

PHIL 303I - Philosophy and the Arts: Critical Approaches to Comics

Professor Matthew Brown

Spring 2023

Monday and Wednesday, 1 – 2:15pm

The focus of this class is on the critical study of comics or comic books. Centering our critical attention on comics raises a number of philosophical questions: Are comics a genre, an expressive medium, or a language unto themselves? How do we define "comics" and "comic books"? Are they different from "graphic novels"? Can pop culture works count as art? Are they a form of literature? Or are they some sui generis form of expression, reducible neither to visual art nor to literature. Can comics communicate ideas, including philosophical ideas, in ways that prose writing cannot do (or do as well)? What gives art and literature their cultural legitimacy, which comics are generally thought to lack? Can comics be an effective form of journalism, political critique, or history? Can works of literature or scientific knowledge be effectively translated into comics? Many of these questions touch on foundational, philosophical issues in the arts.

We will address these questions philosophically and by way of an introduction to the interdisciplinary, academic study of comics and comic books. We will read a selection of primary texts from several genres of comics (including superhero, indie/underground comix, autobiographical, journalistic, etc.) as well as philosophical and interdisciplinary texts about the study of comics from different approaches, e.g., philosophical aesthetics, literary/narrative criticism, visual analysis, feminism, and race theory.