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English 2824F: Heroes and Superheroes

Course Description

This course aims to explore the figure of the hero and superhero as it evolves and is depicted in contemporary comic books as well as in other forms of popular culture such as movies and TV series. Methodologically, it will combine the study of literature with contemporary popular culture while incorporating a theoretical component as well. In the beginning, we will briefly explore myths that are relevant and will help us understand the figure of the modern-day superhero. After a quick historical exploration, which will offer a substantial foundation for the study of the 20th and 21st-century manifestation of the superhero, the main focus of this course will be placed on the problematic of this figure. Besides well-known characters (Superman, Batman and Spider-Man), we will tackle less-spoken-about figures, such as Jessica Jones or Harley Quinn. We will examine the inner transformation and evolution of the superhero from the twentieth-century comic book to today's tent-pole blockbusters and Netflix's exclusive streaming series. Costumes, masks, weapons and other apparel will play an important role in our analysis. The course will also chart the way in which comic book universes have responded to the development of identity politics of all kinds: we will look at how superheroes deal with issues related to gender, race and sexuality. Has the modern female superhero become something other than an object of an object of masculine desire –of the male gaze? We will engage in questions about femininity through close readings of such characters as Supergirl and Agent Peggy Carter. A course on such extraordinary heroes would not be wide-ranging without a discussion about the Japanese manga series, especially Dragon Ball and at its main character, Goku, a modern avatar of the Monkey King.