MCM0901D: Film Comedy
Instructor: Maggie Hennefeld
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Course Meeting: Tuesday / Thursday, 10:30 – 11:50
Screenings: Monday or Tuesday, 7:00 – 11:00 PM
Classroom: The Henkle Room, MCM Department, 155 George St.
Screening Room: Production 1 Classroom, 135 Thayer Street (except for special 35mm screenings at the Granoff Center)
Office Hours: Tuesday, 1-2:30 PM or by appointment, Room 208 of MCM Dept. (155 George St.)

Course Description:
What makes some films so funny? This course will investigate many different forms of film comedy-- from slapstick physical gags involving hapless men and umbrella-wielding matrons, to eccentric verbal banter, to parodies that subvert state politics using puppet characters. Instead of treating film comedy as “just mindless escapism,” we will study how comedy's complex and slippery devices are central to the history of cinema. Readings in critical discourses about comedy, film history and film theory, e.g. Freud, Bergson, Benjamin, Rob King, Miriam Hansen, and Kathleen Rowe. Screenings range from silent slapstick, to communist satire, to romantic comedy, to political mockumentary.

This course offers the opportunity to think about a widely discussed but critically under-researched topic. Comedy has always been described as a very slippery experience: jokes die in the process of explaining them, and only become funny again once they have regained that mystifying quality. This semester we will attempt to grapple with the limits of comedic form, its playful nature as well as its deeper implications, by focusing on the interrelation between modern comedy and the history of cinema.

Assigned Texts:
Available at Brown Bookstore
Sigmund Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious
Henri Bergson, Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic

Readings and Screenings:
All other readings are available on OCRA. **Password = Laughter.**

You are expected to have completed the readings by the day that they are assigned, and to have seen all of the week’s screenings by Thursday’s class meeting. Attendance will be taken at weekly screenings. If for some reason you are unable to attend either of the screening times on a given week, it is your responsibility to watch the films before our class session on Thursday. All of the films will be available for viewing in the film archive of the MCM Basement (155 George St.) Most of the films will also be posted on **MyCourses** the week after they are screened so that you can refer to them for your papers, presentations, and blog posts.

Films will be screened in the order that they are listed on the syllabus on Monday; and in reverse order on Tuesday. For example, *Sullivan’s Travels* will screen at 7 PM on Monday (1/30), and at 8:45 PM Tuesday (1/31).

**Course Requirements:**
Given the performative nature of our course topic, your lively and engaged participation in class discussions will be crucial.

**MIDTERM PAPER**- **20%** (5 pages double-spaced. Due in class on 3/8)

**FINAL PAPER**- **30%** (10 pages double-spaced. Due by email before midnight on Friday, May 6th)

**GROUP PROJECT**- **20%** (4/9 or 4/10)

- You and your partner(s) will prepare a creative project to present to the class. This can be a short film, a skit, a stand-up routine, a short story, an art project, a website, etc. Your project will offer an interpretation of some of the major questions and themes of the course. You will accompany your project with a short, written synopsis and explanation of why your project medium offers a different set of tools for grappling with the difficulties of comedy than the screenings and readings we have been focusing on this semester.

**IN-CLASS PRESENTATION**- **10%**

- Everyone will be responsible for giving a 10-15 minute in-class presentation during the semester. You will sign up for presentation dates on the second week of class.

**ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION**- **10%**

- This means punctual attendance, lively and engaged participation at all class meetings, and punctual attendance at screenings.

**WIKI POSTS**- **10%**

- Every other week you will be responsible for posting a discussion question on our class wiki. Your question should respond to some aspect of the readings, screenings, and topics for that week. Discussion questions must be posted no later than 9:00 PM, WEDNESDAY.

**Extra Credit:**
You will have the opportunity to earn up to 5 extra credit points throughout the semester by attending extra-curricular film comedy screenings. Each extra credit film comedy screening is worth 1 point, and must be accompanied by a short response (screening
name, date, and location + synopsis + your critical reaction) on the class wiki no later than 1 week after the screening took place. The MCM Cinemathèque screening of Dorothy Arnzer’s Anybody’s Woman is worth 2 points (on Feb 3rd at 6PM in the Production 1 Classroom of 135 Thayer St.)! Your first 3 screening points are limited to the MCM Cinemathèque (http://www.brown.edu/Departments/MCM/images/MCM_cinemathequeposter_spring2012.jpg), Magic Lantern Series (http://magiclanterncinema.com), the French Film Festival (http://www.brown.edu/Project/French_Film_Festival/film-list/) or Africana Film Festival (http://brown.edu/Departments/Africana_Studies/events/).

Grading:
Your grade will be based 100% upon merit. In other words, there is no curve. However, it is mandatory that you complete each component of the course requirements in order to earn a passing grade in this course. For example, if you do not show up to class on time and ready to participate, then you will jeopardize your ability to pass this course, even if you have performed satisfactorily on all of the other assignments.

Course Schedule:

Thurs, 1/26: COURSE INTRODUCTION

Week 1: COMEDY AND SELF-REPRESENTATION
Screening—Sullivan’s Travels (Preston Sturges, 1941, 90min) and Shaun of the Dead (Edgar Wright, 2004, 99min)
**This week’s screenings will take place at the Granoff Center.

Recommended Viewing: O Brother, Where Art Thou? (Coen Brothers, 2000); The Purple Rose of Cairo (Woody Allen, 1985)

Tues, 1/31:
- James Agee, “Comedy’s Greatest Era” (1949) in Film Comedy Reader [ed. Gregg Rickman], 14-28
- Recommended-- Simon Critchley, “Introduction” to On Humour, 1-22

Thurs, 2/2:

Week 2: EARLY AND TRANSITIONAL FILM COMEDY

**Screening—**
Early Films: L’Arrosuer et l’Arrosé (Frères Lumière, 1896, 1min); Biograph’s Personal (Wallace McCutcheon, 1904, 5min); Uncle Josh at the Moving Pictures (Edwin S. Porter, 1902, 2min); Mary Jane’s Mishap (G.A. Smith, 1903, 4min); The Curtain Pole (D.W. Griffith, 1909, 13min); Silent Short Films: Lea and the Ball of Wool (Cinès, 1913, 5min); Rigadin Has a Sensitive Soul (Georges Monca, 1911); Miracle Water (Eleuterio Rodolfi, 1914, 11min); Laughing Gas (Charlie Chaplin, 1914, 16min); Chess Fever (Pudovkin and Shpikovsky, 1925, 28min)
Feature Film: *Tillie’s Punctured Romance* (Mack Sennett, 1914, 74min)

**Recommended Viewing:** A Ringing Good Joke (Edison, 1899); The Wig Chase (Georges Hatot, 1906); Troubles of a Grass Widower (Max Linder, 1908); Onesime, Clockmaker (Jean Durand, 1912); Mabel at the Wheel (Mabel Normand and Mack Sennett, 1914); The Cook (Fatty Arbuckle, 1918); A Roman Scandal (Al Christie, 1919)

**Tues, 2/7:**
- Donald Crafton, “Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy” in Classical Hollywood Comedy [eds. Jenkins and Brunovska Karnick], 106-119
- Tom Gunning, “Response to Pie and Chase” in Classical Hollywood Comedy [eds. Jenkins and Brunovska Karnick], 120-122

**Thurs, 2/9:**
- Rob King, “‘The Impossible Attained!’ *Tillie’s Punctured Romance* and the Challenge of Feature-Length Slapstick, 1914-1915” in The Fun Factory, 105-139

Week 3: SILENT SLAPSTICK COMEDY

**Screening—** The Circus (Charlie Chaplin, 1928, 71min); The Camera Man (Edward Sedgwick, 1928, 69min); Habeas Corpus (Leo McCarey and James Parrott, 1928, 20min)
Recommended Viewing: *Safety Last!* (Fred Newmeyer and Sam Taylor, 1923); *The Gold Rush* (Charlie Chaplin, 1925); *One Week* (Edward F. Cline and Buster Keaton, 1920); *He Who Gets Slapped* (Victor Sjostrom, 1924)

Tues, 2/14:
- Tom Gunning, “Mechanisms of Laughter: The Devices of Slapstick” in *Slapstick Comedy* [eds. Rob King and Tom Paulus], 137-151
- Walter Benjamin, “Chaplin” and “Chaplin in Retrospect” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction and Other Writings on Media*, 333-337

Thurs, 2/16:
- Jennifer Bean, “The Art of Imitation: The Originality of Charlie Chaplin and Other Moving-Image Myths” in *Slapstick Comedy* [eds. Rob King and Tom Paulus], 236-261
- Charles Maland, “Struggling Through the Twenties” in *Chaplin and American Culture: The Evolution of a Star Image*, 94-123
- Buster Keaton, “What Are the Six Ages of Comedy” (1923) in *Film Comedy Reader* [ed. Gregg Rickman], 2-4

Week 4: CLASSICAL SCREWBALL COMEDY: JOKES AND INNUENDO

*Screening:* *Ball of Fire* (Howard Hawks, 1941, 111min); *My Little Chickadee* (Edward Cline, 1940, 83min); episode of *The Simpsons*, “Bart’s Friend Falls in Love” (#3.23, 1992, 30min)

Recommended Viewing: *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940); *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey, 1937); *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938)

Tues, 2/21: NO CLASS- University Holiday

Thurs, 2/23:
- Sigmund Freud, “Part A: Analytic Part” in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 5-50, 106-139
- Ramona Curry, “*Goin’ to Town* and Beyond: Mae West, Film Censorship, and the Comedy of *Unmarriage*” in *Classical Hollywood Comedy Reader*, 211-237
- Kathleen Rowe, “Professor-Heroes and Brides on Top” in *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, 145-168
- “The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930” (The Hays Code)

Week 5: SLAPSTICK SOUND COMEDY
Screening-- *The Great Dictator* (Charlie Chaplin, 1940, 125min); *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (Jean Renoir, 1932, 85min); *Night Class* (Nicolas Ribowski, 1967, 30min); boat cabin scene excerpt from *Night at The Opera* (Sam Wood, 1935)

Recommended Viewing: *Playtime* (Jacques Tati, 1967); *Duck Soup* (Leo McCarey, 1932); *Bananas* (Woody Allen, 1971)

**Tues, 2/28:**

- Sigmund Freud, “Jokes and the Species of the Comic” from PART III of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 224-293

**Thurs, 3/1:**

- Recommended-- Henry Jenkins, “A High-Class Job of Carpentry:” Toward a Typography of Early Sound Comedy” in What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic, 127-152

**Week 6: BACKSTAGE COMEDY: SELF-FABRICATION AND CELEBRITY OBSESSION**

Screening-- *The White Sheik* (Federico Fellini, 1952, 86min); *Singin’ in the Rain* (Stanley Donen, 1952, 103min); Springtime for Hitler number excerpt from *The Producers* (Mel Brooks, 1968)

Recommended Viewing: *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, 1962); *The King of Comedy* (Martin Scorsese, 1983)

**Tues, 3/6:**

- Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” in *Social Text* (1979), 130-148

**Thurs, 3/8:**

- Peter Bondanella, “The Break with Neorealism” in *Italian Cinema: from Neorealism to Present*, 118-141
- Recommended-- Peter Wollen, *Singin’ in the Rain*, 9-66

**Week 7: COLD WAR SATIRE: USA V. USSR**

Screening-- *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964, 95min); *The Witness* (Peter Bacso, 1969, 105min); excerpt from *A King in New York* (Charlie Chaplin, 1957)
Recommended Viewing: *Ivan Vasilievich: Back to the Future* (Leonid Gaidai, 1973); *MASH* (Robert Altman, 1970)

**Tues, 3/13:**
- Alenka Zupancic, “Introduction” and “The Concrete Universal” in *The Odd One In: On Comedy*, 3-60
- Sergei Eisenstein, “A Few Thoughts About Soviet Comedy” in *Problems of Film Direction*, 54-60

**Thurs, 3/15:**
- Charles Eidsvik, “Mock Realism: The Comedy of Futility in Eastern Europe” in *Comedy / Cinema / Theory* [ed. Andrew Horton], 91-105
- Patrick Webster, “Dr. Strangelove or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb: An Immodest Proposal” in *Love and Death in Kubrick*, 30-43

**Week 8: BLACKFACE MINSTRELSY: FROM JIM CROW TO TROPIC THUNDER**

*Screening—* *Watermelon Man* (Melvin Van Peebles, 1970, 100min); *Tropic Thunder* (Ben Stiller, 2008, 107min); *The Watermelon Patch* (Wallace McCutcheon and Edwin S. Porter, 1905, 5min); excerpt from *The Singing Fool* (Lloyd Bacon, 1928)

Recommended Viewing: *Bamboozled* (Spike Lee, 2000); *I’m Gonna Git You Sucka* (Keenen Ivory Wayans, 1988); *Chappelle’s Show* (2003-2006)

**Tues, 3/20:**
- Stuart Hall, “Racist Ideologies and the Media” in *Media Studies: A Reader* [eds. Paul Marris and Sue Thornham], 271-282

**Thurs, 3/22:**
SPRING BREAK

Week 9: GENDER AND GENRE
Screening-- Semiotics of the Kitchen (Martha Rosler, 1975, 6min); Can't You Take a Joke? (Viki Dun, 1982, 26min); Born in Flames (Lizzie Borden, 1983, 90min); 200 Pounds Beauty (Yong-hwa Kim, 2006, 120min); excerpt from Bridesmaids (Paul Feig, 2011)

Recommended Viewing: The Man Who Envied Women (Yvonne Rainer, 1985); Antonia's Line (Marleen Gorris, 1995); Roseanne (1988-1997)

Tues, 4/3:
• Kathleen Rowe, “Introduction: Feminist Film Theory and the Question of Laughter” in The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter, 1-21
• Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, Excess” in Film Quarterly 44.4 (Summer 1991), 2-13
• Mikhail Bakhtin, “Characteristics of Genre” in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 122-132

Thurs, 4/5:
• Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, “The Comedy of the Sexes” in Popular Film and Television Comedy, 132-173
• Teresa de Lauretis, “Rethinking Women’s Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory” in New German Critique (1985), 154-175

Week 10: GROUP PROJECT PRESENTATIONS
No screenings or readings this week.

Mon, 4/9: Group project presentations during 7 PM screening time in Production Classroom 1

Tues, 4/10: Group project presentations during regular class time in Henkle Room (No screening or meeting tonight)

Thurs, 4/12: NO CLASS MEETING TODAY.

Week 11: MOCKUMENTARY: THE AUTHENTICITY OF MOCKERY
Screening-- Zelig (Woody Allen, 1983, 79min); Man Bites Dog (Remy Belvaux and Andre Bonzel, 1992, 95min); an excerpt from The Yes Men (Dan Ollman and Sarah Price, 2003)

Recommended Viewing: Best in Show (Christopher Guest, 2000); Bob Roberts (Tim Robbins, 1992)

Tues, 4/17:
• Bataille, Georges, “Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears” in October, vol. 36 (Spring, 1986), 89-102
• Bill Nichols, “How Do Documentaries Differ from Other Types of Films?” in Introduction to Documentary, 20-41

Thurs, 4/19:
• Robert Stam, “From Dialogism to Zelig” in Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film, 187-218
• Craig Hight and Jane Roscoe, “Introduction” and “Degree 3: Deconstruction” in Faking It: Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality, 1-5, 160-180

Week 12: COMEDY “UNCUT:” FILM V. TV
Screening- Trailer for The Dictator (Larry Charles, 2012); Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan (Larry Charles, 2006, 84min); South Park: Bigger Longer & Uncut (Matt Stone and Trey Parker, 1999, 81min); “Palestinian Chicken episode” of Curb Your Enthusiasm (Season 8, ep. 3, 2011); ep. of The Daily Show (TBD)

Recommended Viewing: Beavis and Butt-Head Do America (Mike Judge, 1996); That’s My Bush! (TV Series by Matt Stone and Trey Parker, 2001); In the Loop (Armando Iannucci, 2009)

Tues, 4/24:
• Annalee Newitz, “What Makes Things Cheesy?: Satire, Multi-Nationalism, and B-Movies” in Social Text, 63 (v.18, No.2, Summer 2000), 59-82

Thurs, 4/26:
• Leshu Torchin, “Cultural Learnings of Borat Make for Benefit Glorious Study of Documentary” in Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film & Television Studies, Volume 38.1 (Spring 2008), 53-63