COMICS & GRAPHIC NOVELS

IN CENTRAL, EASTERN, AND NORTHERN EUROPE

CENS 308

MON/WED | 11AM - 12:30 PM (2026-27 W1)

IMAGE FROM HEARTCORE (2025) BY ŠTĚPÁNKA JISLOVÁ

WHEN+WHERE

Winter Term 1 2025-26

- Mon/Wed | 11AM - 12:30 PM
  2026-09-09 - 2026-12-07
- **Earth & Ocean Sciences (EOS)**
  Floor: 1 | Room: 135

This course explores comics and graphic novels that thematize Central, Eastern, and Northern Europe to examine the relationship between politics, culture, society, and graphic storytelling. Students analyze various texts spanning historical and contemporary contexts, exploring themes such as identity, memory, nationalism, migration, gender, climate change, illness and mental health, and urban life. By the course's conclusion, students will develop a nuanced understanding of the political, cultural, and social dimensions of European comics. They will refine their critical thinking and visual analysis skills within broader socio-historical frameworks by connecting the role of comics as an art form and cultural artifact to other disciplinary perspectives in German and European studies, literary studies, cultural studies, art history, the medical and environmental humanities, museum studies, and Indigenous studies. In addition to advancing their critical thinking skills and visual, media, and climate literacies, this course supports students in developing arts-based research skills through assignments modelled after some of the works we examine in class. In particular, the final project asks students to work in groups to create a comic based on archival research, modelling how creators utilize historical documents and primary sources to craft narratives. ***There are no artistic skills or prerequisites required.***

LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. Identify key themes (e.g. identity, memory, nationalism, migration, gender, urban life) across a range of comics and graphic novels from or about Central, Eastern, and Northern Europe.
2. Describe the historical, political, and cultural contexts in which these comics were produced and received.
3. Recognize formal elements of comics storytelling (e.g. panel structure, visual rhetoric, sequencing, gutters, word/image relations).
4. Apply visual and textual analysis techniques to critically assess comics as both literary texts and visual media.
5. Use interdisciplinary approaches from German studies, literary studies, cultural studies, art history, and museum studies to interpret comics in their socio-historical contexts.
6. Demonstrate familiarity with the conventions and techniques of autobiographical comics and zines through hands-on creative work.
7. Analyze how comics engage with memory, trauma, and history, particularly through their formal structures and use of archival material.
8. Examine how comics represent marginalized voices and intervene in public discourses and collective memory.
9. Create a short autobiographical zine that draws on course themes and comics storytelling strategies.
10. Develop a group comic project based on archival research, synthesizing historical documentation with creative narrative construction.
11. Integrate historical documents, visual techniques, and collaborative storytelling in the production of original graphic narratives.
12. Evaluate the role of comics as cultural artifacts that reflect and shape societal discourses in European and transnational contexts.
13. Reflect critically on your learning through journal entries, connecting weekly materials with personal insights, class discussions, and broader cultural questions.
14. Demonstrate consistent engagement with course materials through thoughtful contributions to asynchronous discussions and completion of in-class writing assignments.

Dr. Elizabeth "Biz" Nijdam (biz.nijdam@ubc.ca)
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Director, UBC Comics Studies & Pop Culture Clusters
Department of Central, Eastern, & Northern European Studies

Office Hours: Wednesdays, 12:30–1:30 PM, Buchanan Tower, Room 927

Hi! My name is Dr. Biz Nijdam. I've taught at UBC since 2019. I received my PhD from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in 2017, where I wrote my PhD on feminist comics and graphic narrative.

My teaching and research are grounded in the belief that popular culture not only reflects social and political discourse, but it also has the capacity to intervene in it. With popular culture increasingly serving as a site for political formation and shaping political ideas and practices, it's more important than ever to integrate popular culture into teaching and learning in higher education.

My scholarship examines the representation of complex histories in comics and digital and tabletop games, Tarot's capacity for innovating classroom teaching, and the role of comics and arts-based research in preserving Indigenous knowledges, sharing Indigenous storytelling traditions, and revitalizing Indigenous languages.

WHAT WE'LL NEED:

1) Canvas will be used for accessing course materials, completing assignments and coursework, and participating in class discussions. To log in to Canvas and learn more visit: https://students.canvas.ubc.ca. You can direct all technical questions to the Learning Technology Hub: lt.hub@ubc.ca. **All supplementary readings will be provided in PDF form on our Canvas site.**

2) Unless provided via Canvas in excerpt, all comic books will be available for free online or for purchase via the **UBC Bookstore**.

3) Digital games will be available online for free or for purchase on various platforms, including laptop and desktop computers as well as Android and iOS devices.

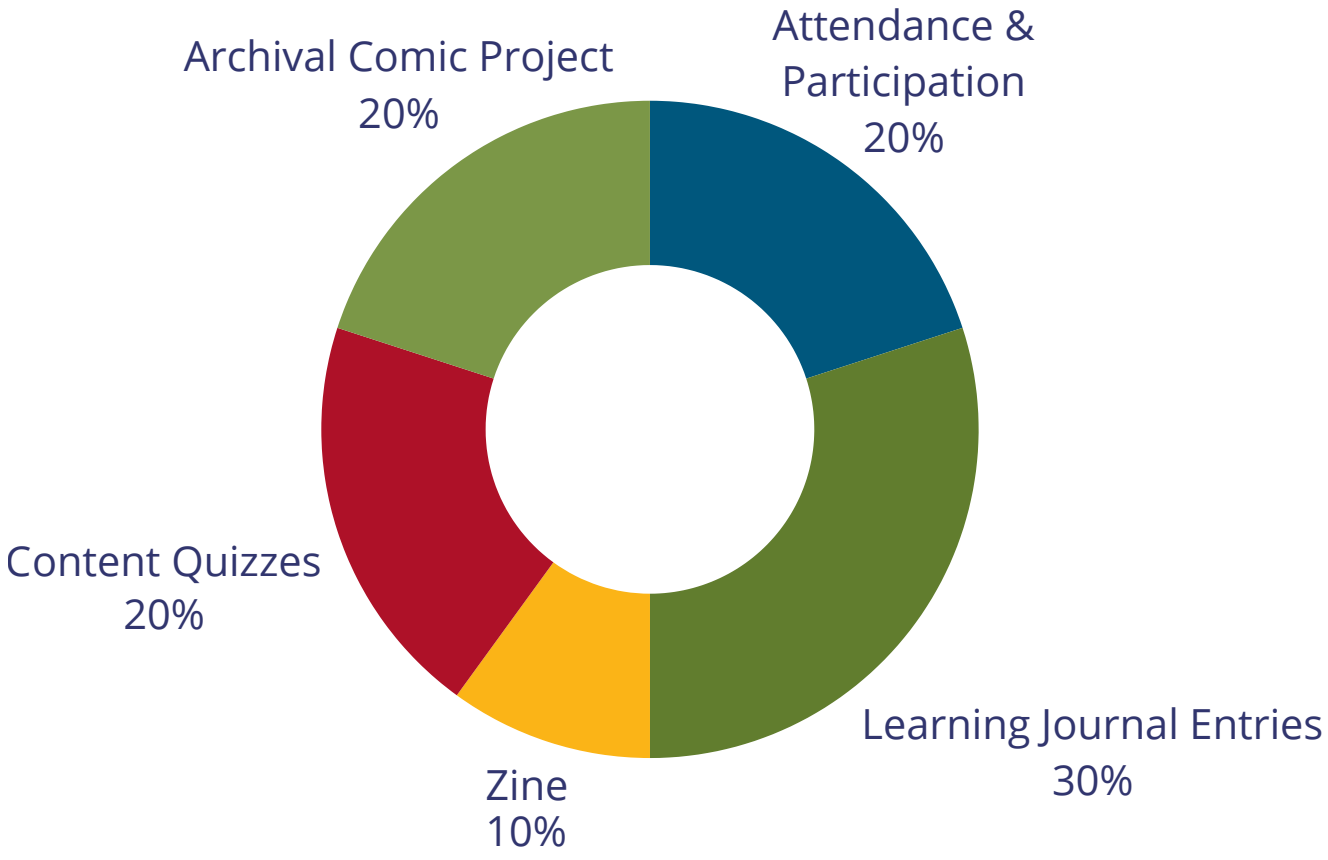
WHAT WE'LL LEARN

This course explores comics and graphic novels that thematize Central, Eastern, and Northern Europe to examine the relationship between politics, culture, society, and graphic storytelling. Students analyze various texts spanning historical and contemporary contexts, exploring themes such as identity, memory, nationalism, migration, gender, and urban life. By the course's conclusion, students will develop a nuanced understanding of the political, cultural, and social dimensions of European comics. They will refine their critical thinking and visual analysis skills within broader socio-historical frameworks by connecting their assessment of the comics as an art form and cultural artifact to other disciplinary perspectives in German studies, literary studies, cultural studies, art history, and museum studies.

In addition to the work of visual analysis, this course will encourage students to use the drawn image critically by producing pieces that engage in art-based research methodologies and making comics themselves. In particular, the final project asks students to create comics based on archival material, investigating how creators utilize historical documents to craft narratives.

WHAT ABOUT GRADING?

This course will feature weekly course readings and lectures, class discussion, group work, and short Learning Journal Entries, and students will complete several creative projects, including a Zine, a visual engagement with an object, and a comic based on archival research in UBC Special Collections or online.



CLASS ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION (20%)

To be successful in this course, you must be prepared for our class sessions and participate actively in all assigned course activities. Good participation will take the form of regular contributions to class discussion and the completion of "in-class" short essays assigned via Canvas.

Students are expected to attend class regularly. Students may not miss more than 40% of the course's scheduled class sessions, regardless of whether their absences are avoidable or unavoidable. In the event that a student misses 12 or more hours of class time, they may be considered unable to meet the "learning outcomes" of the course and may therefore be excluded from final examination. Those students who are unavoidably absent from our class sessions or miss multiple class sessions and their associated "in-class" assignments must ***report their absence to me immediately*** *or upon their return to participating in class in order to establish how they should proceed in catching up on missed material. Students may be granted a concession for their absence, in the case of an extended absence, by the Academic Advising Services of the Faculty of Arts.*

CLASS ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION (CONT.): IN-CLASS ESSAYS

Attendance and participation will be graded through Canvas "in-class" writing assignments. These assignments will be completed during class time and take the form of short "In-Class Essays" that engage the course material, readings, and lectures of a given class session. During our class sessions, students will take 5–7 minutes of in-class time to write 150–350 words in response to a prompt. These short essays offer students the opportunity to reflect on the course material before participating in other online and in-class activities, such as in-class discussion or online discussion threads, and moving on to other material.

These short In-Class Essays are part of our Grading Contract and will therefore not be graded for grammar, spelling, punctuation, or syntax; instead, they will be graded for completion. They thereby function as a testament to student engagement with the course material and proof of their participation in class, as well as form the foundation of class discussion and project work. The use of AI technologies for this and other assignments is strictly forbidden.

All In-Class Essays should be completed in the order they are assigned and are due the day they are assigned at midnight. Making up In-Class Essays after the deadline will only be possible in extenuating circumstances, and extension requests will be considered on a case-by-case basis. All In-Class Essays assignments will close on Sunday at midnight the week they are assigned.

LEARNING JOURNAL ENTRIES (30%, DUE SUNDAYS):

Students will participate in **a series of weekly activities** over the course of the semester, which constitute their Learning Journal (LJ). These activities are either essay-style response (350 words min.) or arts-based assignments (Scratchboard Comic, Object Lesson, Tarot Card, etc.) that deepen student engagement with our course texts, films, and themes. These assignments require students to demonstrate understanding and engagement with course material in greater depth and complexity than in-class discussion, responding to one particular concept, idea, or question.

Excellent written responses will consist of coherent and comprehensible short texts that engage with the topic at hand, incorporate references to readings when applicable, and synthesize class discussions with individual responses and interpretations.
Excellent artistic applications will demonstrate a clear understanding of the intended intervention of the artistic enterprise and the consistent modelling of the conventions, visual style, and aesthetic choices of the genre, medium or form explored through the assignment's arts-based practice.

Learning Journal Entries will be submitted via the assignment's Canvas Discussion Thread **by Sunday at midnight (11:59 PM PT)**. After submitting their Learning Journal Entry, students will participate in Small Group Discussion (in groups of 5 students) over the course of the following week, commenting on at least 2 of their peer's Learning Journal Entries before the following Sunday at midnight (11:59 pm PT). Each comment should consist of 150 words on their fellow student's Learning Journal Entry, while adding elements of their own observations.

Citations for referencing video or in-person lectures are not required. For in-text references to readings, films, or other media, please use MLA style. Bibliographies are not required.

ZINE (10%):

CENS 308's exploration of sequential art is grounded in the role of comics in recounting deeply personal stories and individual experiences that simultaneously connect to public discourses, collective memory and historical events. Students will therefore also be charged with reflecting on these tensions through creative processes. Early in the semester, students will participate in a Zine Workshop with a UBC Librarian to explore how zines also engage in this work and are an important medium for self-expression and storytelling.

After the workshop, students will be asked to create their own autobiographical zines, adopting some of the strategies they learned in the course's introduction to comics studies as well as the tools they explored in the Zine Workshop. In particular, students will create a personal zine that reflects themes and techniques we discussed in our study of autobiographical comics and zines.

CONTENT QUIZZES (20%):

To ensure that students are keeping up with the assigned readings and to encourage close engagement with the comics we are exploring in class, we will be asked to complete short content quizzes at the beginning of each class. These quizzes will also function as a preview for the session's discussion of the material to help students reinforce their understanding of key themes, characters, and plot points, ensuring that you are prepared for in-depth discussions and activities during class.

ARCHIVAL PROJECT: COMIC BOOK (20%)

Our course deals with the representation of history in comics form, and part of this work will be to engage in these creative methods by producing a comic book based on archival research in UBC's Rare Books and Special Collections (RBSC) or online.

For this group project, students will explore a selection of materials of historical import housed in a local archive or online to create a short comic based on these materials. Working in groups of 2-3, student will be invited to explore archival materials housed at UBC or found digitally in one or more internet archives, selecting some to integrate into their comic book, transforming these historical documents into a compelling visual narrative.

Please see our Late Work Submission Policy, which is posted on our course's Canvas site, for more information on submission deadlines, our course's 2-day Grading Grace Period, and late submission for partial marks.

There are no traditional final exams or midterms in this course.

COURSE POLICY ON GENERATIVE AI

The use of generative artificial intelligence tools is strictly prohibited in all course assignments unless explicitly stated otherwise. This includes ChatGPT and other artificial intelligence tools and programs.

Submitting work generated by AI tools is not only a form of academic misconduct. it also misrepresents your understanding and efforts within the context of our course, which is unfair to your peers.

It's easy to rely on AI tools when you're participating in a class that requires a lot of online work, but I hope you'll trust that you're capable of this work without the assistance of technology, especially since you're here to develop critical thinking skills, broaden your understanding of the role of popular media in our lives, and deepen your engagement with it, which AI can't do for you.

Moreover, many of these assignments are part of our grading contract, which was designed to afford students the opportunity to think and learn freely while taking chances in their interpretation of the texts and performance of literary, visual, and media studies analysis. This approach means that there are no "wrong" answers to these low-stakes assignments, so students should feel encouraged to engage thoughtfully and creatively without concern for the impact on their grades.

Finally, writing and critical thinking are essential skills that you will continue to use throughout your academic and professional careers. Practicing these skills now will benefit you in the long run.

UBC POLICIES AND HELPFUL RESOURCES:

The following policies and procedures are considered part of the class syllabus and policy. Feel free to talk them over with your instructor!

UBC Attendance Policy
Applying for Academic Concession
UBC's Academic Code of Honour
UBC's current COVID-19 Policy
Resources to support Student Success
Accommodations for Religious Holidays and Days of Significance
Using Online Netiquette
Use of Electronic Devices at UBC
Center for Accessibility: Support for Disabled Students

UBC Calendar Entry for this course:
"Competence and fluency in everyday situations; ability to report and narrate past events fluently and to express opinions; familiarity with contemporary issues in the German-speaking societies."

OUR PLAN FOR THE TERM

Week 1		WED., SEP. 9	**Course Introduction** **Introduction to Comics Studies**
Week 2	MON., SEP. 14	WED., SEP. 16	**Holocaust Comics & Spiegelman's *Maus*** LJ: MAUS (1972)
Week 3	*asynchronous* MON., SEP. 21	WED., SEP. 23	**Holocaust Comics & Krug's Belonging** LJ: SCRAPERBOARD PROJECT
Week 4	*asynchronous* MON., SEP. 28	*WED., SEP. 30*	**Holocaust Comics & Krug's Belonging** LJ: OBJECT LESSON
Week 5	MON., OCT. 5	WED., OCT. 7	**Canadian Indigenous Comics** Yahgulanaas' *JAJ* & Homalco Heroes LJ: INDIGENOUS STORYTELLING
Week 6	*MON., OCT. 12*	*asynchronous* WED., OCT. 15	**Graphic Medicine:** EUA Graphics LJ: 1-PAGE GRAPHIC MEDICINE COMIC
Week 7	MON., OCT. 19	WED., OCT. 21	**Men's Mental Health** with Shawn Forde Jislová's *Heartcore* LJ: PHOTO ESSAY
Week 8	MON., OCT. 26	WED., OCT. 28	**Jislová's *Heartcore*** & Artist's Talk *Zine Workshop*
Week 9	*asynchronous* MON., NOV. 2	WED.,NOV. 4	**Comics & Migration** LJ: MIGRATION IN THE MEDIA CODING ACTIVITY
Week 10	*MON., NOV. 9*	*WED., NOV. 11*	*WINTER BREAK* **ZINE DUE!**
Week 11	*RBSC: Option 1* MON., NOV. 16	WED., NOV. 18	**Climate Literacy & Storytelling** *Archival Research Workshop* LJ: DOCUPOETRY/TBD
Week 12	*RBSC: Option 2* MON., NOV. 23	WED., NOV. 26	**Climate Literacy & Storytelling** *Comic Book Project: Group Work* LJ: DOCUPOETRY/TBD
Week 13	MON., NOV. 30	WED., DEC. 2	**Climate Literacy & Storytelling** Tarot & Radical Imagining LJ: TAROT CARD
Week 14	MON., DEC. 7		**Comic Book Presentations** **COMIC BOOK DUE!**