No Joke: Comedy as Commentary  
Fall 2008  
Thursdays 12:00 - 2:40 pm, 66th 5th Ave, Room 101  
Julia Dault, daultj32@newschool.edu

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).
WEEK 1
9/4: Class business and Introduction. *What’s so Funny?*

WEEK 2
9/11: What we laugh at (types of humor)

Required:


To view: Maurizio Cattelan, et al.

*Talking Points due*


WEEK 3
9/18: Why we laugh (theories of humor); Freud, Bergson

Required:


Supplemental:


*Talking Points Due*
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:


Talking Points Due

WEEK 5
10/2: Me Talk Funny (The relationship between language and humor; puns/limericks/wordplays/alliteration/wit)

Required:


*Peter Pauper’s Limerick Book* (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.
WEEK 6
10/16: The Modern World (What is Modernism and how did it affect comedy?)

Required:

Additional Excerpt TBD

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

Talking Points Due

WEEK 7
10/23: Anarchy and Humor (Upsetting the status quo; Dadaism; Situationism; Pranksterism;)

Required:

Breton, Andre. Lightning Rod, 1940. (excerpt).
Tzara, Tristan. Dada Manifesto, 1918. (excerpt).
Ball, Hugo. Dada Fragments, 1916-17 (excerpt)


Talking Points Due

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

WEEK 8
10/30: Black humor (the comedic villain; clowns; the unfunny; the modest proposal and satire; the psychology of weeping)
Required:


Talking Points Due

WEEK 9
11/6: Feminism and Humor (Women and Humor; feminism; role-reversals; caricature)

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


Talking Points Due
Paper Topic sheets due: Subject and ten sources (cited properly)

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

_Talking Points Due_

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**WEEK 11**

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

Required:


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:


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_
WEEK 13
12/4: Situation Comedy (humor and post-modernity; irony; no laugh track)

Required:


*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**