. Students will then introduce each other to the class and share self-portraits.

Lightning presentations (20 points)

At the beginning of each class, we will spend 10 or 15 minutes on lightning presentations by students. Each student will do one lightning presentation during the semester. Students will sign up for lightning presentations the first week of the semester. I encourage students who already have an idea of something they might share to sign up early in the semester!

Lightning presentations are **5-minute presentations** (that's it—I will time you!) that will allow each of you to share with the class an item (a comic, graphic narrative, animated film, article, book or film review, hashtag, or posts or accounts

on social media, etc.) related to the themes of the class, very broadly conceived. Students are encouraged to share using slides (no more than 5!) or a handout. There are many aspects of comics and graphic narratives that we will not cover, or only touch on briefly (to name just one of many possible examples: superheroes!!). Thus, the goal of this exercise is to help expand our knowledge of graphic cultures beyond the texts we will read, watch, and explore in class.

Some tips for the lightning presentation format:

- Keep it brief (obviously!)
- Tell us why you are interested in the item you are sharing: how did you come across it? What interests/moves you about it? Keep in mind that you might be moved in negative as well as positive ways.
- How does it relate to other materials or themes in the class?
- Practice your presentation!

Annotation as method of visual analysis group discussion (30 points): Three times during the semester, students will be organized into small groups to practice annotation as method of visual analysis. Each group will be assigned one image from a text, and they will be required to annotate it. The texts are the animated film *Grave of the Fireflies*, Thi Bui's graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do*, and Rachel Lindsay, *RX: A Graphic Memoir*. On September 19, we will do an ungraded in-class annotation exercise. On October 12 and November 21, our class will not meet in person. Instead, students will do an asynchronous annotation exercise on Brightspace. **Students will post their notes and interpretations on Brightspace before midnight on Thursday, October 12 and Tuesday, November 21. Students will also be required to comment on two other posts before 6pm on Sunday, October 15 and Sunday, November 26.**

How to annotate: Generally, we annotate by writing directly on a text or image. Because our discussion will be virtual not in-person, students are not required to write directly on the image. What you will do is a two-part process—note taking and interpretation. First, you will study the image carefully. You will take notes on what you see and feel as you look at the image. This is descriptive work. Describe the image in detail. These notes do not need to be full sentences or paragraphs. You will want to look and look again. That is, don't simply look and take notes in one sitting, but spend time studying, then do something else for a period of time (sleep on it, go for a walk, watch a film, listen to music), and return later to look again.

After you feel like you have fully annotated or described the image, then give us some thoughts on what ideas or feelings the image is attempting to show. In a short paragraph (3 or 4 sentences), interpret the image. Key concepts from the course and other course materials will help you do this interpretative analysis.

You will post both your notes on and your interpretation of the image. Once you have posted your own notes and interpretation, you will be able to see what other members of the group have posted. You will want to comment and respond to 2 other posts.

Grade rubric for asynchronous annotation exercise (15 points x2):

- Notes (6 points)—How detailed is your description of the image?
- Interpretation (6 points)—Your notes should help you analyze and interpret the image. How insightful/creative/original is your interpretation?
- Comments (3 points)—Your comments should be analytical and thoughtful, not simply “I agree with so and so” but why you agree/disagree.

Create your own comic or a comic commonplace book (40 points): This assignment gives you a choice to either make your own comic or create a comic commonplace book. A proposal is due on Brightspace on November 7 before midnight. For students doing a comic, this should be a 100-word description of what you intend to make your comic about and a rationale for why you have chosen this topic. For students doing the comic commonplace book, you will turn in one sample comic panel and annotation.

Graphic cultures comic: This option allows you to create your own comic on a topic related to the themes of the class. For content there are many possibilities. For example, you might create a comic about:

- A family story of migration, trauma, or war
- You could do a brief interview with a family member, friend, colleague, and make a comic about what you learn, as MK Czerwiec does in her book *Taking Turns*
- Graphic feminism comic: show us what feminism means to you in a comic!
- A personal experience of illness or disability or the experience of a family member or simply about an everyday encounter with healthcare
- Your career plans/dreams. You could think of this as a comic version of a statement of purpose for graduate or professional school
- Activism or advocacy that you or someone you know has participated in

In terms of form and style, there is also flexibility. I understand that you are most likely not a trained artist; don't let that stop you! The minimum requirement is two pages/4 panels per page that tells a story (if you want to do more, I won't stop you!!). Students will also write a 200-word artist's statement explaining how and why they made their comic.

Critical comic commonplace book: This option allows you to create a book of comic quotations, that is, panels from comics and graphic narratives that you particularly like and that speak to you about a particular topic, idea, or feeling. On a single page, you will include the image of the panel and a 100-word annotation/analysis of the panel (this can be hand-written or typed). Your commonplace book will include at least 10 such pages. Be creative. You may want to experiment with how you annotate the panel depending on the images/feelings/ideas you want to convey. You can use color, collage, or other means to elucidate, decorate, embellish, and/or transform the image and your annotation.