Course Overview:
In 1939, a man in blue tights and a red cape graced the front cover of Action Comics and the world was never the same. Superheroes and the comics they featured in were dismissed early on after their origin as mere childish entertainment. Since then they have spawned a massive entertainment industry, conquering the world not only as widely lauded works literature, but also massive box office blockbusters. In this course, we suggest this evolution as a permanent feature of popular culture is due to the fact that superheroes are rhetorical symbols that communicate messages of values, morals, and ethics that reverberate deeply within our cultural unconscious. Additionally, while these mythic figures are an international phenomenon, superheroes are a distinctly American creation and therefore reflect the desires, fantasies, and (in some cases)
realities of what it means to be American. Because of the embedded messages and massive audiences they draw, these cultural myths warrant a deeper critical examination to ask questions such as:

1) Does absolute power corrupt absolutely?
2) Does great power come with great responsibility to humanity?
3) Is vigilante justice incompatible with legitimate Democratic process?
4) Can one group’s Supervillain terrorist be the charismatic Superhero outlaw of another group?
5) And ultimately: Why are superheroes so important to us, and what do they communicate and reveal about the American cultural psyche?

Whether you are an avid comic book collector or just enjoy streaming the occasional superhero show from your couch, this course should engage with your understandings of how important popular culture is to shaping everyday life. While this course is intended to be enjoyable (and dare I say super!) it will at times be covering challenging material and rhetorical theory. Fear not! I promise to help us as classroom tackle each of these complex cultural characters together in order to reveal what they might have to say about “truth, justice, and the American way.” Critical Avengers Assemble!

**Course Objectives:**
This course will:
(1) introduce you to the academic study of superheroes and comic book studies.
(2) introduce you to communication studies concepts and research such as rhetorical theory and mythic criticism.
(3) develop your critical writing, public speaking, research, and listening skills.

**Communication Program Learning Objectives:**

1. Theory Knowledge: Students majoring in Communication Studies should display comprehension of major communication theories.
2. Theory Application: Students majoring in Communication Studies will apply the major theories in the field to communicate effectively in a variety of settings.
3. Research Methods: Students majoring in Communication Studies will be able to use and demonstrate understanding of appropriate methodology in critical, humanistic, or social scientific paradigms in examining research questions in communication.
4. Diversity and Freedom of Expression: Students majoring in Communication Studies will be able to recognize the central role of diversity and freedom of expression in a global community.
5. Constitutive Nature of Communication: Students majoring in Communication Studies will be able to demonstrate knowledge of the constitutive nature of communication, which includes forces that enable and constrain communication such as technology, ethics, and organizational life.
6. Higher Order Thinking: Students majoring in Communication Studies will be able to demonstrate oral and written competence in logical and critical thinking.
**Required Course Materials:**
*Watchmen* – Alan Moore (DC Comics).

There are several different versions and any will do. Available on Amazon or other online book retailers.

You will also need to select an additional graphic novel for your analysis assignment during the semester. At the beginning of the semester I will offer a first come first serve policy for you and a partner to choose one of the graphic novels from this list:

- *Batman Year One* - Frank Miller
- *The Dark Knight Returns* - Frank Miller
- *A Superman for All Seasons* - Jeff Loeb
- *All Star Superman* - Grant Morrison
- *Superman: Red Son* - Mark Millar
- *Wonder Woman* - Greg Rucka
- *Ms. Marvel Vol. 1: No Normal* – G. Willow Wilson
- *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills* – Chris Claremont
- *Black Panther: The Complete Collection Volume 1* by Christopher Priest

All other readings provided electronically via D2L.

**Course Content Warning:** It might come as a surprise, but some of the material we will cover will address sensitive issues such as violence, misogyny, and explicit rhetoric. This material is not meant to shock or offend anyone, but I will always prepare students for these themes in advance. If this is something you are not comfortable with, I completely understand, this class is probably not for you though.

**Accommodations:**
If you have a disability that hinders your ability to perform your best in this course without special attention, please contact me as soon as possible. I will make every effort to meet your accommodation needs.
To obtain disability related accommodations, alternate formats and/or auxiliary aids, students with disabilities must contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS), Human Services Building, and Room 325, 468-3004 / 468-1004 (TDD) as early as possible in the semester. Once verified, ODS will notify the course instructor and outline the accommodation and/or auxiliary aids to be provided. Failure to request services in a timely manner may delay your accommodations. For additional information, go to http://www.sfasu.edu/disabilityservices/.

**Academic Dishonesty:**
As this is an upper-division course, you should know by now what does or does not constitute plagiarism or academic dishonesty. If for some reason, you need a refresher, please consult the electronic Student Handbook: http://catalog.sfasu.edu/content.php?catoid=2&navoid=78

Bottom line – just don’t cheat. It’s a huge hassle for you and me, and can have serious repercussions if it’s decided the Dean needs to get involved. If you are ever unsure about an assignment, or cannot meet a deadline -- just reach out to me. No assignment is worth ruining your academic record. That being said, I reserve the right to assign no credit, drop and/or fail students from the course if a serious offense is committed. For real though, y’all are really smart, don’t be lazy and cheat. You’re better than that.

**Acceptable Student Behavior:**
“Classroom behavior should not interfere with the instructor’s ability to conduct the class or the ability of other students to learn from the instructional program (see the Student Conduct Code, policy D-34.1). Unacceptable or disruptive behavior will not be tolerated.”

There will be no tolerance for bigoted, sexist, racist, demeaning language, or hateful interactions. I strive to create an open environment for all participants to express themselves truthfully, but this freedom will not come at the expense of the well-being of others. **Basically, don’t be an evil supervillain. Nobody likes an evil mastermind.**

**Course Policies:**
**Communication** – It is important that you are familiar with D2L. All your grades and assignment instructions will be posted in D2L. However, you will be required to regularly check your SFA email. Students who do not check email regularly will still be held accountable for missed information. If you need to contact me, always use my welshmt@sfasu.edu email as I rarely check D2L mail.

**Attendance & Participation** – Attendance is required. Students are allowed 2 unexcused absences without any penalty. Take a break, a mental health day, or a “treat-yo-self” day if you need it. After your allotted unexcused absences, your next absence will lower your final participation score total by 2 points. After 4 unexcused absences I reserve the right to drop/fail the student for the course.
Late work – Late work will not be allowed to be turned in for full credit. Late work will result in a penalty according to the nature of the assignment. All of your assignments will require online submission. Make sure you receive confirmation that the upload was successful.

Grading policy – In general, assignments will be returned within one to two weeks of submission. Once grades are returned, the student must wait 24 hours before presenting the instructor with any contestations. Students will have one week to discuss their grades in person with the instructor during office hours or by appointment.

**Evaluation:**
Here’s how your grade and assignments break down.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation/Attendance</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading Discussion</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paper 1</strong> (Superhero Icon)</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Paper 2</strong> (Graphic Novel Analysis)</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Paper 3</strong> (Movie/Television Analysis)</td>
<td>150</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paper 2 Class Presentation</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm Exam</td>
<td>150</td>
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<tr>
<td>Project Proposal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Annotated Bibliography</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Project Presentation</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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**Final Grade Distribution**
A = 900 - 1000
B = 800 - 899
C = 700 - 799
D = 600 - 699
F = 0 - 599
Assignments:

Here’s a quick rundown and explanation of the work will be doing this semester. More detailed instructions will be provided via D2L or in lecture when necessary.

Participation/Attendance – Ok, I admit it, I’m a huge superhero nerd and could ramble aimlessly about this stuff for days. Trust me, you don’t want that, and neither do I. This is a discussion-based course, so your participation score relies not only on your physical presence, but also your comments, questions, and critiques. The best classrooms are always the ones where I speak the least. Occasional in-class assignments will also count toward your overall participation score. So come prepared to each class and share you genius with us!

Reading Discussion Posts – Each Wednesday (due @ 11pm) you will need to submit a 250 – 300 word response based off of one of the previous readings. Your post should engage with the material, offer analysis, ask questions, and/or provide a well-written critique or evaluation. Additionally, you must respond to two other classmate’s posts to receive full credit. For the record “Yeah I totally agree, you raise great points!” won’t satisfy as a response. Put some effort into reading and responding to your fellow classmates’ brilliant ideas. (5 points for your response and 5 for your replies to other posts, 10 points total)

Paper 1: Superhero Icon – write a concise 4-6 page paper that identifies and argues for your favorite American Superhero Icon. What superhero has influenced you most, and how or why do you identify with them? What characteristics and values make this character your favorite and worthy for consideration as representative of American culture? As a paper, you should apply the readings from Hart's "Rhetorical Criticism" (his chapter on "cultural criticism" discussing myths, narrative, and fantasy theme analysis). You should consider your favorite superhero as symbolic for some particular "rhetoric." Identify the central values, myths, and fantasy themes which your American Superhero Icon embodies. More specific details will be included on D2L.

Paper 2: Graphic Novel Analysis - You and a partner will select one of the graphic novels from our reading list and write a paper that analyzes content of the mythic rhetoric it contains. Your first step is to research the text’s core themes, and some of the best critical commentary already out there. The next step is to formulate a few key ideas or themes that you want to explore in your paper, the guidelines for which are included in D2L. But keep in mind, the point of the exercise is to synthesize readings and concepts from the semester in your analysis. More specific details will be included on D2L. A week after your presentation you will submit your paper. (5-7 typed pages with at least 5 sources).

Paper 2: Class Presentation – On the day assigned in the schedule, you and your partner will offer an oral analysis of your graphic novel breaking down the main ideas, narratives, myths, and connections to our course concepts. 8-10 minutes. More specific details to be included on D2L. Your goal is to not only make your audience familiar with
a text they might not have read, but to also stimulate a classroom discussion over the deeper concepts and ideas you identify in your analysis.

**Paper 3: Film/Television Series Analysis:**

**OPTION A:** For your final paper, you should choose one of the many superhero movies or television series out there and offer your own ideological/mythical rhetorical analysis of the class, gender, and race dynamics within the text. Drawing upon course concepts and readings, **cite at least 3 reviews of your film/show that critically engage these latent meanings and themes**, critically analyze some of the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic elements at play in the work. More specific details will be included on D2L. (8-10 pages, 10 sources minimum, 5 academic sources required)

**Or OPTION B:** Since superheroes are found within creative texts, I offer you the opportunity to create an artistic project that engages with the mythic and/or rhetorical aspects of our understandings of superheroes. In addition to whatever creative project you propose and develop, you will submit at four page rationale (10 sources minimum, 5 academic sources required) that explains your artistic work’s connections to our course concepts and ideas. Ideas that could work:

- You could re-write a famous story (such as a classic origin story) from superhero history, helping us see it from a new angle
- You could write and film a sketch or series of sketches that reveal something about our understanding of superheroes as mythic symbols
- Perhaps you are a musician, you can write, record, and perform a superhero themed mini-musical, medley, etc.
- Perhaps you are an artist, you could create the first issue of a new superhero comic
- Or maybe you have a completely out of the box idea, let’s put our brains together and see what you come up with.

**Midterm Exam** – To assess your progress through the first half of the course an in-class midterm exam will be administered. The format will be short answer essay questions that you will turn in during the class period.

**Project Proposal** – Midway through the class I will ask that you submit a formal, but brief, description of the project you want to complete for Paper 3 (option A or B). I expect a rationale to how it connects to the course, some context of your chosen topic, and a tentative thesis statement for what you intend to argue.

**Annotated Bibliography** – Regardless of which choice you select for the Paper 3 assignment (Option A or B), you will need to provide a thorough annotated bibliography that features 10 sources you will incorporate into your final work. 10 sources in total, 5 academic sources required.

**Final Project Presentation** – In our final weeks, everyone will present a 7-10 minute presentation on their research project. Show us what you got!