Comedy: Literature, Film, Theory  
Fall 2015  
ENG 131a

Prof. Sherman  
email: davidsherman@brandeis.edu  
office: Rabb 136  
office hours: Tuesday 2:00-3:00, Friday 10:00-12:00, and by appointment

Class Schedule:  
Tuesday / Friday 12:30-1:50  
Olin-Sang 112

Jake Burg, Teaching Fellow  
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office hours: Wed 2:00-3:00, Thurs 12:00-1:00

This course is an exploration of comedy as an enigma at the heart of social belonging, psychological coherence, and philosophical speculation. We will investigate the basic strangeness of laughter and compare comic literary and film genres in different historical periods as a way to ask: what is the nature of comic pleasure? How does comedy organize desire and make sense of suffering? How are communities regulated by comedy, and how is comedy involved in social freedom? How are basic philosophical questions about minds and bodies illuminated by comedy? In this course, we will approach the comedic as a defining element of human life in order to develop critical terms for understanding how it works and what it does.

As a four-credit course, it is based on the expectation that students will spend at least nine hours a week, in addition to class sessions, preparing for classes and completing assignments.

The learning objectives for this course include:

- an ability to compare prominent philosophical, psychological, anthropological, and rhetorical theories of comedy and humor, and to distinguish comedy from humor
- familiarity with several comedic genres in the history of literature and film
- analyzing comedic and humorous texts in order to explain how they produce their distinctive effects
- learning to describe the social functions of humor and theorize the political meaning of comedy
- writing / doing comedy and humor

Required Texts (at Brandeis Bookstore unless otherwise noted):

Course Reader [CR], available from instructor  
Tig Notaro, “Live,” mp3 available at iTunes or from instructor  
Lenny Bruce, “The Carnegie Hall Concert,” mp3 available from iTunes or instructor  
Richard Pryor, stand up routine, “Bicentennial Nigger,” mp3 available from instructor [this routine is disc 4 of the box set ...And It’s Deep Too]  
Henri Bergson, Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic (Dover)  
Aristophanes, Lysistrata (Hackett, trans. Ruden)  

Samuel Beckett, Three Novels (Grove)  
Plautus, Amphitryon (Johns Hopkins)  
William Shakespeare, The Comedy of Errors (Signet Classic)  
Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest (any edition)  
Sigmund Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (Norton)  
Flannery O’Connor, Wise Blood (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux)  
Lorrie Moore, Birds of America (Vintage)  
Swift, Gulliver’s Travels (Penguin Classics)
Rules and Requirements:

- Laptops and phones may not be used in class. Don’t use ebooks for readings.
- All assignments must be completed and submitted to receive course credit. Late work will be penalized by one plus/minus for each day past due date.
- Three unexcused absences lowers the final course grade by one plus/minus, and each additional absence by another plus/minus.
- Plagiarism will be penalized by failure on the assignment or course, appearance before a university committee, and/or expulsion.
- Students who wish to have reasonable accommodations made for documented disabilities or Brandeis athletic obligations should speak to me immediately.

Grades and Assignments:

Homework Assignments 1-7: Approximately 1 double-spaced page in response to the questions below and due on the dates listed below. Graded out of 10 points, with 1 point deducted for each day late. 5% each.

Blog: 2 required posts to the class blog, anytime during the semester. In a short paragraph, posts should discuss some aspect of a recent assigned reading or class discussion and relate it to something within the comedy-industrial complex that you find on the internet. Full credit for thoughtful insights exploring connections between ideas in the course and your link, no credit for thoughtless posts or unexplained links. Note: you may post to the blog more than the required amount, and in fact this would be a clever thing for you to do because you can ask that your best blog posts be graded for credit, and also because these posts will be a good way to test out ideas for your longer work. Because the blog will be a part of our ongoing conversation, all students should check the blog a few times a week. 5% each, total 10%. Credit / No credit.

Interpretive Essay: Topics to be assigned. Approx. 5 pages. Due 10/16. 20%

Comedy Piece: A short story, dramatic piece, essay, memoir, fake document, satire or other kind of writing intended to make others laugh or otherwise feel pleasurably estranged from what they take for granted. 5-10 pages, supplemented by an approx. 2-page critical reflection on your piece in which you use course readings, if appropriate, to describe what it is and how it works. Graded according to the comedic skill of the piece and nuance of the self-reflection. Note that comedy pieces will not be graded on some semblance of originality, so for this piece you should learn from the techniques of those on our syllabus, and you may in fact consider this assignment a kind of investigation into your understanding of the comedic techniques we’ve been reading. Due 11/3. 15%

Comedy Genre Project: A project in which you designate a distinctive genre of comedy work, gather examples, identify crucial features, and analyze its social functions. Full assignment description to be distributed. Project proposal due 9/22; rough draft due 12/1; final project due noon 12/14. 20%

Discussion Sections: 9/22, 10/13, 11/17, 12/1

Class Schedule:

Friday, 8/28: Introduction
Monty Python, Candice Bergman, T. S. Eliot, Velimir Khlebnikov, not necessarily in that order.

Tuesday, 9/1
Duffy, “The Laughter at Stafford Girls’ High” [CR]
Böll, “The Laugher” [CR]

**Friday, 9/4: Homework Assignment 1 Due**
Baudelaire, “On the Essence of Laughter” [CR]
Bakhtin, from *Rabelais and His World*, 1-29, 48 [CR]
Parvulescu, from *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (ch. 1) [CR]

**Unit One: Physical Comedy. Having a mind in relation to a body is funny.**
**Tuesday, 9/8**
Chaplin, dir., *City Lights* [LATTE]
Plessner, *Laughing and Crying*, pp. 32-38 [CR]

**Friday, 9/11: Homework Assignment 2 Due**
Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*
Keaton, dir., *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* [LATTE]

*CLASS CANCELLED Tuesday, 9/15 for Rosh Hashanah*

**Friday, 9/18**
Lewis, “The Meaning of the Wild Body” [CR]
McCarey, dir., *Duck Soup* [LATTE]

**Tuesday, 9/22: *Meet in sections.* Proposals for Comedy Genre Project Due.**
Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*

**Friday, 9/25**
Beckett, *Molloy*, sec. 1

*CLASS CANCELLED Tuesday, 9/29, Brandeis Monday*

**Friday, 10/2**
Beckett, *Molloy*, sec. 2

**Unit Two: Mistakes of Identity / Identity as Mistake. Having a proper name is funny.**
**Tuesday, 10/6: Homework Assignment 3 Due**
Plautus, *Amphitryon*
Frye, from *Anatomy of Criticism*, “The Mythos of Spring: Comedy” [CR]

**Friday, 10/9**
Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*
Dolar, “Comedy and Its Double” [CR]

**Tuesday, 10/13: *Meet in sections.* Homework Assignment 4 Due**
Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*
Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” [CR]
Friday, 10/16: Interpretive Essay Due
Allen, dir., *Zelig* [LATTE]

Unit Three: Desire and Repression. Wanting something you’re not supposed to is funny.
Tuesday, 10/20: Homework Assignment 5 Due
Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Part A

Friday, 10/23
Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Part B

Tuesday, 10/27
Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Part C
Zupanic, from *The Odd One In: On Comedy*, pp. 110-147 [CR]

Friday, 10/30: Homework Assignment 6 Due
Pfaller, “The Familiar Unknown, the Uncanny, the Comic: The Aesthetic Effects of the Thought Experiment” [CR]
Ramis, dir., *Groundhog Day* [LATTE]

Unit Four: Comedy as suffering by other means. Being mortal is funny.
Tuesday, 11/3: Comedy Piece Due
Notaro, stand up routine, “Live”
Allen, “Death: A Comedy in One Act” [CR]
Barthelme, “The School” [CR]

Friday, 11/6
O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, chs. 1-7

Tuesday, 11/10
O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, chs. 8-14
Niebuhr, “Humor and Faith” [CR]

Friday, 11/13
Moore, *Birds of America*, “Willing” through “Beautiful Grade”

Tuesday, 11/17: *Meet in sections*
Moore, *Birds of America*, “What You Want to Do Is Fine” through “Terrific Mother”

Unit Five: Satire and Cultural Estrangement. Social norms are funny.
Friday, 11/20: Homework Assignment 7 Due
Douglas, “Jokes” [CR]
Brecht, “On Chinese Acting” [CR]
Dundes, from *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humor Cycles and Stereotypes*, ch. 1, “The Dead Baby Joke Cycle” [CR]
Bruce, stand up routine, “The Carnegie Hall Concert”
Pryor, stand up routine, “Bicentennial Nigger”

**Tuesday, 11/24**
Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, part I

*CLASS CANCELLED Friday, 11/27 for Thanksgiving*

**Tuesday, 12/1:** *Meet in sections.* Rough Draft of Comedy Project Genre Due
Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, parts II-III

**Friday, 12/4**
Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, part IV

**Tuesday, 12/8:** Conclusion. The punchline.

*Final Comedy Genre Project Due, Monday 12/14, noon, in my mailbox*
**Homework Assignments.** Write approximately one double-spaced page for each assignment.

**Assignment 1, due 9/4**
Read Baudelaire, Bakhtin, and Parvulescu. How does each writer suggest the relationship between laughter and freedom? Briefly characterize, with a few quotations, the way each claims that the pleasure of laughter undermines coercive social conventions, evades authority, resists domination, or otherwise animates agency in the face of constraints. (In class, be prepared to argue for the approach among these writers that you find most compelling.)

**Assignment 2, due 9/11**
1) What is Bergson’s core, repeated argument about the nature of human laughter? Feel free to quote one of his exemplary formulations of his claim.
2) What does Bergson seem to mean by “life” or “living,” in his discussions of the comic? He doesn’t explicitly develop this term, even though it’s central to his thought. How do you interpret it? Quote a few relevant lines to clarify your interpretation.
3) Briefly contrast Bergson to another theorist of laughter or the comic. What is their conversation about—what is their shared concern—and how do they approach it differently?

**Assignment 3, due 10/16**
1) What are some typical qualities of a comedic narrative world, according to Frye?
2) Frye argues that elaborate, unbelievable plot-twists are typical in comedic narratives. Comedies don’t depend on realism. How does he explain the success of comedic non-realism? What does this non-realism satisfy, according to Frye?

**Assignment 4, due 10/13**
1) Briefly discuss the distinctive form or technique of Sontag’s piece of writing and the way her formal/technical method helps generate her insights.
2) Quote a short passage from Sontag, a sentence or three, that is especially effective in capturing her ideas about camp.
3) Identify a dynamic tension or contradiction involved in camp, according to Sontag.

**Assignment 5, due 10/20**
1) How does Freud justify taking jokes as a serious object of analysis? He addresses this question at the end of the Introduction and later, when he associates jokes with dreams. How does he justify his analytical project?
2) How do jokes generate pleasure, according to Freud?

**Assignment 6, due 10/30**
1) What does Pfaller mean by “an occurrence of symbolic causality” (in section two)? To help your explanation, invent or describe another example of this phenomenon, beyond those he gives.
2) On p. 207, Pfaller writes that

   both the uncanny and the comic presuppose a thought experiment. The impression of the uncanny or comic always results when, at a certain moment and at a particular point, the world itself seems to correspond to a thought experiment – for example, when people
move for a moment as if they were those machines that Descartes tries to imagine in his thought experiment.

How does his idea that the comic resembles a thought experiment help you understand a comedic text in our course? What is the thought experiment, the implicit “what if...,” embedded in this text?

**Assignment 7, due 11/20**

Read the essays by Douglas, Brecht, and Dundes. Select one of the essays and answer the questions below about it.

1) identify the sentence that it can least afford to do without, its most crucial moment. Transcribe it.
2) justify your choice by explaining how this sentence captures essential aspects of the author’s thought, what this sentence says or does that provides a key to the whole.
3) formulate an important question that this essay is trying to answer. What is the question to which this essay is a response?
4) briefly describe some alternative, contrasting or competing idea that the author uses to develop his or her own ideas. What interesting perspective does the author use in order to sharpen his or her own points?