

EngLit 1681
Spring 2005
Kurlander, C.

L1681

Film Comedy
EngLit 1681
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COURSE DESCRIPTION: As Gerald Mast notes in *The Comic Mind*, comedies are among the best films made and yet "surprisingly little attention has been paid to the intellectual complexity of comic films." What is the relationship between comedy and narrative? How do comic transgressions function to break down societal and cultural norms? What role does humor play in allowing filmmakers to deal with issues of gender and race in ways that might otherwise be taboo even in a "free society"? How can comedy challenge basic social assumptions in a culture? What are the psychological and ideological underpinnings that can be found in films that can be characterized as comedies?

After reading thoughtful essays on the subject and closely examining comedic films as "text", you will be asked in this course to engage in a serious discussion about what makes us laugh. We will explore the specifics of how comedy functions in film and what deeper meanings can be drawn from its use. Though there is no prerequisite for this course, you will be expected to use terms of the cinema found in Bordwell/Thompson's *Film Art* (used in Film Analysis classes) and write about film in a way consistent with analytic essays illustrated in Tim Corrigan's *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*, both of which can be found on Reserve at Hillman.

Required Text: *Film Comedy* by Geoff King, Wallflower Press, 2002

Books On Reserve: *The Comic Mind*, Gerald Mast (also at the book store); *American Cinema, American Culture*, John Belton; *Class, Language, and American Film Comedy*, Christopher Beach; *American Dark Comedy*, W.H. Gehring; *Comedy/Cinema Theory*, Horton [CCT]; *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*, Corrigan; *Film Art*, Bordwell/Thompson

Essays on Reserve: "Buster Keaton, or The Work of Comedy....", Gunning, Hollywood Comedians: The Film Reader, Krutnick [HC]; "Romantic Love and Friendship: The Redefinition of Gender", Lent, Classical Hollywood Comedy, Karnick and Jenkins [CHC]; "Film Parody and the Resuscitation of Genre", Harries, Genre and Contemporary Hollywood, Earle; Rowe, *Comedy, Melodrama and Gender* [CHC]

FILM JOURNAL: You **MUST** buy a folder to bring to class each week with the following:
Reading memos. Each week, you will be expected to write up a single page “reading memo” summarizing what you have read and reflecting upon how that material has informed your further understanding of film comedy and the films we have seen so far in class. Be specific in alluding to moments in these films which illustrate your points by citing screening notes you have taken during class. Such memos should also contain questions that you are to bring to class each week which will lead to further discussion on how humor works in film. Please date and put your name on each reading memo as they will be collected periodically for evaluation.
Screening notes. Please type up your screening notes and notes from class discussion and clearly label them in your portfolio. These should be kept separate from your reading memos and can be looser and more informal. Also, use this journal to share thoughts on films you have seen outside of class.
Quizzes and writing assignments. Periodically, you may have brief quizzes on the reading material or specific writing assignments for the class. Keep these in your film journal. Back up of all your work on computer in case any of it should get misplaced.

CLASS PARTICIPATION. You will be expected to come each week having thought about the week’s reading and with written questions about the material. At one point, you will be asked to bring in a clip of film comedy which you find significant and discuss it intelligently in light of the readings and class discussion. This will count as part of your class participation grade.

ATTENDANCE. Because this class meets only once a week more than **TWO** unexcused absences will effect your grade. You **MUST** email me if you must miss class for any reason.

GRADING. Your film journal will be worth 30 percent of your grade. (Approximately, as is the case with each of these percentages.) Class participation including your “clip presentations” will be worth 15 percent of your grade. Your mid-term paper will be worth 20 percent. Your final paper will be worth 35 percent of your grade. Grading criteria includes clarity and originality of thought and understanding of concepts discussed in the texts. **Note: Plagiarism in any form can result in expulsion. Please footnote including internet sources.**

OFFICE HOURS: You are encouraged to see me during office hours or make an appointment to see me at any time concerning any aspect of this class. Please email to let me know you are coming. Should you have a disability, please contact me or Disability Resources and Services, 216 William Pitt Union, 648-7890 or 383-7355 (TTY) as early as possible in the term.

Class Schedule

1/11 Week #1 Introduction: Film Comedy

Screening: *Sullivan's Travels*, 1941 Sturges, 90m

Clips: *Animal House*, *Duck Amock*, *Sleeper*, *Horse Feathers*, *The Gold Rush*

1/18 Week #2 Comedy and Narrative

Reading due: *Film Comedy*, King, Chapter 1

Writing Assignment: Reading memo (due each week except for when essays are due)

Screening: *Duck Soup*, (1933 Carey) 70m, *A Cure for Pokeritis* (1912), *Foxtrot Finesse* (1915)

Red Hot Riding Hood (1943 Avery)

1/25 Week #3 The Silent Comedians

Reading due: "*Buster Keaton, or The Work of Comedy in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction*", Gunning [HC]; *The Comic Mind*, Mast, Chapters 6, 8 (Chaplin) 9 (Keaton)

Screening: *Sherlock Jr.* (1924 Keaton) 45m , *Modern Times* (1936 Chaplin) 83 m

Clips: *Office Space*, *The Kid*, *The Circus*, *The Great Dictator*, *The General*, *Cops*

2/1 Week #4 Screwball and the Romantic Comedy

Reading: "*Romantic Love and Friendship*", Lent, CHC; *American Cinema*, Belton Ch. 7,

Screening: *American Cinema: Romantic Comedy*, PBS/ *Bringing Up Baby* 95m

Clips: *Bachelor and the Bobbysoxer*, *His Girl Friday*, *It Happened One Night*

2/8 Week #5 Comedy and Representation

Reading: *Film Comedy*, Chapter. 4

Screening: *Some Like It Hot* (1959 Wilder)

Clips: *Tootsie*, *Birdcage*, *Victor/Victoria*

2/15 Week #6 Post-Modern Romantic Comedy- Case Study—Woody Allen

Reading: *Class, Language, and American Film Comedy*, Beach, Ch. 6 pp. 155-177

Screenings: *Sleeper* (1972 Allen) 87m, *Annie Hall* (1976 Allen) 93m

Clips: *When Harry Met Sally*, *Lost In America*, *Swingers*, *Lost In Translation*

2/22 Week #7 Comic Transgressions and Regressions

Suggested reading: Tim Corrigan's *A Short Guide to Writing About Film* (RESERVE)

Assignment due: **MID-TERM ESSAY**

Screenings: *The Disorderly Orderly* (Tashlin 1964), Monty Python's *Meaning of Life*
 Clips: *Brats, Big, Pee Wee's Big Adventure, Ace Ventura, Pink Flamingos*

3/1 Week #8 Animal and Youth Comedies

Reading: *Film Comedy*, King, Ch. 2; *Laughing Screaming*, Paul, Ch. 6, 8, 10; "There's Just Something About Mary" Script, Reserve; "Paralysis in Motion", Bukatman, [CCT]
 Screening: *There's Something About Mary* (1998 Farrelly Bros.), *Animal House* (Landis 1976)
 Clips *Fast Times At Ridgemont High, Sixteen Candles*, various Bill Murray movies

SPRING BREAK

3/15 Week # 8 Satire and Parody

Reading: *Film Comedy*, King, Chapter 3
 Screening: *M*A*S*H* (Altman 1970)
 Clips: *Being There, Dr. Strangelove, Wag the Dog*

3/22 Week #9 Parody, Satire, & Race

Reading: *Film Parody and The Resuscitation of Genre*, Harries, [GCH], Earle
 Screening: *Blazing Saddles* (1972, Brooks)
 Clips: *Spinal Tap, Fear of the Black Hat, Scary Movie, Stir Crazy, Little Big Man*

3/29 Week # 10 Comedy beyond Comedy

Reading: *Film Comedy*, King, Chapter 5
 Screening: *Reservoir Dogs*
 Clips: *Pulp Fiction, Fargo, Jaws*

4/5 Week #12 Comedy and Melodrama

Reading: Rowe, *Comedy, Melodrama and Gender* [CHC]
 Screening: *The Graduate* (Nichols 1968)
 Clips: *Terms of Endearment, Broadcast News, Moonstruck*

4/12 Week #13 Dark Comedy

Readings: *American Dark Comedy*, Gehring, Chpt. 1, 2, 4
 Screening: *King of Comedy*
 Clips: *Harold & Maude, King of Hearts, Heathers*

4/19 Week # 14

Final Paper Due