While the existence of what we now know as “superheroes” can be traced to the birth of comic-book/graphic novel literature in the early 20th Century, the origin of the form goes back to the beginning of storytelling itself…and the nature the heroic myth.

In this class, we will be critically engaging with prominent Hollywood films and international responses to the genre (and the hero myths they’re often based on), and also documentaries and industrial/behind-the-scenes histories and dilemmas. In contemporary Hollywood, superhero films are one of the most successful and influential modes of storytelling, and are thus worthy of further critical assessment and interpretation – but it is equally interesting to investigate independent and international responses to this production trend.

This course will include formal exploration of artistic, industrial, and international developments (and critical theories behind) superhero cinema and television throughout motion picture history. Each week, we will explore a different superhero (or heroine?), some of their history and context within the medium, and various critical and aesthetic interpretations of their motion picture/media adaptations. We will look at both “mainstream” and “unusual” (super)heroes on screen, cultural and industrial machinations behind the current “wave” of the genre, and how studios and filmmakers often attempt to reinvigorate old ideas, genres, and franchises with varying levels of success…and excess.

A selection of critical readings will be required for you to read and interpret before each class session, giving you background and context for discussion.

Readings will be posted on Blackboard.

Further readings on genre may be assigned throughout.
Throughout the semester, you will be introduced to (and asked to analyze):

- The history of superheroes in film and media
- How contemporary technologies influence the choice of characters Hollywood adapts
- How special effects (or lack thereof) can contribute to the verisimilitude of a film world
- International contributions to Western/Hollywood-style superhero tropes
- How much superheroes really make a difference in their local environment(s)
- Why masks, costumes, secret identities, and manipulation of muscles are so inherent in superhero media and imagery

By the end of this class, you should be able to:

- Identify and explain significant moments in the history of superhero film and media
- Have both broad and specific knowledge of how the genre has changed through time
- Understand and produce academic analysis of complete feature films and specific scenes, sequences and moments deemed important to a superhero media text
- Analyze how what a film “displays” on screen can often be at odds with its subtextual message
- Consider how international cinemas appropriate Western genres and add their own distinctive ideas
- See how superhero films comment on social and cultural dilemmas in unique ways
- Use your own creative (super) abilities to “pitch” a new or previously-established superhero to us, the studio executives, for a potential production
There are five ways in which I will assess your performance and participation in this course:

- Written Responses (approx. 6-8) 10%
- Critical Essay 25%
- Group Presentation 25%
- Comprehensive Final Exam 25%
- Attendance and Participation 15%

**EMF 368 is designed to explore the principles and aesthetics of different film genres. This course will acquaint you with:**

1. Basic and advanced genre theory and critical methodologies;
2. The function of genre in popular culture, refracting social and ideological priorities;
3. The economic system of genre production;
4. The history and development of superhero films;
5. Issues of entertainment, performance, race, and gender.

This course cannot be repeated more than once without permission of the Academic Studies Committee.

If you have been diagnosed with a learning disability or you play for a Towson team, you are required to inform me at the beginning of the course.
For successful class completion, you should:

(1) Attend all classes/screenings – you should be familiar with all lectures, films and discussion

(2) Read each week’s assigned texts before class to facilitate discussions

(3) Submit short responses and/or answer quizzes based on assigned readings and films

(4) Actively participate in class discussions

(5) Write one essay and participate in one group project

(6) Submit your essay by the deadline – penalties apply for late submissions

**Reading Responses/Quizzes:** At least five quizzes/reading response requests will be scattered throughout the semester, requiring you to demonstrate familiarity with the assigned readings/films/discussions. If you read the weekly assignments, you will easily accomplish this.

**Participation:** Actively participate, whenever possible, during lecture and post-screening discussions.

**Attendance:** Two unexcused absences will lower your final grade one letter; three unexcused absences will lower your final grade 1.5 letters; four unexcused absences will lower your final grade two letters; and so on. Remain for the entire class. **Late arrivals and/or early departures will also lower your final grade.** Three late arrivals and/or early departures will lower your final grade 1 letter; four late arrivals and/or early departures will lower your final grade 1.5 letters; and so on.

**Missing two or more of our class meetings (the equivalent of four regular class meetings) without a medically or otherwise verified excuse will cause you to lose at least one full letter grade for the course!**

**OTHER EMF PRODUCTION COMMITMENTS ARE NOT VALID EXCUSES.**

If you believe other EMF priorities will keep you from attending/engaging/participating in this class in significant ways, please consider enrolling in another class.
Essay: Due by the beginning of class WED., May 8th

Write an 8-10 page cultural/aesthetic/textual analysis explaining and applying (when appropriate) concepts such as superhero iconography, superhero “problems,” postmodernism, social reflection, ideology, myth, authenticity, gender, race, sexuality, and/or “thick texts” to one film seen in class (no more than 1/3 of your essay) and at least one further film of a “superhero” theme seen outside of class. You must get your topic/films approved by me no later than one week ahead of the due date (Wed., May 1st).

Your Essay must include a minimum of six quotations from four different sources; each quote/source must be cited (MLA). Two sources can be from assigned readings; of the other two sources, at least one should be academic/peer reviewed journal articles or book chapters (see below) focused on superhero films or significant related subjects in discussion. Late submissions lose 5% each weekday.

No essays will be accepted after 5:00pm, Tuesday, May 14th (the last day of classes in the Spring 2019 semester).

The Final Exam will be comprised of a series of essay questions based on material discussed throughout the semester; all films shown (and assigned readings) in class are eligible for questioning, you should be familiar with every week’s discussion topics and film contexts. If you have any questions concerning the Final Exam, please contact me via email. If for any reason you need to take the exam at another date/time, you must inform me prior to the last day of our class (Wed., May 8th). Missing the Final Exam with no prior excuse will constitute an automatic failure of the Exam (25% of your final grade).

The Group Presentation should be an interactive talk of approximately 20 minutes ideally inspired by one significant element of superheroes in media throughout recorded history. Topics must engage with critical/scholarly research in the form of at least two additional articles pertaining to the subject, and at least one new (not discussed already in class) media text as an additional point of reference. Topics must be approved by me. Once stipulations are distributed, feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns.

**Films and media listed under each topic in the schedule are suggested topical screenings, and subject to change.**
**All films/shows formally referenced (i.e. in-depth, concentrated discussion) through screenings, readings and in-class lectures are considered suitable Final Exam material. I will usually be pretty clear about whether you should take note of something or not – if at any time you are unclear about the relevance of material, you need only to approach me or ask via email.**

**Regular Attendance is of course required and encouraged for a strong participation percentage of your grade; you will gain a fuller understanding of many different aspects of comic book/superheroes media and history, theory and context, which will help you in surviving the Final Exam! Also, since we only meet once a week, it is *doubly* important that you attend regularly – each week, you will be exposed to critical knowledge and materials in both verbal and visual capacities.**

**Please turn off/put away all cell phones for the duration of class – if there is a particular urgent reason why you need to have constant access to a phone, please inform me before class. Please also avoid the use of laptops/PCs/Macs unless needed…especially during screenings!**

**CLASS SCHEDULE**

**Wed., Jan. 30th**

**Genre, The Hero’s Journey and Myth. The “The Puritan Superhero”:**

**Solomon Kane** (2009)

**Readings:**

“The Hero’s Journey Defined,” summaries from the work of Joseph Campbell (Blackboard)


*Recommended*: Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

Joseph Campbell – The Power of Myth (Netflix)


Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (sequential art)
Feb 6th

Negotiating flights and tights: Truth, Justice, and Superman in Moving Image Media:


Readings:


Feb 13th

How to discuss Female Superheroes in Film and Media?


Readings:


Feb. 20th

Black Superheroes on Film:


Readings:


Feb. 27th

The Marvel Mutant as 20th Century FOX (Super) (Anti?) Hero:


Readings:


March 6th

The Chinese Connection: The Heroic Trio (1992)

Readings:

Sabine Lebel, “‘Tone Down the Boobs, Please!’: Reading the Special Effect Body in Superhero Movies,” Cineaction 77, 56-67.


March 13th


Readings:


March 18th-22nd – NO CLASS – SPRING BREAK

March 27th


April 3rd


Reading:

AND


Reading:

April 10th


Readings:

Christoph Huber, “The Power of the Poker Face: 30+1 Attempts to Crack the Comedy of Matsumoto Hitoshi,” *Cinema Scope*, Fall 2011, No. 48.

April 17th

Deconstructing the American Superhero Myth, Part II – Big, Mean and Green:


Readings:

Studying *Hulk* Journalism from 1978-2008 (Blackboard)

**April 24**<sup>th</sup>  
**The Marvel Studios Cinematic Universe**


**May 1**<sup>st</sup>  
**GROUP PRESENTATIONS – YOU “PITCH” A SUPERHERO** (Details to be distributed)

**May 8**<sup>th</sup>  
**E**<sup>**S**</sup>**E**<sup>**A**</sup>**Y** **DUE**

The Dark Knight Rules – **Batman** in Cinema and Media:


**Readings:**


**FINAL EXAM: WED. MAY 15**<sup>th</sup>, 7:30pm-9:30pm
Format for papers:

All papers are to be typewritten and **double-spaced**, with **one-inch margins** and stapled together horizontally in the upper left-hand corner. A size **12 font in Times New Roman** script is the required format.

I generally prefer MLA format for academic writing, and a nice set of guidelines are posted here: [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/)

While I do not expect strict adherence to MLA standards within your essays, your **title page(s)** should reflect a general knowledge of MLA guidelines and approaches.

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**Academic Integrity and Plagiarism:**

**While at Towson University, you are expected to pursue an academic career with honorable integrity and honesty.**

You should review the University policy linked on-line at: [https://www.towson.edu/about/administration/policies/documents/policies/03-01-00-student-academic-integrity-policy.pdf](https://www.towson.edu/about/administration/policies/documents/policies/03-01-00-student-academic-integrity-policy.pdf)

You are expected to understand this document.

Academic dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated.

Anyone feeling that they still do not understand the policy or have specific questions should arrange to meet with me.

Anyone caught plagiarizing will automatically receive a grade of **F** on the assignment in question, and **may be given a failing grade for the course.**

Plagiarism is defined in Diana Hacker’s *A Pocket Style Manual* as follows: “(1) Failing to cite quotations or borrowed ideas, (2) failing to enclose borrowed language in quotation marks, and (3) failing to put summaries and paraphrases in your own words.” Any suspicious phrases or passages of text will be checked through Google, “turnitin.com,” Amazon.com’s “Search Inside the Book” and other tools at our discretion.
Writing Resources:

You may meet individually with me to discuss your writing/essay, but those desiring assistance outside of class may also benefit from using one of the following resources:

The Writing Support Program helps native English speakers with sentence-level and grammar skills. Phone 410-704-3426 or to schedule an appointment.

http://www.towson.edu/cla/centers/writing/

English Language Center (for non-native English speakers):

http://www.towson.edu/academics/international/englishlanguagecenter/

Academic Achievement Center: http://www.towson.edu/aac/

Weapons Policy:

To promote a safe and secure campus, Towson University prohibits the possession or control of any weapon while on University property. The term weapon includes any potentially dangerous object or substance or replica thereof. The full policy can be found at this link:

https://www.towson.edu/about/administration/policies/documents/polices/06-01-11-weapons-prohibited.pdf

Emergency Text Alerts:

All students must sign up for the Campus Emergency Alert Text Message Notification System. Go to following link for instructions to do so:

http://www.towson.edu/publicsafety/notification/index.html
EMF Policy about Multitasking in the Classroom

The EMF Department recognizes the utility of laptop computers and other electronic devices in the classroom, but only for academic purposes related to the course and under the direction of a faculty member to enhance learning. Student use of electronic devices for personal or other, non-course related activities, such as texting, e-mailing, Internet surfing, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, gaming, etc., is disruptive to fellow students, disrespectful to the professor, and detrimental to the student’s own academic performance.

Recent research findings indicate students who multitask perform significantly worse than those who don’t multitask – with multitasking students performing at the same level as those who never come to class.

See some recent research linked here:


For these reasons, the Department of Electronic Media & Film fully supports faculty if they implement a course policy prohibiting or limiting the use of personal electronic devices in the classroom. The Department of Electronic Media & Film also fully supports any penalties, stated in the syllabus, assessed against students who violate the course policy.

My student device/technology policy is:

Laptops are permitted if you have special accommodations, but discouraged otherwise. Please make every attempt to engage in class discussion (and screenings!) and put away your phones for the duration. If you are distracting yourself or anyone else too much, I will take notice and your Attendance/Participation grade will be affected (possibly without even notifying you).
COFAC Civility Code

All College of Fine Arts & Communication Studies students, staff, and faculty are committed to collegial and academic citizenship demonstrating high standards of humane, ethical, professional, and civil behavior in all interactions.

We must take responsibility for the relationship between our personal conduct and the quality of campus life. What we do and say always has an effect on others, whether we see it or not. Civility means more than respecting campus facilities and grounds. Civility means consistently treating people with consideration and respect. It means being courteous, polite, and fair. It means recognizing diversity and honoring differing points of view. When our behavior is guided by concern for others in our community, we are being civil. Practicing civility requires thoughtful behavior and checking our assumptions and perceptions of others’ race, ethnicity, gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, abilities, culture, belief systems and economic status.

Civility Code

COFAC places a priority on learning. We value the inherent worth and dignity of every person, thereby fostering a community of mutual respect. Students have the right to a learning environment free of disruptive behaviors and offensive comments. Faculty have the right to define appropriate behavioral expectations in the classroom and expect students to abide by them. Faculty have the responsibility to manage and address classroom disruption. Staff have the right and responsibility to define appropriate behaviors necessary to conduct any university activity free of disruption or obstruction.

We believe that in order to achieve these ideals, all COFAC students, staff, and faculty are expected to exhibit and practice civil behaviors that exemplify: (1) respecting faculty, staff, fellow students, guests, and all university property, policies, rules and regulations; (2) taking responsibility for one’s choices, actions and comments; (3) delivering correspondence – whether verbal, nonverbal, written, or electronic – with respectful language using professional writing standards and etiquette; and (4) accepting consequences of one’s choices and actions.
The use of offensive, threatening or abusive language, writing, or behavior will not be tolerated and can lead to academic dismissal. Further information about civility can be found in Appendix F of the university catalog.

Examples demonstrating civility in the classroom as a student include:

- Being respectful of the professor and other students.
- Not texting or using cellular phones and other electronic devices.
- Not eating or drinking in class.
- Not reading newspapers or listening to music during the class.
- Not sleeping in class.

Examples demonstrating civility in the classroom as a faculty member include:

- Being respectful of the students.
- Attempting to understand individual student needs and learning styles.
- Discussing civil behavioral expectations during the first class.
- Taking time to talk with students whose behaviors negatively affect the classroom.
- Encouraging students to follow your civil behavior.
EMF Google Group List Serve –

All EMF students are required to join the EMF Google Group List Serve at http://groups.google.com/group/TowsonEMF. This will guarantee that you receive daily postings regarding digital media, video, film, and audio production topics including festivals, special screening, guest speakers, film/video crew needs, internships, and jobs.

Use this email address (TowsonEMF@googlegroups.com) to post your own messages to the group. The main page will also archive all posts.

Instructions:

1. Create a user account and password, and be sure to use the email to which you prefer receiving mail. (You only need to sign up once and you’ll continue to receive EMF Google group emails.)

2. Please select one of the three Email options for reading the group messages:
   
   (a) Abridged Email (No more than 1 email per day) -- Summary of new activity each day

   (b) Digest Email (Approximately 1 email per day) -- Up to 25 full new messages bundled into a single email

   (c) Email (Approximately 1 email per day) -- Best way not to miss important postings, as you get every message sent as it arrives