

# Incorporating Short Forms into Teaching Practices (Comics)



Erasmus+  
Short Forms Beyond Borders

Intellectual Output 3  
Pedagogical Tool Development

## Framework

The following is set of task incorporating short form (particularly within the medium of comics) into teaching practices of new media literacies. The examples below are from BA level seminar “Introduction to the Ninth Art: Comics, Comic Strips, and Graphic Novels” offered at the Institute of English & American Studies (University of Szeged, Hungary).



### Course Title: *Introduction to the Ninth Art: Comics, Comic Strips, and Graphic Novels*

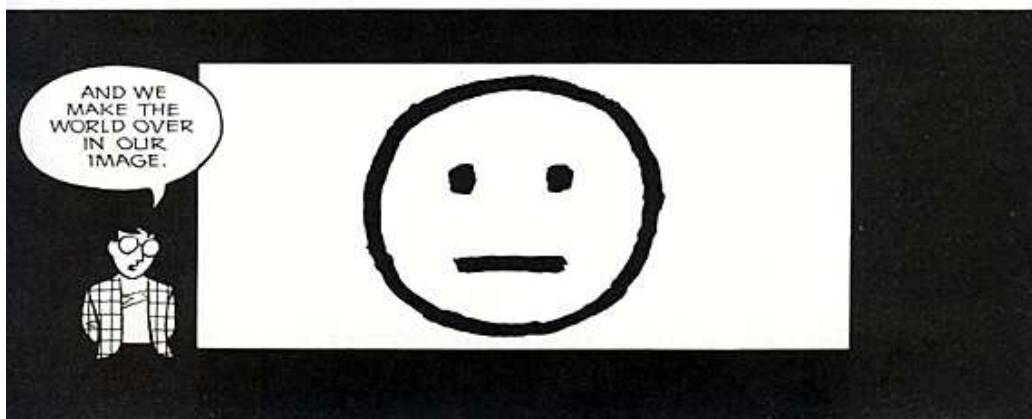
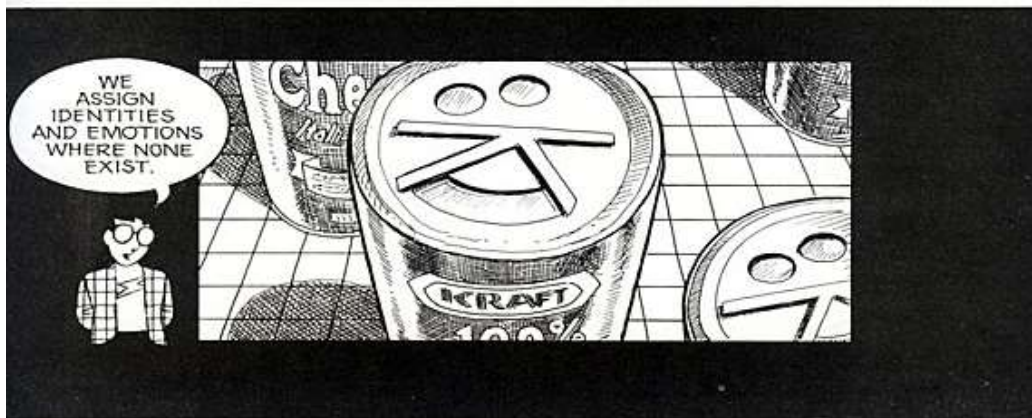
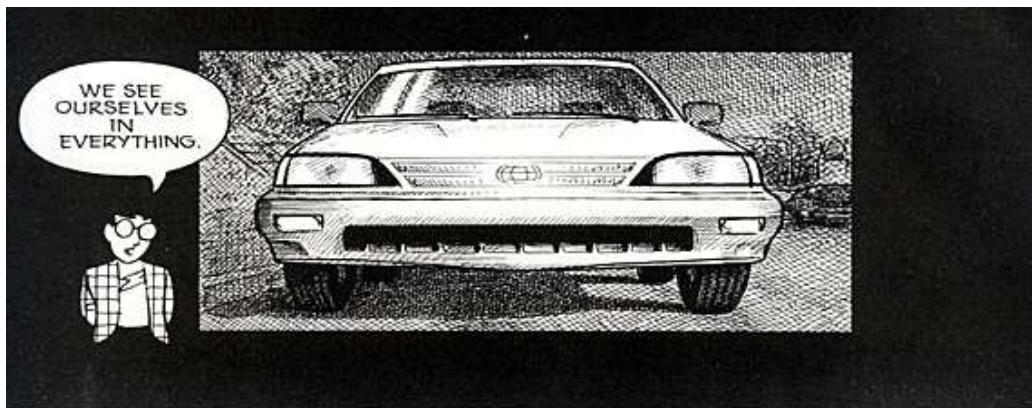
Developed and taught by Larisa Kocic-Zámbó

#### Course description:

There is an inherent deprecatory sense in the Anglo-American term designating comic books and comic strips, suggesting an art form not to be taken seriously. However, recently comic books have come to be regarded seriously even within academic circles, launching research projects ([Yale](#)), interdisciplinary scholarly journals (e.g., [Image-Text](#) since 2004-5 hosted by University of Florida; [Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics](#) since 2010 published by Taylor & Francis Online), etc. Indeed, the Anglo-American scholarship is slowly following in the footsteps of the Francophone counterpart, where the distinction of comics as the ninth art (*le neuvième art*) is prevalent. The objective of this seminar is to introduce students to the ninth art of comic books, strips and graphic novels, discussing its media specific features, genres and subgenres and its distinct aspects. For despite the visual media saturation of our culture there is not much emphasis put on reflexive, critical perception and reading of these media.

## Task #1: Self-Centered Perception of the Human Face

Based on Scott McCloud claim in *Understanding Comics*, we humans tend to see ourselves or at least a human face in everything (see image below). Lets test this ability of perception. If you see something that reminds you of a human face, make a photo and share it. Just make sure you don't upload it directly from your phone because the photo images your phone takes might be too big files our platform to handle. So, instead, open the image file and make a screenshot (either on your phone or computer) and share the screenshot (it's a much smaller file). Crop it if need be and if you feel like it, you can help us see the human face by doodling over it :) Curious to see what you will share.



## Examples of student contributions to task #1:

I feel like my pillowcase is always watching\* me. \*\*  
\*and sometimes judging



And I also found this guy on our terrace door, he has a moustache!



For some reason my hairclip is very sad.

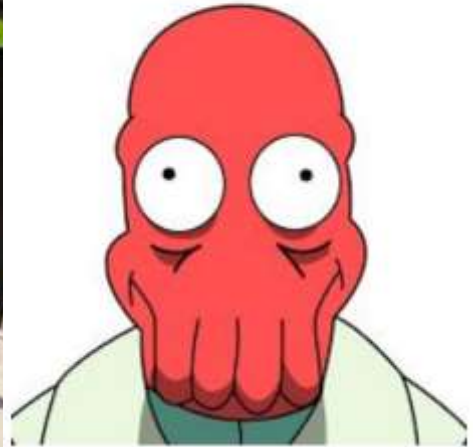


Maybe it's sad because mine is angry!

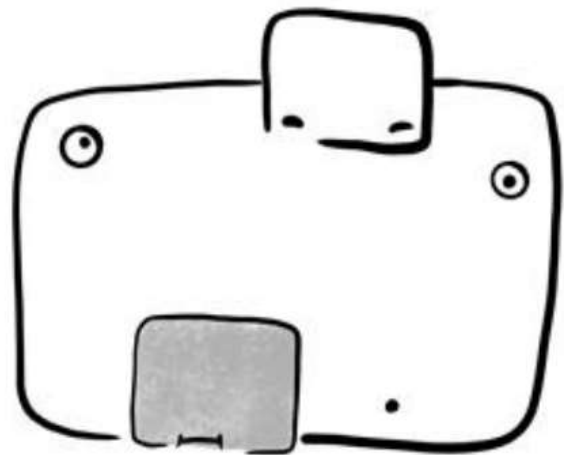




Reminds me of him



It is in our classroom. I can't help but see a weird cartoonish face in it.



Here is a teenage girl who is screaming because she made her buns too tight.



Octopus with two tentacles



Somebody is up to no good...



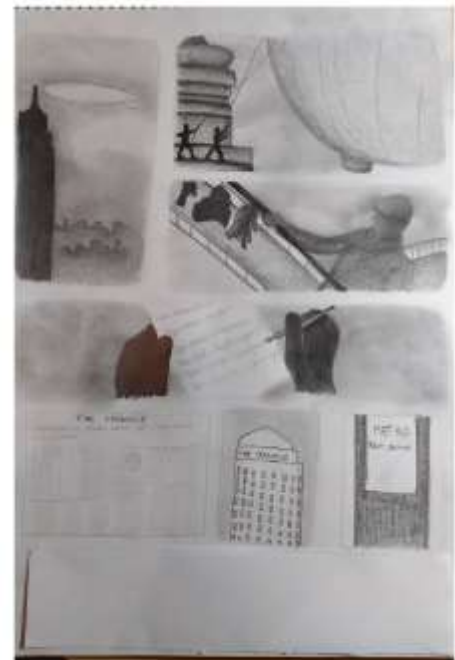
## Task #2: Media transposition (focus on comics' visual aesthetics and media specifics)

**Make a comics of maximum four pages using still images (screen shots) of the first 5 minutes of the movie *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*** (here is a link to a YouTube upload of the whole movie: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYE6X5C2JF8>). No fancy app is needed for the task, just use PowerPoint -- it will allow you free distribution and manipulation of images (i.e., cropping, sizing, rotating, etc.) and also insertion of text boxes (you can even use speech balloons by inserting Shapes>Callouts -- if you haven't used this feature yet, here's a [simple youtube tutorial](#)). I will upload a pptx template for you (Documents folder) in which the slides are resized to the width and height of two A4 pages facing each other (420mm x 297mm). Once you have completed your two slides (i.e. 4 A4 pages), please, save them as a PDF document before uploading here, into this task folder. **Remember, the tension achieved in the movie by time (movement) and soundtrack is something you have to translate into pictorial elements (the size and/or distribution of your still images).** After you have all uploaded your contribution, I will open the task folder for all participants, so you can see each other's work.

[The objective of this task is to draw the students' attention to the formal elements of a medium and how those contribute to the meaning created. In other words, to pay attention not only to *what* is being conveyed but also *how* it is being conveyed. Also, the brevity and fairly simple tool-set of the task allows easy participation not requiring drawing/artistic skills on the part of the students, while at the same time fostering creative+critical engagement.]

### Examples of student contributions to task #2:

From the contributions, it seems, students struggled most with what to leave out, i.e., cutting and trimming the material and, thus, creating a short(ened) form. The majority of the contributions choose to focus on the first 3' 46" of the movie (e.g., [01](#), [02](#), [03](#)), occasionally experimenting with repetitious panels to convey the sense of prolonged tension ([04](#)). The ones that incorporated all five minutes came up with different solutions too: opting to focus solely on the images (providing



symbols instead of texts – [05](#)), changing the color scheme into black and white ([06](#)), using clear cut panel division ([07](#)), omitting the slow paced initial scene ([08](#)), and in one case choosing to redraw the scenes in question and thus creating a very different atmosphere ([09](#) – image above).

### Task #3: Reading/Interpreting comics

Write a short (max. 250 words long paragraph) analysis of the last page of "Happy Anniversary" from Adrian Tomine's *Optic Nerve* series (see image below). On the last page of the six page long comics the panels are devoid of words. So how does Tomine employ images to convey meaning?



[The objective of this task is help students practice *writing* about comics while paying attention to the mediums visual language.]



### Examples of student contributions to task #3:

The first panel gives us a panoramic view of the apartment building, with the rising sun illuminating the city view. This indicates that a significant time has passed between this panel and the one before and gives context on the location where the characters reside. In the next panel, the woman's eyes are focused on the direction the sunlight is coming from, and the following panel shows her rubbing her eyes - telling us that she has just woken up. The next two panels show us that the woman takes a short glance at her partner, with the fifth one being from the woman's direct perspective. Her facial expression shows uncertainty, and the lack of a smile hints that she may be thinking about the conversation they had the previous night. She is then seen looking out of the window of her apartment, with the last panel focusing on her profile. There, she is shown still having a worried/bothered expression on her face. The focus (and deeper detail) on her face and the darkened background gives me the impression that she is spending a prolonged amount of time looking out of the window, as if she was contemplating something. The small range of motion shown through these nine panels show that the character is experiencing a sort of inner turmoil/unease, along with racing thoughts. (S. T.)

The artist set the tone of a slow morning in the first panel. The first one also contrasts all the other panels, as it is spacious, while the others feel full. The cramped panels cause the room to feel uncomfortable and the woman's facial expressions suggest that she feels similar. She looks very tired and sad, even when looking at her partner, implying these emotions are rooted in their relationship. The man was sleeping, leaving the woman alone with her thoughts, but also highlighting her loneliness and the distance between them, as they are shown in widely different states. In the panel where her entire body is shown, there are boxes in the background, which, to me, suggests that she had been trying to get out of the relationship, but she never succeeded. This is amplified by the last panel, in which the shadow of the shutter is associated with prison bars. Because she is looking outside, it also feels like she is longing for freedom, just as an inmate would. This could mean that she will keep trying to get out of the relationship, and possibly even suggest that she will succeed. (H. R.)

In class we already discussed how Tomine uses stripes, and we attached the meaning of monotonousness to it. When Jeanette looks through the shutters, she breaks the stripes, which may convey the meaning of ending the relationship, but for me it seems more likely that looking out the window is a sign for considering her opportunities and possibilities as a single person. This goes hand in hand with the aspect-to-aspect transitions on the last page, which can stand for Jeanette considering the aspects of her current situation. On the last panel we see her face in the shadows. The shadows being made up of stripes imply that she will stay in the relationship. If the last panel was a view through the shutters, that could mean that she would break up with her boyfriend. (O. L.)

Tominee is using more black on the last page to block out shadows, also employs extensive hatching. The penultimate picture is the only one where these parallel lines are disturbed in the form of the shutter being pulled down by the woman. This image is contrasting, as the window is bright and the character appears wholly black, possibly reflecting on her feelings as well as implying that the room behind her is completely dark and the only source of light is the window. The contrasting values could signify melancholy and deep thoughts, which are reflected on the woman's face on the last image of the page. Beforehand the characters' faces were free of shadows and hatching, making here probably agonizing thoughts appear on her face, casted by the light of the outside world that can convey the meaning of prejudice and criticism if she would decide to break up with her partner so close to getting married. (V. O.)

## **Recommended readings:**

Chute, Hillary. 2008. "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narratives." *PMLA* 123 (2): 452-465.

Groensteen, Thierry. 2007. *The System of Comics*. Translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

McCloud, Scott. 1994. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperPerennial.

Pratt, Henry John. 2009. "Narrative in Comics." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (1): 107-117.

Saraceni, Mario. 2003. *The Language of Comics*. London and New York: Routledge.