

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ORLEANS
Department of History, Department of Philosophy

<p>HIST 4991/G; A&S 3099; PHIL 3095 – American Comedy as Social Commentary and Cultural Critique 3 Credit Hours</p> <p>TIME: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:30pm to 2:45pm</p> <p>LOCATION: Liberal Arts Building 256</p>	<p>Dr. Nikki Brown, Department of History Office: Liberal Arts Bldg 109 Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11am to 1pm, Wednesdays, 2pm to 4pm Phone: 280-6135 Email: nlbrown2@uno.edu</p>	<p>Dr. Edward Johnson Department of Philosophy Office: LA 395 Office Hours: 11:00-12:00 MWF (and by appointment) Telephone: 280-7193 Email: erjohns1@uno.edu</p>
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Course Description and Content

In this course, we'll explore and examine the forms in which American comedy acts as cultural criticism. Comedy holds a special position in the public discourse when American culture seeks to critique itself. Naturally, comedy makes us laugh and forget our problems; but, good comedy also makes us think about our surroundings and forces us to question our circumstances. In the 20th century, American comedy has been used as vehicle to introduce immigrants to America, people of color to European Americans, and working classes to the middle and upper classes. We'll start in the 1890s with minstrelsy and vaudeville and end in 2008 with stand-up comedy.

As you watch the cinema and television selections, consider these perspectives and approaches: identify the comfortable stereotypes, particularly racial and gendered stereotypes; look past the humor and examine the social and political commentary; make note if there is a lack of commentary; and finally, critique the image, not the actor.

Required texts:

Articles and book chapters on MOODLE

Simon Critchely, *On Humor*

Matthew Hurley, *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse Engineer the Mind*

Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*

Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s*

Richard Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America*

Films in class:

Check the weekly schedule. All films are required viewing.

Learning Objectives:

After taking this course, students will be able to:

- Identify the central kinds of comedy and commentary

- Define key concepts in the development of American comedy
- Evaluate the persuasiveness of comedy-based social commentary
- Apply historical and philosophical concepts studied in the analysis of cases
- Synthesize, in effective English essays, central aspects of cultural debate in this area

Grading:

Undergraduate

4 ONE PAGE FILM summaries (see syllabus) – 20% (5% each)

1 TWO PAGE READING summary of Gordon essay – 10% - REQUIRED FOR ALL HISTORY STUDENTS

3 TWO PAGE READING summaries of any Hurley, Jenkins, Nachman, or Zoglin chapter – 30% (10% each)

1 TWO PAGE READING summary of Daniel Boorstin's "From American Dream to American Illusion"

REQUIRED FOR ALL HISTORY STUDENTS (see syllabus) – 15%

Class participation (including attendance) – 15%

Undergraduate Honors

One term paper of 5 to 7 pages in length about a topic relating to comedy and cultural criticism. Please check with us before embarking on your research and writing.

Graduate students

All of the above assignments are required (excluding the term paper), plus the following assignment:

One 15 to 20 minute presentation on one of the films listed in the syllabus, 20%

*Graduate students must make a presentation in order to receive graduate credit

Grading Specifications

- A, 90-100 points = Exceptional Accomplishment.
- B, 80-89 points = Superior.
- C, 70-79 points = Satisfactory.
- D, 60-69 = Inferior but passing.
- F, 59 or below = Failed.

Lectures

Lectures are provided for instructional purposes only and remain the intellectual property of the professor. Lecture material is covered by copyright (Title 17 U.S. Code). Lectures may not be taped or recorded without our written or clear verbal consent.

Students of Different Abilities

Following university policy, if you require accommodations for this course, such as a sign language interpreter or wheel chair accessible room, please notify me as soon as possible, preferably at the beginning of the course. Students must verify their eligibility through the Office of Disability Service, 280-7284 or at the following website: <http://www.ods.uno.edu/students/confidentiality.cfm>

Attendance Policy

Attendance is required. You must sign in on a sign-in sheet passed around during class. If your attendance for the class is less than 50% and you receive a D or F for the class, there's nothing we can do to change your grade.

Plagiarism and Cheating

A definition of plagiarism: to copy, duplicate, mimic, or reproduce the work of someone or something else, for the purpose of passing it off as your own work.

The University of New Orleans believes that “Academic honesty and intellectual integrity are fundamental to the process of learning and to evaluating academic performance. Maintaining such integrity is the responsibility of all members of the University.” Click on the following link for more information:

http://www.studentaffairs.uno.edu/studentpolicies/policymanual/academic_dishonesty.cfm

If a student is caught on his/her exams plagiarizing any part of the required texts, lectures, or the Internet, the student will receive a zero and F for the assignment. If caught again, we will contact the Office of Judicial Affairs, and the student will receive an F in the class.

Syllabus Changes

We reserve the right to change the syllabus at any time, to fit the needs of the class or to account for unforeseen circumstances.

Film summaries

In a one-page summary of the films, please answer the following questions:

FACTUAL questions

What is the comedy?

Who is/are the comedian/s?

How is the comedy fashioned, i.e what form does the comedy take?

INTERPRETIVE questions

In a brief essay (in a paragraph or two), explain: why this routine or film is funny; is the comedic selection funny *now*? Why, or why not?

(Note: The more sources you refer to in your summary, the higher your grade will likely be.)

All film summaries must be turned in one week after the viewing at the beginning of class. For example, you should turn in a summary of “CSA: Confederate States of America,” at the beginning of class on Tuesday, January 22.

Reading summaries

You must turn in a total of five reading summaries for this course. Turn in the summaries a week after they are listed in the syllabus. Your summaries must be two pages long. In your summary, you will answer the basic questions of journalism and you’ll identify the intellectual component, i.e. the BIG IDEA. You’ll explain:

- Who wrote the reading and when
- What is the BIG IDEA (the thesis and its impact on the analysis)
- How does this reading illuminate comedy for us? That is, how do we understand comedy better now that the author has explained it to us?

All reading summaries are due at the beginning of the THURSDAY class of the week they are assigned. For example, the reading summary of Peter Gordon’s “What is intellectual history” is due on January 24.

Do not email your assignments. Please print out your assignments and turn them at the beginning of class. Emailed assignments will not be accepted.

Presentations Guidelines (for graduate students):

Depending on the size of the class, there will be two groups of three or four students presenting their responses and explorations of one of the films we've seen in class. The presentations will be 15 to 20 minutes long for each group. Though brief explanations of the film and their assigned readings are necessary, the presentations should be based on a critical analysis of the comedic content.

The presentation should show or answer the following:

- Which period in American history does the film depict?
- How is the comedy delivered?
- What is the social commentary in the film?
- What is the film saying about America?
- What were your negative and positive reactions to the film and reading?
- How does the film compare to the articles or books that we have read?

Presentations will take place at the end of the semester.

Topics and readings

Week 1: January 15, 17

Lecture and discussion topics: Introduction; Comedy and History; Comedy and Philosophy; American history; Minstrelsy in the 1890s

Reading: Peter Gordon, "What is Intellectual History," available on MOODLE; Critchley, "Introduction"

Tuesday film: *CSA: The Confederate States of America*

Week 2: January 22, 24

Lecture and discussion topics: National identity and the beginnings of national taste; Progressivism in the 1900s; Communism and World War in the 1910s

Reading: Jenkins, Chapter 2; Critchley, Chapter 2

Tuesday film: *Vaudeville* documentary

DUE Jan 24 – Summary of Gordon

Week 3 January 29, 31

Lecture and discussion topics: A change in medium to radio; Modernism; Rural and urban America; Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s

Reading: Jenkins, Chapter 4; Critchley Chapter 3

Tuesday film: *Sherlock, Jr.*

DUE Jan 31 – Summary of Jenkins, Ch 2

Week 4: February 5, 7

Lecture and discussion topics: Depression and fascism of the 1930s

Reading: Robert Sklar, "The Golden Age of Turbulence and the Golden Age of Order," ON MOODLE

Tuesday film: *Duck Soup*

DUE Feb 7 – Summary of Jenkins, Ch 4

Week 5: February 12, 14

Discussion topics: From Radio to TV; "The Medium is the Message"; Eisenhower and American Conformity

Reading: Douglass, excerpt from *Radio and the American Imagination*, ON MOODLE

Tuesday – NO CLASS, Mardi Gras

Thursday – Radio shows, Amos N'Andy

DUE Feb 14 – Summary of Sklar chapter from Moodle

Week 6: February 19, 21

Lecture and discussion topics: "The Medium is the Message"; Change in medium to TV; the Cold War, arms race, mass annihilation; a critique of conformity

Reading: Daniel Boorstin, "From the American Dream to the American Illusion," in *The Image* ON

MOODLE: This week's reading assignment is also a required writing assignment for all History students.

Tuesday film: Viewing of an episode from "I Love Lucy"

DUE Feb 21 – Summary of Douglass chapter

Week 7: February 26, 28

Lecture and discussion topics: The roots of social unrest – Vietnam, the Civil Rights Movement; Students and Activism

Reading: Zoglin, Chapters 1 and 2

Tuesday Film: George Carlin, HBO concert selections; *Too Hip for the Room*

DUE Feb 28 - Summary Boorstin essay, required for all History students

Week 8: March 5, 7

Lecture and discussion topics: Civil Rights, sexual freedom and the baby boomers

Reading: Audrey McCluskey, "Was it Something He Said? Censorship and the Richard Pryor Show" ON MOODLE

Tuesday film: Richard Pryor, *Live on the Sunset Strip*

DUE Mar 7- Summaries of Zoglin Ch 1 and 2

Week 9: March 12, 14

Lecture and discussion topics: A change in medium to cable TV; Return of Conformity, family values, conservatism; the Co-opting of humor, the neutralization of humor

Tuesday film: Bill Cosby, "Himself"

THURSDAY Reading: Zoglin, Chapter 8, Nachman, "Father Goose, INC."

Due Mar 14: Summary of McCluskey

Week 10: March 19, 21

Lecture and discussion topics:

Reading: Janet Bing, "Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?" ON MOODLE

Tuesday film: *Wisecracks*

DUE March 21 – Summaries of Zoglin or Nachman

MARCH 25 through 29 – NO CLASS, SPRING BREAK

Week 11: April 2, 4

Lecture and discussion topics: Postmodernism and the spectacle of society

Reading: Hurley, chapter 9

Tuesday film: *Seinfeld: Comedian*

DUE April 4 – Summary of Bing

Week 12: April 9, 11

Lecture and discussion topics: Emergence of hip-hop comedy as an agent of change

THURSDAY Reading: Zoglin, Chapter 10, "Women"; Zoglin, Chapter 12, "Mainstream"

Tuesday film: *Vagina Monologues*

Due April 11 – Summary of Hurley

Week 13: April 16, 18

Lecture and discussion topics: More on hip-hip comedy; America after 9/11

Reading: Mel Watkins, Chapter 13, “Pryor and Thereafter” ON MOODLE

Tuesday film: Chris Rock’s *Never Scared*

DUE April 18 – Summary of Zoglin Ch 10 or 12

Week 14: April 23, 25

Lecture and discussion topics: “Truthiness” in the age of the 24-hour news cycle; How Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert Matter

Reading: TBA – Probably an article ON MOODLE

Tuesday film: Louis C.K. *Hilarious*

DUE April 25 – Summary of Watkins

Week 15: April 30, May 2

Lecture and discussion topics: the future of comedy as social commentary

Reading: No reading

Tuesday film: Wanda Sykes, *I’m a Be Me*

DUE May 2 – Summary for Previous week

Final exam – Wednesday May 11 (12:30pm to 2:30pm)

Graduate students – please schedule your presentations for the last week of class.

Honor students – please turn in your term paper to Dr. Brown by 5pm Friday May 13.