

Professor Kathleen Karlyn  
Winter 2014  
214 McKenzie 2-3:50

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## ENGLISH 490/590: COMEDY and the GROTESQUE

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**COURSE CONCEPTS:** Comedy has been a crucial presence on the screen since the origins of cinema over a century ago, and on the stage for millennia, with many literary critics finding the roots of western comic dramas in ancient Athens and Rome. Still, critics continue to wrestle with definitions of comedy, theories of laughter, and what the two have to do with each other. This course approaches comedy from several perspectives: the *narrative* structures associated with comedy; the *psychological structures* associated with joke-making and laughter; and the imagery and performance modes associated with carnival and the grotesque, through which *social structures* are challenged under the guise of laughter.

The first half of the course will emphasize comedy as a narrative form by studying well-known theories of comic structure (Northrop Frye) and laughter (Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud). In the second half, we will read Mikhail Bakhtin's Rabelais and His World, a sweeping study of the power of laughter, the body and the popular as a means of social insurgency, written by a Marxist literary theorist during the years of Stalinist repression. We will look at recent critical work on film and TV comedy, which revises classic theories with new perspectives on gender and race. We will consider the validity of "universal" theories of comedy and laughter, as well as the radical potential of comedy to challenge authority, upset hierarchy, and express visions of utopia.

Throughout, we will test the theories we are studying by applying them to films, television, standup comedians and other contemporary forms of comedy. Students will be encouraged to range widely in popular culture for examples to bring to class.

**Attendance, late work and other policies:** If you are absent from class, you will need to make your own arrangements for locating and watching the material you have missed. Three absences will affect your grade, without notice. Four absences will result in failure for the course. Show up punctually. If you arrive late, it is your responsibility to see me after class or you will be marked absent. Chronic lateness will constitute absences, at my discretion.

If you have special needs, please see me outside class to discuss them. No incompletes will be given and no late papers accepted unless you contact me *in advance* about a serious illness or other emergency. Hard copies of assignments are due at the beginning of class on the day listed. I do not accept e-mailed work.

Please maintain professional etiquette in your communication with me. For e-mails, put the course title in the subject line of e-mails and address me as "Dear Professor Karlyn." If you have a serious matter to discuss with me, arrange to meet me in my office.

**Classroom Standards:** Take active responsibility for creating a respectful learning environment within the classroom. Pay full attention to whoever has the floor. Refrain from side-conversations. Turn all laptops and cell phones off (not to "vibrate"). Don't eat. Do your best to avoid leaving and re-entering the classroom during screenings, lectures or discussions. Be prepared to engage with controversial subjects in a thoughtful manner. Disagreements are certain to arise, but it is imperative that the classroom remain a place for inquisitive thought and respectful debate. Think before you speak.

**Writing Standards:** All written work must use correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation, and all assignments must adhere to standards of academic honesty outlined in the Student Handbook. Do not turn in work prepared for other classes. Document *all sources* consulted in preparing your work, including websites and other material obtained on the Internet. If in doubt, document. Plagiarism will result in failure for the course and additional sanctions determined by the director of Student Judicial Affairs.

**Evaluation:** Grades will be based on a midterm (20 percent); a take-home final (30 percent); term paper (30 percent); group presentation (10 percent); and class participation (10 percent).

**Texts:** The primary texts are the films shown in class and Mikhail's Rabelais and His World, available at the bookstore. Additional readings are posted as pdfs on Blackboard.

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**1. Theorizing Laughter**

Film: Modern Times (Charlie Chaplin, 1936)  
Reading: Henri Bergson, "On Laughter"

**2. Theorizing Structure: Romantic Comedy**

Film: Bringing Up Baby (Howard Hawks, 1938)  
Readings: Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy" and selections from The Anatomy of Criticism, 43-52, 163-86

**3. Laughter, Aggression and the Unconscious**

Film: I'm the One That I Want (Lionel Coleman with Margaret Cho, 2000)  
Reading: Sigmund Freud, selections from Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, 104-139

**4. An Argument for Comedy**

Films: Some Like It Hot (Billy Wilder, 1959) and Sullivan's Travels  
(Preston Sturges, 1941—to be watched your own)  
\*\*\* Midterms distributed \*\*\*

Panel 1

**5. Comedy and Gender: Women on Top**

Film: Moonstruck (Norman Jewison, 1987), clips from Lucille Ball  
Readings: Lucy Fischer, "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child"; Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, "Comedy, Melodrama and Gender: Theorizing the Genres of Laughter"; and Pat Mellencamp, "Lucille Ball, and the Regime of Domiculture"

Panel 2

\*\*\* Midterms due \*\*\*

**6. Comedy and Class: The Carnavalesque**

Films: The Meaning of Life (Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam, 1983)  
Readings: Mikhail Bakhtin, "Introduction" and Ch. 1 "Rabelais and the History of Laughter"

Panel 3

**7. Popular Culture and the Grotesque Body**

Films: Hairspray (John Waters, 1988)  
Readings: Bakhtin Ch. 5 "The Grotesque Image of the Body" and Ch. 6

"Images of the Material Bodily Lower Stratum"; John Fiske, "Offensive Bodies, Carnival Pleasures"

**Panel 4**

**8. Nov. 15/17: Laughing, Screaming: Race and the Grotesque**

Film: The People Under the Stairs (Wes Craven, 1991)

Readings: Haggins, Bambi, "Laughing Mad: The Black Comedian's Place in American Comedy of the Post Civil Rights Era"; and Freud, "The Uncanny"

**Panel 5**

\*\*\* Term Papers due \*\*\*

**9. Nov. 22: More Unruly Women: Fat Bodies, Big Mouths**

\*\*\* Nov. 24 Thanksgiving Holiday \*\*\*

Films: The Roseanne Barr Show (HBO Special), "We're Talking Vulva," clips from Mae West

Readings: Bakhtin Ch. 2 "The Language of the Marketplace" and pp. 239-257 of Ch. 3 "Popular Festive Forms"; Nancy Henley, "Power, Sex and Non-Verbal Communication"; Kathleen Rowe (Karlyn), "Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess"

**Panel 6**

**10. Nov. 29/Dec. 1: More Gender Trouble: Queerness, Comedy and the Grotesque**

Film: Clips from The Rocky Horror Picture Show (Jim Sharman, 1975)

Readings: Alex Doty, "There's Something Queer Here" and Jeffrey Hilbert, "The Politics of Drag"

**Panel 7**

**Final exam:** Students will choose two questions from a list passed out the last week of classes. Answers should be typed, written in good essay form, and returned to my office at a date I will announce later.

**Bibliographic information:**

Bergson, Henri. "On Laughter." In Comedy, ed. Wylie Sypher. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956. 61-192

Doty, Alex. "There's Something Queer Here" and Hilbert, Jeffrey, "The Politics of Drag." In Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture. Ed. Corey Creekmur and Alexander Doty. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995. 71-90 and 463-69.

Fischer, Lucy. "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child: Comedy and Matricide." In Comedy/Cinema/Theory, ed. Andrew Horton, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. 60-78.

Fiske, John. Selections from "Offensive Bodies and Carnival Pleasures." In Understanding Popular Culture. New York: Routledge, 1989.

Frye, Northrop. "The Argument of Comedy." In English Institute Essays. 1948, ed. D. A Robertson, Jr. New York: Columbia University Press, 1949. 58-74

Frye, Northrop. Selections from Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays. New York: Atheneum, 1977. 43-52, 163-86.

Freud, Sigmund. Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious. The Standard Edition. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York: WW Norton & Co., 1989. 104-139.

Haggins, Bambi. "Laughing Mad: The Black Comedian's Place in American Comedy of the Post Civil Rights Era." In Hollywood Comedians, The Film Reader. Ed. Frank Krutnik. New York: Routledge, 2003. 171-86.

Henley, Nancy. Body Politics. Power, Sex and Non-Verbal Communication. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977.

Mellencamp, Patricia. "Lucille Ball and the Regime of Domiculture." In Situation Comedy, Feminism and Freud: Discourses of Lucy and Gracie. In Hollywood Comedians: The Film Reader, ed. Frank Krutnik. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

Rowe (Karlyn), Kathleen. "Comedy, Melodrama and Gender: Theorizing the Genres of Laughter." In Classical Hollywood Comedy, eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins. New York: Routledge, 1995. 39-59.

Rowe (Karlyn), Kathleen. "Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess." Screen 31.4 (1990): 408-19.

#### **Recommended readings:**

Davis, Natalie Zemon. "Women on Top." In Society and Culture in Early Modern France, 124-151. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975.

Doty, Alexander. "Queerness, Comedy and The Women." In Classical Hollywood Comedy, eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins. New York: Routledge, 1995. 332-48.

Douglas, Mary. Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo. London: Ark Paperbacks, 1966.

Jenkins, Henry. "'The Laughingstock of the City': Performance Anxiety, Male Dread and Unfaithfully Yours." In Classical Hollywood Comedy, eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins. New York: Routledge, 1995. 238-61.

Krutnik, Frank. "The Faint Aroma of Performing Seals. The 'Nervous Romance' and the Comedy of the Sexes." Velvet Light Trap 26 (1990): 57-72.

Mulvey, Laura. "Changes: Thoughts on Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience." In Visual and Other Pleasures. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989. 159-76.

Turner, Victor. "Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality." In Performance in Postmodern Culture. Eds. Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello, pp. 33-55.

Robertson, Pamela. "The Kinda Comedy That Imitates Me: Mae West's Identification with the Feminist Camp." Cinema Journal 32 (1993): 57-72.

Russo, Mary. "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory." In Feminist Studies, Critical Studies. Ed. Teresa de Lauretis, pp. 213-229. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986,

Stallybrass, Peter and Allon White. The Politics and Poetics of Transgression. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

Stam, Robert. Subversive Pleasures. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

