

ENGE2140/UGED2187 Superheroes in Comics and Film

Lecturer: Dr. Carolyn LAU, carolynlau@cuhk.edu.hk (Office hours by appointment)

Teaching Assistant: TBC

Course description

“Behold, I teach you the superman: He is this lightning, he is this madness!” thus spoke Friedrich Nietzsche. This course defines superheroes as the contemporary incarnation of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* that calls for self-becoming and self-overcoming. We will trace the development of this enduring pop culture artifact, from immortal bodies of classical heroes to fantasies of the perfectible human through technoscience. With reference to cross-cultural expressions of the genre, we dissect the concept of superheroes: What are they? Where do they come from? How can they help us change the way we think about ourselves, our environment, and the multiverse of possibilities that surrounds us?

We will discuss how the origins and evolution of these characters are shaped by sociohistorical factors, such as gender and sexuality, race, and society. Topics covered will include good and evil, power and identity, and justice and responsibility. You will also have the chance to design your own superheroes. It is hoped that by the end of the course, you will have developed new ways of reading superheroes as our modern myths about our fears, longings, and aspirations.

Learning outcomes

Having successfully completed this course you shall be able to:

- recognise key concepts and conventions of the superhero genre
- understand elements of storytelling in popular culture
- relate cultural and sociohistorical contexts to textual interpretation
- investigate, discuss and write critically, reflectively, and analytically

Course syllabus

Topic	Contents/ fundamental concepts
Popular culture	Speculative fiction, mass media, culture industry
Human experience	Identity, the body, power, change
Storytelling	Setting, characters, plot, conflict, solution, conclusion

Course components (Teaching modes and Learning activities)

This course is run as a 165-minute seminar. Within this time, a number of different teaching strategies and learning activities will be drawn to contextualise, discuss, and consolidate the ideas and debates raised by our texts. Primary teaching strategies include:

The interactive lecture

There will be an interactive lecture each week. It has two interspersed components: the talk and class exercises.

The talk as a teaching strategy ensures that you are introduced to sufficient analytical and critical material to orient yourself to the field of study. The main focus of the talks will be to outline and elucidate the historical, social and/or artistic context of the texts. Illustrative readings of selected excerpts will also be conducted. It is intended, then, that the lectures serve as a springboard for self-directed engagement with the topics and debates raised by the study of each text. **Class exercises** that foster collaborative learning, such as writing sessions, group tasks and/or discussions will be integrated into each lecture.

Assessment (Tentative)

Assessment type	Percentage
1. Attendance & participation	15
2. Mid-term assessment	20
3. Group presentation	30
4. Final assessment	35

Assessment rubrics

See materials on Blackboard
Please refer to “Appendix B” for “Grade Descriptors”

Required and recommended readings**Assigned readings**

Please see Blackboard

Assigned films

Please refer to films referenced in lectures

Recommended readings (available as E-book on the University Library website):

Burke, Liam, Ian Gordon, Angela Ndalians, eds. *The Superhero Symbol: Media, Culture, and Politics*. Rutgers University Press, 2019.

Hatfield, Charles, Jeet Heer, Kent Worcester, eds. *The Superhero Reader*. University Press of Mississippi, 2013.

McGarry, Cormac, Liam Burke, Ian Gordon, Angela Ndalians, eds. *Superheroes Beyond*. University Press of Mississippi, 2024.

Scott Jeffery. *The Posthuman Body in Superhero Comics: Human, Superhuman, Transhuman, Post/Human*. Springer, 2016.

Other supplementary readings made available during class.

Online resources

[DC Characters](#)

[Marvel Characters](#)

[Writing About Film: Terminology and Starting Prompts](#)

Feedback for evaluation

Students are welcome to offer feedback on the course at any time during the course. Students will provide formal feedback by completing the University’s Course Evaluations at the end of the semester.

Course schedule

Class/week	Topic	Assigned reading
1	Course Introduction	Please see Blackboard
2	Defining Superheroes	
3	The Golden Age 1	
4	The Golden Age 2	
5	Superheroes in WWII	
6	The Silver Age 1	
7	The Silver Age 2	
8	The Bronze Age	
9	The Dark Age	
10	The Renaissance	
11	Presentations	
12	Presentations	
13	Course Consolidation	

Contact details for teacher(s) or TA(s)

Professor/Lecturer/Instructor:	Lecturer
Name:	Dr. Carolyn LAU
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Teaching Assistant/Tutor:	Teaching Assistant
Name:	TBC
Office Location:	
Telephone:	
Email:	

Details of course website

Announcements and course materials will be posted on Blackboard regularly. **Please check Blackboard at least once a week.**

Academic honesty and plagiarism

Attention is drawn to University policy and regulations on honesty in academic work, and to the disciplinary guidelines and procedures applicable to breaches of such policy and regulations. Details may be found at <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/>.

With each assignment, students will be required to submit a signed [declaration](#) that they are aware of these policies, regulations, guidelines and procedures.

- In the case of group projects, all members of the group should be asked to sign the declaration, each of whom is responsible and liable to disciplinary actions, irrespective of whether he/she has signed the declaration and whether he/she has contributed, directly or indirectly, to the problematic contents.
- For assignments in the form of a computer-generated document that is principally text-based and submitted via VeriGuide, the statement, in the form of a receipt, will be issued by the system upon students' uploading of the soft copy of the assignment.
- Students are fully aware that their work may be investigated by AI content detection software to determine originality.
- Students are fully aware of the AI approach(es) adopted in the course. In the case where some AI tools are allowed, students have made proper acknowledgment and citations as suggested by the course teacher.

Assignments without a properly signed declaration will not be graded by teachers.

Only the final version of the assignment should be submitted via VeriGuide.

The submission of a piece of work, or a part of a piece of work, for more than one purpose (e.g. to satisfy the requirements in two different courses) without declaration to this effect shall be regarded as having committed undeclared multiple submissions. It is common and acceptable to reuse a turn of phrase or a sentence or two from one's own work; but wholesale reuse is problematic. In any case, agreement from the course teacher(s) concerned should be obtained prior to the submission of the piece of work.

The copyright of the teaching materials, including lecture notes, assignments and examination questions, etc., produced by staff members/ teachers of The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) belongs to CUHK. Students may download the teaching materials produced by the staff members/ teachers from the

Learning Management Systems, e.g. Blackboard, adopted by CUHK for their own educational use, but shall not distribute/ share/ copy the materials to a third-party without seeking prior permission from the staff members/ teachers concerned.
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Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools in Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Approach 2 – Use only with prior permission

Students are allowed to use AI tools in some scenarios or some learning activities and/or assessments but not in others.

In case of queries, students should seek advice from the course teacher.

**This course outline is provisional; final details will be confirmed at the start of the semester.*

**The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Department of English**

Departmental guidelines on sick leave, attendance and assignments

(revised in Jan 2023)

1. Academic Advising

- 1.1 If students are unable to attend class because of medical issues or other situations, they should communicate with the course instructor and teaching assistants as soon as possible to inform them of the reason for their absence and provide documentation whenever possible.
- 1.2 If students are absent for three weeks for one course and have not communicated with the course instructor about their situation, they will be invited to meet with their academic advisor to discuss their progress. Depending on students' needs and upon students' consent, they may be referred to meet with a Learning Enhancement Officer or attend university counselling.

2. Absences

- 2.1 Students should refer to the course syllabi for absence policies and mark reductions for individual courses.
- 2.2 Please refer to the Appendix for a list of acceptable reasons for leave of absence, and the documents required. Circumstances not listed in the Appendix should be discussed on a departmental level and can be given discretionary treatment.
- 2.3 Students with prolonged medical issues that hinder attendance and academic studies have the option of suspending their studies in order to get back on track.

3. Assignment Due Dates

- 3.1 Students should adhere to assignment deadlines. Late assignments will normally be penalized according to the assessment scheme of individual courses unless medical or other valid reasons with documentation, whenever possible, are given.
- 3.2 To ensure fairness, extensions will not be granted to individuals based on workload or extra-curricular activities, but special permission may be granted for students who are participating in events at an institutional or international level. Students are encouraged to communicate with their course instructor regarding any special circumstances and submit supporting documents whenever possible.
- 3.3 After the University final grade submission deadline, assignments will not be accepted, and no changes to the grades can be made.
- 3.4 In cases where students self-report mental health or motivation issues as reasons for not submitting their assignments on time, the Department will request that the student meets with their academic advisor. With the student's consent, the Department can make a referral for the student to attend university counselling so that they can receive the necessary help that they need. Students can also opt to see an outside specialist and provide the relevant documents. Once the Department receives the documentation, follow-up action for students to receive the necessary assistance will be arranged.

4. Consideration of Documents for Sick Leave or Deadline Extensions

- 4.1 Students should submit a document issued by a certified medical practitioner or by a university counsellor or other relevant bodies. Students are urged to consult with their course instructors as soon as possible if exceptional circumstances arise that impact their ability to attend class and/or submit assignments on time.
- 4.2 Relevant documentation should be issued as soon as possible but preferably within three days of the missed class or assignment deadline.
- 4.3 In the case of mental health issues, the document is considered valid for one semester or for the period specified by the medical practitioner or university counselor.
- 4.4 Please refer to the Appendix for a list of acceptable reasons for leave of absence, and the documents required. Circumstances not listed in the Appendix should be discussed on a departmental level and can be given discretionary treatment.

5. Late Drop of Courses

No late-drop applications will be processed after the last teaching day of the semester.

6. Probation

Students on academic probation will be asked to meet with the Academic Advisor II and may be referred to meet with a Learning Enhancement Officer or attend university counselling.

7. Suspension of Studies

- 7.1 Students with long-term issues that hinder their academic performance may be advised to apply for suspension of studies.
- 7.2 Retroactive suspension of studies will be considered for students with specific and long-term conditions or situations that considerably hinder their ability to work on assignments and participate in university life.

8. Discontinuation

When students are discontinued by the University, the department will assess the students' overall suitability for academic studies before deciding to lodge an appeal on behalf of the student.

Appendix

Acceptable Reasons for Applications of Leave and Extensions, the Documents Required and the Maximum Period of Extension to be Granted:

Type	Required Documents	Maximum Period of Extension
MEDICAL	Medical certificate issued by a medical practitioner, or a certificate of attendance issued by a university counsellor, preferably within 3 days of the missed class or assignment due date	3 days for minor illnesses; 7 days for more serious illnesses or conditions; 14 days for illnesses that require hospitalization; Or as specified by the medical practitioner
CHRONIC MEDICAL Special educational needs or chronic health condition (including mental health issues)	Statement from a counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist, preferably stating how the medical condition affects the student's ability to attend class and/or meet the assignment due date, issued during the semester or within three months	14 days; Or as specified by the counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist
COMPASSIONATE Serious illness of a family member; death of a family member	Not compulsory, but relevant documents may include medical certificates and funeral notices	7 days
ACADEMIC Students selected or invited to represent their College, CUHK or Hong Kong to perform, compete or attend conferences or trips	Official documents issued by the organizers stating the nature of the event, the student's role and the time period involved	3 days for local events; 14 days for overseas events
ELITE ARTISTS OR ATHLETES Students performing or competing at a recognized local or international performing arts, cultural or sporting event	Official documents issued by the organizers stating the nature of the event, the student's role and the time period involved	3 days for local events; 14 days for overseas events

OTHERS		
Events that cause serious, prolonged and unforeseeable disruptions to the student's ability to attend class, study and/or work on assignments	To be decided on a case-by-case basis	To be decided on a case-by-case basis

Grade Descriptors

Grade A / Excellent: Outstanding performance on ALL learning outcomes.

Demonstrates the ability to synthesize and apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would surpass the normal expectations at this level and typical of standards that may be common at higher levels of study. The 'A' grade should be reserved for truly excellent work that exceeds the level expected for the majority of students and are expected to be achieved only by a small minority.

Grade A- / Very Good: Generally outstanding performance on ALMOST ALL learning outcomes.

Demonstrates the ability to synthesize and apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would fully fulfill the normal expectations at this level and occasionally reaches standards that may be common at higher levels of study.

Grade B+ / Good (Plus): HIGH performance on all learning outcomes, OR HIGH performance on some learning outcomes which compensates WELL for slightly less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance.

Demonstrates the ability to apply WELL the principles or skills learned in the course in a comprehensive manner that would sufficiently fulfill the normal expectations at this level WELL.

Grade B / Good: SUBSTANTIAL performance on all learning outcomes, OR SUBSTANTIAL performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for slightly less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance.

Demonstrates the ability to apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a MORE COMPREHENSIVE manner that would sufficiently fulfill the normal expectations at this level.

Grade B- / Good (Minus): GOOD performance on all learning outcomes, OR GOOD performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for slightly less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance.

Demonstrates the ability to apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a COMPREHENSIVE manner that would sufficiently fulfill the normal expectations at this level.

Grade C+ / Fair (Plus): VERY SATISFACTORY performance on the majority of learning outcomes.

Demonstrates the ability to apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a SOMEWHAT SUSTAINED manner that would meet the basic requirement at this level.

Grade C / Fair: SATISFACTORY performance on the majority of learning outcomes.

Demonstrates the ability to partially apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would meet the basic requirement at this level.

Grade C- / Fair (Minus): SOMEWHAT SATISFACTORY performance on A NUMBER OF learning outcomes.

Demonstrates the ability to SOMEWHAT apply the principles or skills learned in the course in a manner that would meet the BARE basic requirement at this level.

Grade D+ / Pass (Plus): BARELY SATISFACTORY performance on A FEW learning outcomes.

Addresses the course inadequately by meeting the basic requirement at this level only in some areas while responding minimally with possibly tangential content in others.

Grade D / Pass: ALMOST BARELY satisfactory performance on VERY FEW learning outcomes.

Addresses the course inadequately by meeting the basic requirement at this level only in very few areas while responding very minimally with possibly tangential content in others.

Grade F / Failure: Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements.

Fails to address the course and likely does not understand what the course requires. In other words, the work completely misses the point.