

FMS 490
Capstone Seminar: Comedy as Social Discourse
Spring 2009

Seminar:
F 1:00-3:50 PM LL272
Optional Screening:
Th 6-8PM* LL272

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I. DESCRIPTION:

Comedy is a powerful discursive tool; the notion (attributed to multiple sources from George Bernard Shaw and Joe Orton to my eighth grade English teacher, Mrs. Roshko), that if one gets the audience laughing, then while their mouths are open, you can shove the truth in seems quite applicable here.” (Laughing Mad p. 243)

The course focuses upon the way that comedy can speak with particular clarity to the American condition whether from behind the microphone and/or on the small screen. By examining how comic conventions, personae and sensibilities in standup as well as sitcoms and television satire respond to change in social and political sensibilities at specific historical moments, we will tease out not only why comedy, perhaps more than any other genre, can get people to engage (and to think about) a variety of human experiences—often in spite of themselves.

A VERY BIG CAVEAT: *Dying is easy, comedy is hard—it can also be considered obscene or profane by some. The comedic visual texts screen (and/ or produced) in the course may describe or depict sex, violence and other acts and ideologies that might be considered immoral or amoral by some standards. When examining comedy as social discourse, one should be prepared to engage texts that test social boundaries. In the spirit of creating a nurturing opening and rigorous learning environment, I would urge you to assess whether this course is appropriate for you. If it is not, now time to withdraw.*

REQUIRED READINGS:

All readings will either be distributed in class or available online.

II. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Participation: You are expected to have completed the assigned reading for class on the day listed and to be prepared to discuss all aspects of the material in a coherent manner. While the Thursday screening is optional but students are expected to view the assigned television program or film text before the day of the seminar. [16 pts.]

Plagiarism Policy: You are expected to turn in original work for this course. Quotations or ideas paraphrased from other work must be properly cited. Taking credit for another's idea or writing is plagiarism, which is a serious violation of the University's Code of Academic Integrity: Integrity is expected of every student in all academic work. The guiding principle of academic integrity is that a student's submitted work must be the student's own. The student Code of Conduct and disciplinary procedures established by ABOR Policies 5-308-5-403, all provisions of which apply to all Arizona State University students, furthers this principle. If you are unsure how to credit your source, ask your instructor for clarification.

*Most screenings will last only 2 hours (2 standup specials or 3-4 episodes of sitcoms). If you cannot attend the optional screening it is your responsibility to watch on your own.

Assignments

1) Research Paper/Final Project/White Paper (30 pts.):

Students are required to do one of the following assignments:

A) A typed **10-12-page research paper** based upon the prospectus

B) **The first act of a screenplay or the pilot of a sitcom (along with a 5 page critical paper critiquing one social or political issue or an issue of representation engaged in your creative piece).**

C) A **digital media/interactive project engaging comedy (along with a 5-page critical paper critiquing one social or political issue or an issue of representation engaged in your creative piece utilizing a minimum of three critical sources).**

D) An **10-page “white paper”** that outlines how a specific aspect of the media industry (film, television and/or digital) should incorporate your original approach to making and/or marketing comedy utilizing a minimum of three critical sources).

2) Short Response Essay (8 pts. each essay/ 24 pts. total): Each screening will be accompanied by a series of the “Thought Questions” that relate the visual texts (films/programs) to the critical texts (readings). Students are required to write THREE **3-4-page essays** responding to one of the thought questions for each unit of the three units in the course on stand-up, sitcom and satire. These essays should utilize two visual texts (one screened for class and one of your choosing) and one critical text [from assigned readings]. You are allowed to rewrite one of these short essays (taking into consideration the comments you received) and submit it for review one week after it has been returned to you.

Prospectus/Treatment/Mission Statement (12 pts.): A typed 1-2 page piece outlines your proposed subject. Include in the proposal the following sections: a) a 1-2 sentence summary, b) a description of the “sample” or body of archival work/ primary sources that will be examined; c) an indication of the theoretical orientation you will be applying to the works under analysis; and d) a rationale for the project that references other work done in the area, and/or the need for the proposed project. Make copies for the entire seminar.

Presentation (18 pts.): Students are required to give 15-minute oral/visual presentation to the class of your work (in progress) scheduled for the final two weeks of the seminar. By presenting your creative and/or critical work to receive and respond to the oral and written feedback from your instructor and your classmates. Comments from your peers (on feedback form) as well as your self-evaluation (using the same feedback form) will factor into your presentation grade.

V. CALENDAR/SCHEDULE OF READINGS:

- WEEK 1** **What is “social discourse” and what does comedy have to do with it?**
F 1/23 Readings: “George Carlin: The Last of the Trinity” & “Lenny Bruce without Tears”
Clips: Lenny Bruce, Dick Gregory, George Carlin, Bill Cosby
Screening: *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert*
- WEEK 2** **The Holy Trinity of Contemporary Comedy (+2)**
Th 1/29 Screening: *Make 'Em Laugh: The Funny Business of America*
F 1/30 Reading: Laughing Mad (hereafter LM) Ch. 1 Pts 1-4
 (“From Negro to Black...”) & “Serious PBS, a survey of American funny”
- WEEK 3** **Comic as Rock Star**
Th 2/5 Screenings: *Eddie Murphy: Raw*; *John Leguizamo: Freak*
F 2/6 Readings: LM Ch. 2 Pts. 1-2 (From Black Guy to Rock Star”);
 “Looking at the Latin Freak” & “Dane Cook: pain-free comedy,”
Clips: *Chris Rock: Bring the Pain*, *Dane Cook: Vicious Circle*
- WEEK 4** **Of course, they’re funny: Female Comics**
Th 2/12 Screening: *Queens of Comedy* and *Sandra Bernhard: Without You, I’m Nothing*
F 2/13 Reading: LM Ch. 4 Pts. 1-3, “Comic Views & Metaphysical Dilemmas” &
 “Without You, I’m Nothing”
Clips: Whoopi Goldberg, Sara Silverman, Wanda Sykes
- WEEK 5** **Sense & Sexuality: The Rainbow of Laughter**
Th 2/19 Screening: *Margaret Cho: I’m the One that I Want*; *Eddie Izzard: Dressed to Kill*
F 2/20 Reading: “Where’s My Parade? ...” & “Some performative techniques of stand-up
 Comedy”
Clips:
Paper 1 Due Monday 2/23 by noon (Hard copies only)
- WEEK 6** **Standup Wrap Up & Final Project Status Reports**
Th 2/26 Screening: *George Lopez: Why Are You Cryin’* & *The Original Kings of Comedy*
F 2/27 Readings: “Standup Comic As Anthropologist” & “Performing Marginality”
- WEEK 7** **The Capstone of the Capstone: The Final Project**
M 3/2 Individual Meetings on Final Project Proposal: by appointment
T 3/3 Individual Meetings on Final Project Proposal: by appointment
W 3/4 Individual Meetings on Final Project Proposal: by appointment
F 3/6 **Final Project Proposal Due (via e-mail as pdf attachment)**
 NO CLASS ON F 3/6
- WEEK 8** **SPRING BREAK**
- WEEK 9** **The Electronic Hearth’s Happiest Genre: The Sitcom**
Th 3/12 Screening: *The Honeymooners*, *All in the Family* & *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*
Clips: *I Love Lucy*, *The Donna Reed Show*
F 3/13 Reading: “The Meaning of Memory;” “Quality vs. Relevance,” “Frank’s Place” &
 Television Teaching: Parody, *The Simpsons*...”
Screening: *Good Times*, *Frank’s Place*, *The Simpsons*

- WEEK 10** **It's in the Act**
 Th 3/19 Screening: *Roseanne, The Cosby Show, Home Improvement & Ellen*
 F 3/20 Reading: "There's No Place Like Home," "Class Dismissed," "Comic Interventions"
 Screening: *The Bernie Mac Show*
Paper 2 Due Monday 3/23 by noon (Hard copies only)
- WEEK 11** **Comedies of Self**
 Th 3/26 Screening: *Seinfeld, Will & Grace, Arrested Development*
 F 3/27 Readings: "The Seinfeld Doctrine," "Why is George so funny," "Seinfeld: 10 Years Later" & "Decoding Will & Grace," "Comedy Verité," "Comedy Crisis" & "The Sitcom Digresses"
- WEEK 12** **Laughing & Thinking: Sketch & Society (Part.1)**
 Th 4/2 Screening: *The Richard Pryor Show, In Living Color, Chappelle's Show*
 F 4/3 Reading: LM Ch. 5 Pts 1-4
- WEEK 13** **Laughing & Thinking Part.1: Sketch & Society**
 Th 4/9 Saturday Night Live & *30 Rock*
 F 4/10 Reading: "Strange Bedfellows," "Saturday Night Live' and Weekend Update," "The Sitcom Digresses"
- WEEK 14** **Laughing & Thinking Part 2: Cartoons, Fake News & Different Shades of Satire**
 Th 4/16 Screening: *South Park, Family Guy, Boondocks, The Colbert Report*
 F 4/17 Reading: "First, they're foreigners," "When Fake is More Real" & TBA
 Screening: *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*
Paper 1 Due IN CLASS 4/20 (Hard copies only)
- WEEK 15** **It's Your Show...**
 4/23 Presentations
 4/24 Presentations
- WEEK 16** **Comedy is ALWAYS social discourse**
 4/30 *No Screening (work on your project)*
 5/1 Presentations
FINAL PROJECTS DUE 5/5 by noon