

**HONR 290: How to Watch *Watchmen***  
Fall 2023 (August 23 through October 13)  
MWF 10:40-11:45am  
Goldspohn 34

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Office Hours: MWF, 1:15-2:30pm, or by appointment

**Course Description**

For better or worse, superheroes dominate contemporary popular culture. This course probes both the limitations and the promise of the superhero genre by investigating a comic book classic and a critically acclaimed HBO series based upon it. Both entitled *Watchmen*, the comic and TV series ask profound questions about policing, global politics, and historical memory, while populating their fictional world with flawed and nuanced characters. Where the 1986 comic series by Alan Moore resonated with Reagan-era fears of nuclear war, the 2019 TV by Damon Lindelof adaptation grappled with America's heritage of racial oppression in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement and the right-wing backlash against it.

After a short orientation to the comic book genre and Alan Moore's critical intervention into it, the focus of the course will be a close analysis of Moore and Lindelof's respective *Watchmen*, in dialogue with critical writing on both series. Using a combination of seminar discussion, presentations, and short papers, we will ask how Moore and Lindelof shed new light on the figure of the superhero—and use the superhero to shed new light on our contemporary dilemmas.

**Course Readings**

Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: William Morrow/HarperCollins, 1994). ISBN: 978-0-06-097625-5.  
Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 2019). ISBN: 9781779501127.

Additional readings will be made available on Blackboard. Please note that students will also be required to view the *Watchmen* HBO series, which is most readily available on the Max streaming service.

**Learning Outcomes**

- Identify and analyze the unique storytelling techniques of comic books and “prestige” TV drama.
- Discuss and assess the choices an artist makes in adapting an existing work, both across time periods and across genres.
- Devise and make the case for one's own adaptation of an existing work.
- Respond to online critical discussion of popular culture in an intelligent and critical way.

## Assignments and Grading

Successful honors seminars are heavily discussion-based and student-driven. Accordingly, class participation counts for a much higher proportion of student grades than in most courses: 50%. A series of written assignments will make up the other 50%.

**Class participation** presupposes careful and thorough preparation and serious intellectual involvement in class discussion. Students should take notes as they read or watch the assignment, making appropriate annotations (e.g., underlining in conventional written texts, applying post-its to comic books, noting timestamps on videos). On the basis of such preparation, students should be prepared for an intensive discussion focused on the texts or artworks assigned for that day.

My expectation for class participation is that every member of class will be able to contribute with remarks and citations that are on-topic and reflect solid preparation for class. A student who meets that baseline will receive a grade in the **B range** for their participation portion. Students whose contribution is notably lacking—for instance, those who speak very little, who give no evidence of having done the reading carefully, who consistently change the topic in a disruptive way, or whose primary contributions are jokes or personal anecdotes—will receive a participation grade in the **C or D range**. Students who distinguish themselves through some particular service—such as consistently contributing new topics that shape the discussion, serving as a resource for navigating the text, or making a special effort to draw in quieter classmates—will qualify themselves for a participation grade in the **A range**.

Your participation grades will be posted on Blackboard roughly every two weeks. Normal day-to-day participation for each class session is worth approximately 2.5% of your final grade.

The baseline condition for class participation is of course physical presence in class. Absences not only affect the individual student, but the entire group, and the same is true of habitual lateness. Punctual attendance should be regarded as mandatory. Lateness will count against a student's participation for that session, and in extreme cases will be treated as the equivalent of an absence. An increasing number of absences carries with it increasing consequences, which are as follows:

- 1 absence      No grade penalty, in recognition of our shared human frailties. (If students achieve perfect attendance, however, then in cases where a student is at the threshold between two grades, the professor will go with the higher one.)
- 2-3 absences    A half letter grade is deducted from the student's final grade for each absence; this penalty may be lifted by doing an absence make-up for each missed class.
- <4 absences    For each absence, the student *must* complete an absence make-up (described below) to avoid failing the course, and a half letter grade penalty is imposed on the student's final grade which *cannot* be made up.

In order to make up for an absence, students must write a paper summarizing and reflecting on the day's reading (at least one *full* page, double spaced) or schedule a meeting of at least 10 minutes to discuss the reading with the professor. Absence make-ups must be completed **within two weeks** of the absence being made up, though I strongly urge you to do so as soon as possible to keep you from falling behind in our short time together.

Students requiring *additional accommodations* are urged to discuss this matter with the professor as early as possible in the semester and to devise a formal written plan in consultation with the relevant institutional offices. In line with the Shimer School’s policies on attendance, accommodations will be made with the aim of allowing a student to attend at least 80% of class sessions synchronously and without placing undue burdens on either the accommodated student or the faculty member.

**Written work** will take the form of a “pitch” for a sequel to Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*, worth 20% of the final grade; and a “thinkpiece” on Lindelof’s HBO series, also worth 30%. Details of these assignments will be provided closer to the time they are due. (If these make the assignments feel high-stakes, please note that we are only meeting for half the semester, so you can perhaps better estimate the gravity of the situation by mentally dividing these totals in half.)

Both written assignments will be the basis for a peer review session, at which time students will also have the opportunity to get informal feedback from the professor. Students will subsequently be required to submit their final revised drafts on Blackboard.

#### **Note on Institutional Policies**

Please note that the college-wide policy on plagiarism holds for this class. Plagiarism is a very serious academic and ethical offence that can lead to failure of the assignment or course—or, after multiple instances, expulsion from college. Please consult the Student Handbook for more details of the plagiarism policy. Note that the professor considers the use of AI text-generation software as a form of plagiarism. All other institutional policies apply equally, including those related to accommodations for students with learning disabilities or differences and Title IX protections. More details on those policies are available in the Student Handbook, and students are encouraged to approach the professor with any questions or concerns they may have.

#### **Class Schedule and Readings**

*This calendar provides the schedule for assignments and readings for our time together this semester. Students should be aware that the schedule is approximate and may change. All students will be alerted as soon as possible via email and Blackboard announcement. **Failure to check email regularly is no excuse for missing these updates.***

Wednesday	August 23	Course introduction and syllabus
Friday	August 25	McCloud, <i>Understanding Comics</i> , Intro, chs. 1-4
Monday	August 28	McCloud, <i>Understanding Comics</i> , chs. 5-9
Wednesday	August 30	Classic Comics: <i>Action Comics</i> #1, <i>Showcase</i> #22, <i>Green Lantern and Green Arrow</i> #76, <i>Amazing Fantasy</i> #15, and <i>Amazing Spider-Man</i> #121
Friday	September 1	Moore and Gibbons, <i>Watchmen</i> , Chapters 1-2
Monday	September 4	<b>NO CLASS—Labor Day</b>
Wednesday	September 6	Moore and Gibbons, <i>Watchmen</i> , Chapters 3-4
Friday	September 8	Moore and Gibbons, <i>Watchmen</i> , Chapters 5-6

Monday	September 11	Moore and Gibbons, <i>Watchmen</i> , Chapters 7-8
Wednesday	September 13	Moore and Gibbons, <i>Watchmen</i> , Chapters 9-10
Friday	September 15	Moore and Gibbons, <i>Watchmen</i> , Chapters 11-12
Monday	September 18	Anna C. Marshall, “Not So Revisionary: The Regressive Treatment of Gender in Alan Moore 's <i>Watchmen</i> ”; Matthew Wolf-Meyer, “Utopias in the Superhero Comic, Subculture, and the Conservation of Difference”; Gerry Canavan, “Autonomous Collectivity Against the State”
Wednesday	September 20	Peer review: Sequel pitch
Friday	September 22	<i>Watchmen</i> (HBO): episode 1 <b>Final sequel pitch due by class time via Blackboard</b>
Monday	September 25	<i>Watchmen</i> (HBO): episodes 2-3
Wednesday	September 27	<i>Watchmen</i> (HBO): episodes 4-5
Friday	September 29	<i>Watchmen</i> (HBO): episode 6 Interview with Cord Jefferson; Thinkpieces by Emily Nussbaum, Jamelle Bouie, and Jorge Cotte
Monday	October 2	<b>NO CLASS—Professor travelling for conference</b>
Wednesday	October 4	<i>Watchmen</i> (HBO): episode 7-8
Friday	October 6	<i>Watchmen</i> (HBO): episode 9
Monday	October 9	Jaime Omar Yassin, “Black, White, Blue: To Understand Where HBO’s <i>Watchmen</i> Succeeded, We Need to Understand How Moore’s <i>Watchmen</i> Failed”; Aaron Bady, “Dr. Manhattan Is a Cop: <i>Watchmen</i> and Frantz Fanon”; Leslie Lee, “Whitewashing <i>Watchmen</i> ”; Alyssa Rosenberg, “If HBO makes a second season of ‘ <i>Watchmen</i> ’...”
Wednesday	October 11	Peer review: Thinkpiece
Friday	October 13	<b>NO CLASS—Final thinkpiece draft due by 5pm via Blackboard</b>