

English 393-American Film Comedy-
Western Illinois University
Fall 2016
Class meetings: T/TH 2:00-2:50 (220 SI)
Lab (Film Screening): T 3:00-5:00 (220 SI)

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Course Description and Goals:

Comedy is one of the most appealing and popular genres in American cinematic culture. Through comedy not only are we entertained but we can also release tension or overcome grief, we even laugh at our own insecurities and inadequacies. Film comedy makes us appreciate the value of a good laugh. In this course, we will explore the history of American comedy and study the key concepts of the genre (codes and conventions, representations, comic effects). Through close analysis and discussions of film comedies (from the silent period to contemporary productions), we will investigate comedy's formal and narrative characteristics. Ultimately, by discussing the stories and situations represented in the films chosen for this course we will reach a better understanding of the aesthetic and ideological issues found in this popular genre. Comedy always implies a special relationship with its audience, and in this course we are reminded that 'silent comedies' as well as parodies motivate us to laugh but also reflect on the culture that produced it as much as reflect on ourselves.

Texts: The primary texts for the course are the films. In addition, readings will be assigned from the following books (and are required): *The Film Comedy Reader*, ed by Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight, 2001); *Reeling with Laughter. American Film Comedies from Anarchy to Mockumentary*, by Michael V. Tueth (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012)

Additional text (recommended): *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, by Susan Hayward (Routledge, 2000). This is a useful text for learning film terminology and film periods which help situate our study of film in its particular context. This text is especially helpful for student with no background in film studies.

Course Policies:

- a. Discussions and lectures are scheduled on both class periods (T/TH). Attendance at films screenings and discussions is required. A successful class entails students who participate in class discussions, do the readings following the syllabus and, most importantly, are engaged in the class material. I expect students to keep this policy in mind.

- b. Students whose behavior during film screenings creates a distraction to others will be asked to leave. Consistent late arrival or early departure at film screenings and class periods DOES AFFECT your grade.

- c. Coming to class without the required texts will be considered an absence.
- d. If you experience any difficulties or frustrations with any aspect of the course, I urge you to speak with me either during office hours or by appointment.
- e. Agreement: By remaining in this class ENG 393, you agree to accept the policies articulated in this syllabus
- f. No make-up of in-class activities: Exceptions are considered ONLY if provided with an appropriate letter of explanation from a physician, athletic director, or a faculty member justifying your absence. Letters from parents/relatives won't be accepted. It's up to the instructor to evaluate and decide whether to accept the reasons for the request of a make-up exam
- g. Late work: won't be accepted. Exceptions are considered only if provided with an appropriate letter of explanation from a physician, athletic director, or a faculty member justifying your request of a late submission. However, it is up to the instructor to decide whether or not accept the documentation after carefully reviewing the request.
It is the student's responsibility to make arrangement for the missed class, and check with a classmate for missed material (notes) in discussions/film screenings.
- h. No incompletes will be given in this course

ADDITIONAL COURSE POLICIES:

CELL PHONE: IN THIS CLASS YOU ARE REQUIRED TO TURN OFF OR SILENCE YOUR PHONE. I RESERVE THE RIGHT TO TAKE OFF POINTS EACH TIME I SEE STUDENTS CHECKING THEIR MOBILE OR TEXTING. I ALSO RESERVE THE RIGHT TO ASK TO LEAVE IF STUDENTS DO NOT RESPECT THIS POLICY (AND THAT WOULD COUNT AS AN ABSENCE).

FOOD:

NO FOOD IS ALLOWED AT SCREENINGS/DISCUSSIONS

Requirements and Evaluation:

Grades will be based on attendance (60 pts); participation and in class activities (140 pts); 2 film diary sets (400 pts); a final take-home exam (400 pts)

Regular Attendance is REQUIRED (60 pts). Attendance will be taken regularly in class periods and screenings. You are allowed 4 unexcused absences (0-4 absences= 60 pts; 5-8 absences= 30 pts; 9-11 absences= 10 pts; 12-+ absences= 0 pts). Illness, emergencies, and religious obligations that fall on days of regularly scheduled classes may be excusable upon consultation with the instructor and require documentation from a university official or other authority. Letters from parents or relatives won't be accepted.

Note: It is always up to the instructor to decide whether or not the documentation is appropriate and acceptable. Remember, consistent late arrival or early departure DOES affect your attendance grade.

Participation (140 pts): Since the discussion revolves around the readings, the film(s), lectures, active participation is based on a careful reading of both films and literary texts as well as understanding of how the two relate. In-class activities (quizzes, film reviews, screening reports and other writing activities) will be graded as part of the participation grade. Keep in mind that the contribution you offer to discussion counts toward your participation grade. Also, remember

to be respectful in class, disagreements are inevitable in discussions but they should always be conducted in a civil manner.

Two Sets of Film Diaries (400 pts): you are asked to write 8 film diaries of any of the feature films watched in class. The two sets (of 4 film diaries each) are due, respectively, on 09/27 and 11/08. Each film diary (3 full pages long, double-spaced) should include a one-paragraph plot summary and a brief discussion of the film's crucial aesthetic, historical and ideological issues. These diaries should reflect your familiarity with the film and the readings and open up further research and critical inquiry.

Take home final exam (400 pts):

The final exam will consist of three essay questions (each 5-6 double spaced pages) about the films and readings discussed throughout the semester.

Grading Scale:

966-934= A

933-900=A-

899-867=B+

866-834= B

833-800= B-

799-767=C+

766-734=C

733-700=C-

699-667=D+

666-634=D

633-600=D-

below 600 pts= F

NOTE: PLAGIARISM: Students should be aware that plagiarism or cheating of any form will not be tolerated and that academic misconduct entails severe penalties. The most common form of academic misconduct is plagiarism. As stated on the website regarding Students' Rights and Responsibilities, "plagiarism is intentionally or knowingly presenting the work of another as one's own. Plagiarism occurs whenever:

- one quotes another person's actual words or replicates all or part of another's product without acknowledgment. This includes all information gleaned from any source, including the Internet.
 - one uses another person's ideas, opinions, work, data, or theories, even if they are completely paraphrased in one's own words without acknowledgment.
 - one uses facts, statistics, or other illustrative materials without acknowledgment.
 - one fails to acknowledge with a citation any close and/or extended paraphrasing of another.
 - one fails to use quotation marks when quoting directly from another, whether it is a few words, a sentence, or a paragraph.

Typical examples: Submitting, as one's own, the work of another writer or commercial writing service; knowingly buying or otherwise acquiring and submitting, as one's own work, any research paper or other writing assignment; submitting, as one's own, work in which portions were produced by someone acting as tutor or editor; collaborating with others on papers or projects without authorization of the instructor.

In addition to oral or written work, plagiarism may also involve using, without permission and/or acknowledgment, computer programs or files, research designs, ideas and images, charts and graphs, photographs, creative works, and other types of information that belong to another.

Because expectations about academic assignments vary among disciplines and instructors, students should consult with their instructors about any special requirements related to citation.” (<http://www.wiu.edu/provost/student/>)

I can easily figure out when a student is plagiarizing so be very careful when citing or using sources, especially those off the Web.

In the case a student is found plagiarizing, he/she will receive an F for that assignment and an academic misconduct will be filed according to the University Policies.

Special Accommodation and Disabilities: “In accordance with University policy and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), academic accommodations may be made for any student who notifies the instructor of the need for an accommodation. It is imperative that you take the initiative to bring such needs to the instructor’s attention, as he/she is not legally permitted to inquire about such particular needs of students. Students who may require special assistance in emergency evacuations (i.e. fire, tornado, etc.) should contact the instructor as to the most appropriate procedures to follow in such an emergency. Contact Disability Support Services at (309) 298-2512 for additional services.”

Additional Information:

- to get important factual information about films (characters’ name, cast, awards), check www.imdb.com.
- For free, one-on-one consultation with trained undergraduate and graduate tutors, visit the University Writing Center at both the Macomb and Quad Cities campus. We work with writers from any discipline, at any academic level, and at any point in the writing process. Whether you need help decoding your assignment, brainstorming a topic, developing stronger points, incorporating research properly, organizing paragraphs, or receiving any other feedback, our tutors are here to help you.

Writing centers on Macomb Campus: Malpass Library, Tanner Hall, Bayliss Hall, Simpkins Hall. Contact the University Writing Center for more information, e-mail mwcenter@wiu.edu. Or, call for an appointment (298-2815) and be sure to always bring a copy of your assignment.

Tentative Schedule*

***The course syllabus provides a general plan for the course but some changes may be necessary. Students will be informed in class of any changes to the assigned schedule**

Week 1:

August 23 (T): Introduction.

August 23 (T): Screening *Sherlock Jr.* (1924 dir. Buster Keaton. 56 m.) followed by discussion.

Begin screening of *Safety Last* (1923, dir. Fred C. Newmeyer, 71 m. US)

Reading for TH: from *The Film Comedy Reader* (Rickman): “What are the six ages of comedy” (by Keaton, p. 2-4); “Comedy’s greatest era,” (by James Agee, p. 14-28)

August 25 (TH): Cont. Screening *Safety Last* (1923, dir. Fred Neymeyer. 70 m.) followed by discussion on the readings/films

Reading for next T: from Rickman’s text: “The Trickster Kid; Harold Lloyd’s One-Reel comedy (42-52, by Bowers)

Reading for TH: Chapter 1 “Anarchic Comedy” in *Reeling with Laughter* (from Michael Tuet), p. 2 -18

Week 2:

August 30 (T): Discussion on the readings

August 30 (T): Screening: *Duck Soup* (1933, dir. Groucho, Harpo and Chico Marx. 83 m.).

September 1 (TH): discussion on the reading and film

Readings for next T: (from Rickman): “Cary Grant: Comedy and Male Desire,” by Britton, p. 128-152)

Reading for next TH: from Tueth, “*Bringing up baby* and *What’s Up Doc?*,” p.39-61

Week 3:

September 6 (T): discussion on the readings and begin screening

September 6 (T): Screening: *Bringing Up Baby* (1938, dir. Howard Hawks. 102 m.)

September 8 (TH): Screening *What’s Up Doc?* (1972, dir. Peter Bogdanovich, 94 m.)

Reading for next TH: from Rickman: “Preston Sturges” Success in the movies,” 204-214

Week 4:

Sept.13 (T): cont. screening followed by discussion on the films and readings (by Tueth)

Sept. 13 (T): Screening: *The Lady Eve* (1941. dir. Preston Sturges. 94 m.)

Sept. 15 (TH): discussion on the reading and film

Reading for next TH: from Rickman: “The Comedy Without, the Gravity Within: *The Father of the Bride*, by Lucas), 215-229

Week 5:

Sept. 20 (T): lecture and in-class activity

Sept. 20 (T): Screening: *Father of the Bride* (1950, dir. Vincent Minnelli. 92 m.)

Sept. 22 (TH): discussion on the reading

Reading for next TH: from Tueth: “Musical Comedy,” p. 63-82

Week 6:

Sept. 27 (T): **FILM DIARY SET N. 1 DUE.** lecture and discussion

Sept. 27 (T): Screening: *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952, dir. Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly. 103 m)

Sept. 29 (TH):

Reading for next T and TH: from Rickman: “Some Like It Hot,” by Rickman (237-242); from Tueth, “Sex Farce,” p. 83-98

Week 7:

October 4 (T): lecture and discussion on the readings

October 4 (T): screening: *Some Like it Hot* (1959, dir. Billy Wilder. 122 m.)

October 6 (TH): discussion on the readings and film

Reading for next TH: from Rickman: “I Can Take a Hint: Social Ineptitude...” by Ian Miller, p. 266-282

Week 8:

October 11 (T): lecture and discussion on the readings

October 11 (T): screening: *The King of Comedy* (1982, dir. Martin Scorsese. 109 m.) followed by discussion

October 13 (TH): **class canceled.** Watch a film comedy on your own, and write a two pages review. This assignment is due Tuesday October 18

Reading for next TH: “Satire” (from Tueth), p. 99-117

Week 9:

October 18 (T): lecture and discussion.

October 18 (T): screening: *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964, dir. Stanley Kubrick. 95 m.)

October 20 (TH): discussion on the reading and film

Reading for next TH: from Teuth: "Parody," p. 117

Week 10:

October 25 (T): lecture and discussion

October 25 (T): screening: *Young Frankenstein* (1974, dir. Mel Brooks, 106 m.)

October 27 (TH): discussion on the film/reading

Reading for TH: From Tueth: "Dionysian Comedy" p. 161

Week 11:

November 1 (T): Lecture and discussion.

Nov. 1 (T): screening: *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978, dir. John Landis, 109 m.)

Nov. 3 (TH): discussion on the film and reading

Reading for next T: from Teuth ("Neurotic Comedy", p. 135)

Week 12:

Nov. 8 (T): **FILM DIARY SET. 2 DUE.** Discussion

Nov. 8 (T): screening: *Annie Hall* (1977, dir. Woody Allen. 78 m.)

Nov. 10 (TH): discussion on the film and readings

Reading for TH: "Romantic comedy today: semi-tough or impossible?" (by Brian Henderson, in Rickman, p. 310-326); For Th: "Introspective Laughter: Nora Ephron and the American Comedy Renaissance," in Rickman, p. 341-361)

Week 13:

Nov. 15 (T): lecture and discussion.

Nov. 15 (T): screening: screening: *When Harry Met Sally* (1989, dir. Rob Beiner, 96 m.)

Nov. 17 (TH): discussion on the film and reading

Reading for Th after the break: "Mockumentary," in Tueth, p. 179

WEEK 14: Thanksgiving vacation

Week 15:

Nov. 29 (T): lecture and discussion

Nov. 29 (T): screening: *Waiting for Guffman* (1996, dir. Christopher Guest, 89 m.)

Dec. 1 (TH): discussion on the reading and film

Week 16:

Dec. 6 (T): lecture and discussion.

Dec. 6 (T): Distribution questions take-home final exam. Screening: *There's Something About Mary* (1998, dir. Bobby and Peter Farrelly, 119 m.)

Dec. 8 (TH): final considerations and students evaluation

Week 17:

FINAL EXAM (take-home) IS DUE DECEMBER 13 (Tuesday) @ 3 pm IN MY OFFICE.