

DePaul University
School for New Learning
AI 156 Film Comedy: *American Style*

Location: O'Hare Campus
Dates: Winter Quarter, Tuesday 1/7 – 3/11
Hours: 6:15-9:15 P.M.
Credits: 4

Instructor: Gary Fox
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Competencies Offered:

- A-1-C - Can analyze artistic or textual works in terms of form, content, and style.
- A-1-D - Can analyze writers' or artists' representations of human experience.
- H-1-X - Can evaluate the social role of comedy in American culture.
- H-2-G - Can evaluate the role and impact of mass media or information technology on society.

Course Description: Since the beginnings of cinema, movies made audiences laugh, and comedy is still the most prevalent film genre around the world. What were the earliest movie comedies like, and has film comedy gotten more “sophisticated”? Is comedy universal (does everyone laugh at the same things)? What lies beneath laughter—what does it mean for something to be funny? What forms of the comic lend themselves particularly well to movies? Do great movie clowns or great comedy directors have anything in common? This course investigates film comedy from these various perspectives, based on American films ranging historically over the last century, and on readings from film critics, psychologists, and philosophers. Students who complete this course will have a good working knowledge of American film comedy—its history, its status as a genre, its social and psychological functions, and some of its landmark films and creators. Through readings, writing assignments, and lecture-discussions, students will also become conversant in a few key theories of comedy, and begin to consider them in the context of films.

Instructor Bio: In addition to teaching film, ethics and public speaking courses at SNL, Gary Fox has been an adjunct faculty member for the last 20 years at Columbia College Chicago where he teaches Film History, Film/TV aesthetics and public speaking. He has also taught at the Center for New Television, The Chicago Academy for the Arts, and in the Des Moines Public Schools' “Talented and Gifted” program. Gary also has experience behind the camera as a film/video director and producer, and in front of the camera as a stage and film actor. He received his B.F.A. in Speech Communication and Theatre Arts from Drake University and his M.A. from DePaul's *School for New Learning*.

Readings: All readings will be handed out or posted on the course Blackboard unless otherwise noted. <https://oll.depaul.edu>

Learning Tools: Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*, 1989.
<http://www.metacritic.com/film/> and <http://www.imdb.com/>

The Learning Experience/Course Objectives: The goals of the course are as follows: 1) to offer a wide overview of American film comedy and its history; 2) to equip students with a variety of theoretical approaches for interpreting and analyzing the evolution of film comedy; and, 3) to apply a variety of approaches to understanding the functions of comedy in film and their relationship to American culture in general. Students should be aware that, because of the diverse goals of the course, the class will be both screening and reading intensive. Students will be expected to complete all readings on time so that they can synthesize the material and bring questions and comments to class. **Students are responsible for making up screenings that they miss for whatever reason.**

Learning Activities: Students will be asked to:

- Complete all assigned readings and attend all in-class screenings
- Participate in all large and small group discussions
- Complete a midterm exam
- Write a final paper (*if required for a competency*)
- Keep a course notebook.
- Make a brief class presentation of your final paper

Course Assessment will be based on the following:

- **Midterm Exam:** 25%
- **Response Papers:** 25%
- **Final Paper:** 30%
- **Journal or Notebook:** The journal, which can be informal and personal, should consist of 1-2 page reactions to the films and other materials discussed in class the previous week. You should use it to sketch out ideas that might lead to your longer essays. The journal can be informal and personal and should also contain any musings you may have on the nature of comedy. 10%
- **Class Participation:** You are expected to attend regularly and to contribute to discussions on topics and films discussed in class. 10%

Competencies:

A-1-C - Can analyze artistic or textual works in terms of form, content, and style.

Students will be asked to answer specific questions on the mid-term exam that relate to film analysis. Additionally, a short paper analyzing one of the films screened in class is required. Particular emphasis will be placed on participation in class discussions and a well-kept journal or course notebook.

A-1-D - Can analyze writers' or artists' representations of human experience.

Students will refer to class readings and write a paper (5-6 pages) on one of the screenings and articulate how the elements of that film (e.g. it's story, humor, and characters) enrich our understanding of the human experience.

H-1-X - Can evaluate the social role of comedy in American culture. Drawing on class

readings and screenings, students will write a paper (6-8 pages) that identifies the ways in which comedy--especially film comedies--shape our cultural identity and impact the way Americans relate to one another.

H-2-G - Can evaluate the role and impact of mass media or information technology on society. Students will write a paper (6-8 pages) in which they identify and evaluate themes, trends, or motifs that reflect current popular American culture. Sources appropriate for this investigation include reviews of contemporary film comedies and an analysis of movie previews or “trailers” in an effort to describe how these forms of mass media impacts society.

Written assignments will be evaluated on the basis of the following:

- Content: Detailed and insightful discussion of the chosen topic, using relevant examples and support from course readings, class discussion, personal experience, and (where appropriate) outside research.
- Organization: Clear thesis statement, logical development of main points, and well-structured paragraphs.
- Stylistics: Logical sentence structure, grammar, and punctuation; careful proofreading; appropriate documentation of outside sources.

Academic Integrity: As the instructor of this class, I will uphold the University's guidelines on academic integrity found in the Student Handbook. Other than in collaborative writing assignments, students are expected to produce their own writing. In addition, students are encouraged to consult sources outside the class in the development of their assignments. In using these sources, students will be expected to cite any words in their text that are not their own work. It is necessary to give credit to other writers who have influenced a learner's work. Using the words of others as if they were your own is called plagiarism-academic dishonesty-and will not be accepted in work submitted for this course. In general, you can assume that I will uphold the University's guidelines on academic integrity found in the Student Handbook.

Attendance: All students are expected to attend all class meetings and be prompt. IF YOU BELIEVE YOU WILL MISS MORE THAN 2 CLASS SESSIONS, I WOULD ADVISE YOU DROP THE COURSE. If you know you cannot attend, please advise the instructor as soon as possible.

Reading / Viewing Requirements: In addition to assigned readings, weekly screenings and discussions may include the following: *The General (+ One Week), Duck Soup, It's a Gift, Mr. Deeds Goes to Town, The Miracle of Morgan's Creek, Dr. Strangelove, The Graduate, Annie Hall, Young Frankenstein, Raising Arizona, The Royal Tennenbaums.*

WEEK 1

PART I - Introduction to theories on comedy and laughter.

Discussion of the appeal of comedy to each of us.

PART II - Buster Keaton & Charlie Chaplin

SCREEN: *Keaton shorts*

READ: (Before 1st class if possible) New Yorker essay “What’s So Funny?”

Assign: 1. Mast – Keaton 2. “Keaton” by Tom Gunning

WEEK 2

The Vaudeville Aesthetic – W.C. Fields and others

READ: Mast- The Clown Tradition

SCREEN: *Chaplin shorts*, and others (time permitting)
It's a Gift (1934)

ASSIGN: RESPONSE PAPER #1

WEEK 3

Comic Anarchy – The Marx Brothers

SCREEN: *Duck Soup* (1933), *scenes from Night at the Opera* (1935)

READ: 1. Mast – *Duck Soup* (excerpt) **2.** Anarchistic Comedy & the Vaudeville

Aesthetic (especially pg. 98-101)

DUE: RESPONSE PAPER #1

ASSIGN: RESPONSE PAPER #2

WEEK 4

The Screwball Comedy and the importance of narrative structure

SCREEN: *Bringing Up Baby* (1938)

READ: Gehring - *Screwball Comedy: A genre of madcap romance*

WEEK 5

The Comedy Auteur – Preston Sturges

SCREEN: *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, (*scenes from Sullivan's Travels*)

READ: Sturges: *Success in the Movies*

DUE: RESPONSE PAPER #2

ASSIGN: MIDTERM EXAM

WEEK 6

Classical Hollywood Comedy - Comedy Teams – (Hope & Crosby, Martin & Lewis, Hepburn & Tracy)

SCREEN: *Some Like It Hot*

READ: 1. Armstrong's *Some Like it Hot* 2. Sikov's *Some Like it Hot*

WEEK 7

Black Comedy

SCREEN: *Dr. Strangelove*

READ: Mast – *Strangelove & the Case for Comedy*

MIDTERM DUE

ASSIGN: RESPONSE PAPER #3

WEEK 8

Postmodern Romantic Comedy

SCREEN: *Annie Hall* (scenes from *Manhattan*)

READ: Desire & Narrativity in *Annie Hall*,
Comedian Comedy 45-49

ASSIGN FINAL PAPER

WEEK 9

Literary Adaptations

SCREEN: *Being There*

READ: Handouts. Others are TBA

DUE: RESPONSE PAPER #3

WEEK 10

SPOOF! Comedy as Parody

SCREEN: *Excerpts from Blazing Saddles, Young Frankenstein, This is Spinal Tap and others*

JOURNALS DUE

WEEK 11 (no class session)

FINAL PAPERS DUE

This course and its assessment tools are designed to actively incorporate the four cornerstones of a high quality learning relationship here at DePaul University - **Empathy:** students are actively involved in the discussion of moral choices; **Clarity:** approaches to film study are clearly designed and described; **Integrity:** course work leads to discussion of ethical decisions in life as reflected in the arts, and **Flexibility:** students are encouraged to adapt class to the demands of their professional and academic objectives.

Class Policies:

- You are responsible for notifying the instructor prior to any planned absence in order to get your assignments, and as soon as possible after any unplanned absence. Please refer to the contact info. at the beginning of this document.
- Instructor will not fax or email missed assignments or handouts to you. Be sure to ask for them in advance or arrange to get copies from a fellow student.
- **All cell phones must be turned off. All pagers must be turned off or in vibrate mode.**