

## **No Joke: Comedy as Commentary**

Fall 2008

Thursdays 12:00 - 2:40 pm, 66th 5th Ave, Room 101

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This class will explore humor and its theoretical concepts such as rhetoric, irony, the modest proposal, fallacy, facetiousness, and its uses by the avant-garde and contemporary artists, writers, and filmmakers. We'll also look at comedic precedents, that is, theorists, historical figures, and more, who set the course of comedic history and led us to where we are today. Comedic timing, "funny" materials, performativity, kitsch and the comic strip, Dada, pranksterism, subversion, high-brow vs. low-brow, and slapstick, will all be touched upon. The following questions will be investigated: How do artists use irony, goofiness, satire, and sarcasm in their work? Can an artwork be funny and critical at the same time? What historical precedents have established humor as a means of communication? Why is something funny? Is funny universal? How has laughter changed, if at all? Video, photography, interactive installations, book works, paintings, sculptures, film, Television shows, and more, have and continue to use humor as a means of communication. As we'll see, psychology, history, politics, sociology, anthropology, art, literature, film, and philosophy, can all be linked with humor.

The class is organized thematically; every class will cover a different theme or strategy. Each week we will read critical text appropriate to the subject. We will also view artworks, films, TV shows, youtube clips, read limericks, and collectively figure out what humor is and what it's for.

### **Requirements include:**

Participation and attendance every week (10 %)

Preparing "Talking Points" for each class; submitting them at the end of class (20%) -

#### **Due every week**

Weekly readings (readings will be emailed to you/given to you on disk so you have no reason not to do them).

Two "Object Studies": 1 x 500-word think piece (**Due Sept. 11th**), 1 x visual assignment (**Due Oct. 2**) (5%)

One midterm take-home exam: 5-page essay answering one question handed out in class the week before (25 %) - **Due Oct. 23rd**

One term paper: 8-10 pages on a topic of your choice related to themes presented in class (35%) - **Due Dec. 18th**

One oral presentation: on your term paper, with visuals (5%) - **Due Dec. 11th and 18th**

## **Some things to remember:**

Plagiarism. Plagiarism is totally unacceptable and is grounds for failing the course and/or dismissal from the New School. Plagiarism is the unauthorized use of close imitation of the language and thoughts of another author and the representation of them as one's own original work. Examples of this are: using an author's words in your own essay and not citing them, paraphrasing an author's words -- that is changing the exact wording but lifting the exact meaning -- and not citing them, lifting sentences from websites (Wikipedia or other online sources) and not citing them. If you fear you are confused about citations, even after I review citations in class, make an appointment with me and we will go through it together. Note -- plan ahead, as I will not meet with you the day before your assignment is due.

**Absences:** Three absences and you fail.

**Lateness:** Three lates count as one absence.

**Late assignments:** I don't read late papers, talking points, essays, exams, nothing, zip, zilch. Zero. No joke. Don't bother with excuses; if it's late, it's a zero.

**Responsibilities:** If you feel as if you are falling behind, not understand a certain theme, didn't fully grasp a particular article, let me know. I am not a mind reader. If you come to me to explain what is going on you will learn more. Taking the initiative and being proactive will only benefit you as a student.

**Keep in touch:** All assignments, target dates, peripheral readings, contextual information, video clips, etc., are available for viewing on our class blog: <http://ourcomedyclass.tumblr.com/>. If you have an interesting link or article that you'd think would be great to include on the blog, email it to me and I will post it and credit you.

**Assignments:** All assignments must be spell-checked, double-spaced, have your name and date on the very first page (or on a cover page if you prefer), and have corresponding citations and a bibliography (when applicable).

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## WEEK 1

9/4: Class business and Introduction. *What's so Funny?*

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## WEEK 2

9/11: What we laugh at (types of humor)

Required:

Monro, D. H, *Arguments of Laughter*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1951. Chapter 2: "Non-Humorous Laughter," pp. 20- 34 and Chapter 3: "Types of Humor", pp. 35-52.

Morton, Tom. *Maurizio Cattelan: Infinite Jester*//2005. From Higgle, Jennifer, *The Artist's Joke: Documents of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 205 - 211.

To view: Maurizio Cattelan, et al.

*Talking Points due*

*Object Study #1 Due - Review Maurizio Cattelan's sculpture at the New Museum. Is it funny? Why/Why not? 500 words.*

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## WEEK 3

9/18: Why we laugh (theories of humor); Freud, Bergson

Required:

Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. New York: WW Norton & Company Inc., 1960. Pp. 9-15, 90-116.

Bergson, Henri. *Laughter*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1911. Pp. 1-36

Supplemental:

Monro, D. H, *Arguments of Laughter*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1951. Chapter 10: "Bergson", pp. 112-135; Chapter 15: "Freud", pp. 182-200.

Viewing Pool: Jerry Springer, Married with Children, Caddyshack, et al.

*Talking Points Due*

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## WEEK 4

**9/25:** The Banana Peel (physical comedy and gag humor)

\*\*\*Class will start with a brief lesson of how do to: a proper essay outline, proper citations, and a proper bibliography.

Required:

Chaplin, Charlie. *My Autobiography*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964. *Excerpt*.  
Carroll, Noel. *Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humor, and Bodily Coping*, 2000. (Excerpt

Viewing Pool: the Three Stooges, Buster Keaton, Jacques Tati's *Trafic*, American Pie, Monty Python, Jim Carey in *The Mask*, Bruce Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner around the Perimeter of a Square*, Bas Jan Ader, Pie in the face.

*Talking Points Due*

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## WEEK 5

**10/2:** Me Talk Funny (The relationship between language and humor; puns/limericks/wordplays/alliteration/wit)

Required:

Sedaris, David. "The French Lesson" in *Me talk Pretty*, 2003.

Gruner, Charles R. *The Game of Humor: A comprehensive theory of why we laugh*. London: Transaction Publishers, 1997. Chapter 6: "The Special Case of Puns," pp. 131-146.

*Peter Pauper's Limerick Book* (Excerpts)

Schwartz, Alvin. *Witcracks: Jokes and Jests from American Folklore*. New York: Macmillan, 1973. (excerpts)

Viewing Pool: Jenny Holzer, Kay Rosen, Ironic T-shirts, Knock Knock jokes, Ridicule, George Carlin, Steven Wright.

*Talking Points Due*

*Object Study #2 Due -- One image -- photograph, drawing, illustration, painting, collage, video -- of Funny.*

*Midterm question handed out in class.*

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## 10/9 CLASS CANCELLED

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### WEEK 6

**10/16:** The Modern World (What is Modernism and how did it affect comedy?)

Required:

Gay, Peter. Modernism: *The Lure of Heresy: From Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2008. Pp. 1-30  
Additional Excerpt TBD

Viewing Pool: Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, *The Office*,

*Talking Points Due*

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### WEEK 7

**10/23:** Anarchy and Humor (Upsetting the status quo; Dadaism; Situationism; Pranksterism;)

Required:

Dickerman, Leah, ed. *Dada: Zurich Berlin Hannover Cologne New York Paris*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007. (excerpt)  
Breton, Andre. *Lightning Rod*, 1940. (excerpt).  
Tzara, Tristan. *Dada Manifesto*, 1918. (excerpt).  
Ball, Hugo. *Dada Fragments*, 1916-17 (excerpt)  
Hoch, Hannah, *The Painter*, c. 1920.

Viewing Pool: Guy de Bord, John Baldessari's *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*, Vito Acconci, Pee Wee's Playhouse, The Yes Men, Charlie Todd's *Improv Everywhere*.

*Talking Points Due*

**5-page MIDTERM PAPERS DUE; NO LATE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED.**

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### WEEK 8

**10/30:** Black humor (the comedic villain; clowns; the unfunny; the modest proposal and satire; the psychology of weeping)

Required:

Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot* (excerpt).

Robb, David. *Clowns, Fools, and Picaros: Popular Forms in Theatre, Fiction, and Film*. (excerpt).

Piddington, Ralph. *The Psychology of Laughter*. New York: Gamut Press, 1963.

Chapter 5: "The Psychology of Weeping," pp. 105 - 114

Swift, Jonathan. *The Modest Proposal* (Excerpt).

Viewing Pool: Bruce Nauman, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*, Coyote vs. Roadrunner, Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories*, Fellini's *Clowns*.

*Talking Points Due*

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## **WEEK 9**

**11/6:** Feminism and Humor (Women and Humor; feminism; role-reversals; caricature)

Required:

Gruner, Charles R. *The Game of Humor: A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh*. London: Transaction Publishers, 1997.

Chapter 5: "Sexual, Sexist and Scatological Humor," pp. 107-129

Guerrilla Girls, *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist*, 1988 (one page)

Supplemental: "Mae West Was Not a Man: Sexual Parody and Genre in the Plays and Films of Mae West in Finney", Gail. *Look Who's Laughing: Gender and Comedy*. New York: OPA, 1994.

Viewing Pool: Andrea Fraser, The Guerrilla Girls, Adrian Piper, *When Harry Met Sally*, *Legally Blonde*, *Some Like it Hot*, R. Crumb, Rachel Harrison, Carolee Schneemann.

*Talking Points Due*

*Paper Topic sheets due: Subject and ten sources (cited properly)*

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## **WEEK 10**

**13/11:** Kitsch and Pop (high vs. low, funny in the everyday)

Required:

*Warhol on Warhol* (excerpts)

*Tell me Everything:* Interview with Stuart Morgan and Richard Prince, 1989

Hickey, Dave. *Frivolity and Uction* in Higgle, Jennifer. *The Artist's Joke*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007. Pp. 116 - 123

Viewing Pool: Andy Warhol's Soup Cans, Richard Prince's Joke paintings, Roy Lichtenstein, Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, The Simple Life, Gilda Radner as Patti Smith, Saturday Night Live.

*Talking Points Due*

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## **WEEK 11**

**11/20**; Humor, politics, and the politically incorrect (parody; caricature)

Required:

Gruner, Charles R. *The Game of Humor: A Comprehensive Theory of Why We laugh*. London: Transaction Publishers, 1997. Chapter 7: "The Mirage of Innocent Humor," pp. 147-177

Aronowitz, Stanley. *Roll Over Beethoven: The Return of Cultural Strife*, Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1993. pp. 20 - 62.

Colbert, Stephen. I am American and So Can You! (excerpt).

Viewing Pool: Mad Magazine, Sarah Silverman, Gelatin, Robert Gober's Virgin, Piss Christ, Damian Hirst, Jon Stewart Show, Crossfire, Chaplin's The Great Dictator,

*Talking Points Due*

*Paper Outlines Due (with thesis statement and major points)*

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## **THIS WEEK'S CLASS ON TUESDAY INSTEAD OF THURSDAY**

## **WEEK 12**

**11/25**: Humor and Globalization

Required:

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007. (excerpt)

The Mohammed Controversy (Newspaper excerpts)

Viewing Pool: Coming to America, New Yorker cover of Obama and Michelle, Thai Prison's *Thriller*, Islamic graphic novels, et al.

*Talking Points Due*

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**WEEK 13**

**12/4:** Situation Comedy (humor and post-modernity; irony; no laugh track)

Required:

Jencks, Charles. *Critical Modernism: Where is Post-Modernism Going?* New York: Academy Press, 2007. (excerpt)

Tueth, Michael V. *Laughter in the Living Room: Television Comedy and the American Home Audience*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004. (excerpt)

Viewing Pool: Fischl and Weiss's *The Way Things Go*, *Seinfeld*, *Arrested Development*, *Asscat* at Upright Citizens' Brigade, Sarah Silverman.

*Talking Points Due*

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**WEEK 14**

**12/11:** Oral Presentations

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**WEEK 15**

**12/18:** Conclusions; Oral Presentations; **TERM PAPERS DUE**