

Comedy and Performance 197g  
Fall Semester 2018 Tuesday and Thursday 2.00 – 3.50 pm  
Location: ZHS 352

**Instructor: Zach Steel**

**Office: JEF 208**

**Office Hours: Office hours Tuesday/Thursday 12.30 – 1.30**

Please email for face to face appointments or skype appointments. If you cannot meet during these times please email me to arrange an alternative.

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### **Course Description and Overview**

This GE course will provide students with an overview and understanding of the history and performance of comedy. Using examples from as far back as Greek Theatre and as current as *Black-ish*, students will be encouraged to identify and understand the distinctive features, techniques and themes of comedy performance. Through many manifestations including the pantomimes of the Greek and Roman periods, the Commedia dell'Arte of the Renaissance, the flourishing of the circus, the great age of silent comedy in cinema, and the advent of television, comedy in performance has evolved in multiple forms as a response to prevailing conditions while maintaining many primary functions, including satire, celebration, and social commentary. The course explores in depth many of the most important and influential periods and differing strains of comic performance, addressing the discipline in terms of creation and execution as envisaged by writers, actors, clowns, comedians, and directors.

### **Learning Objectives**

- 1. To analyze the form and content of comic material across a range of historic periods and to investigate the impact of comedy on audiences*
- 2. To make connections between the comedy of different periods, identifying the social, political and cultural contexts in which the work was created and performed.*

3. *To enrich the student's discernment of creative production by increasing knowledge of its theoretical, historical, and aesthetic bases across history and cultures.*

**Prerequisite(s):** course(s) that must be taken prior to this course

**Co-Requisite (s):** course(s) that must be taken prior to or simultaneously

**Concurrent Enrollment:** course(s) that must be taken simultaneously

**Recommended Preparation:** course work or background that is advisable, not mandatory

### **Required Readings and Supplementary Materials**

For required reading and viewing please see breakdown of class schedule. All viewing and reading should be carried out **PRIOR** to the class for which is it indicated.

### **Description of Grading Criteria and Assessment of Assignments**

Each assignment will receive a grade out of 100.

#### **Grading Scale:**

*Grading Scale for SDA:*

Excellent: A (4) = 100-94      A- (3.7) = 93-90

Good:      B+ (3.3) = 89-86      B (3) = 85-84      B- (2.7) = 83-80

Average: C+ (2.3) = 79-76      C (2) = 75-74      C- (1.7) = 73-70

Poor:      D (.7-1.3) = 60's

Failing:      F (0) = 59 and below

A = work of excellent quality; clear understanding of class material coupled with original and creative insight

B = good quality; class material has been understood clearly

C = average quality; class material generally understood, gaps in understanding remain

D = below average quality; identifiable gaps in the understanding of class material

F = inadequate work; gaps in completion of work, poor understanding of class material

Further Grading Notes:

*When the GPA falls between two grades, the final grade will be weighted toward the positive end of the scale for students whose attendance and participation in class have been excellent or good and toward the negative end of the scale for those with average or poor attendance and participation.*

*If your work in class is unsatisfactory, you will be warned before the deadline for dropping the course with a grade of W. I will be happy to discuss your work at any time.*

Assignment Submission Policy: All Critical Paper assignments to be submitted via Turnitin on Blackboard. Due dates are as follows:

Assignment 1 (Performance Analysis): Sept 19th at 11.59pm

Midterm (Annotated Bibliography): October 15<sup>th</sup> at 11.59pm

Assignment 2 (Critical paper): October 29<sup>th</sup> at 11.59pm

Assignment 3 (Critical Paper): November 19<sup>th</sup> at 11.59pm

The Final Examination paper is due by 4.30pm on Thursday December 12<sup>th</sup>

Note the different submission time.

Papers will be submitted via Blackboard. No late papers will be accepted without medical evidence.

No late assignments, projects, exams, or papers shall be accepted unless advance extensions have been arranged between the student and the teacher or unless exceptional circumstances occur.

Assignment	Points	% of Grade
Attendance/participation in class	100	15
Assignment 1 (performance analysis)	100	15
In Class Midterm (writing assignment)	100	10
Midterm (annotated bibliography)	100	10
Assignment 2 (critical paper)	100	15
Assignment 3 (critical paper)	100	15
Final (critical paper)	100	20
<b>TOTAL</b>	700	100.00

### Classroom Etiquette

Please arrive promptly for the class. Late arrivals disturb the learning of the whole class.

Please ensure that you have prepared for the class and are in a fit state to contribute.

Please do not use your cell phone during class. I do allow the use of tablets and laptops in my classes but if you are found on irrelevant websites during class I will ask you to switch to taking notes on paper.

## Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

<b>Block 1</b>	<b>What is Comedy?</b>
Week 1	<p><u>Introduction – What is Comedy?</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is comedy?</li> <li>• What do you already know about it?</li> <li>• How do you already think about it?</li> <li>• How this course works</li> </ul>
Week 1	<p><u>How can we analyze comedy?</u></p> <p><u>Comic Vocabularies</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comedy/comedic/comic</li> <li>• Humor, humorous, funny</li> <li>• Laughter</li> <li>• Comic Timing</li> <li>• Joke/gag/skit/sketch/punchline</li> </ul> <p>Reading: <a href="https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/may/11/jimmy-carr-funny-business-review-dorking-halls">https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/may/11/jimmy-carr-funny-business-review-dorking-halls</a>  <a href="https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jun/02/jimmy-carr-joke-standup-comedy">https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jun/02/jimmy-carr-joke-standup-comedy</a>  <a href="https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2006/jul/27/comedy">https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2006/jul/27/comedy</a></p> <p>Research task: gather definitions of the terms listed above</p>
Week 2	<p><u>Comic Devices</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Language use</u></li> <li>• <u>Mistaken identity</u></li> <li>• <u>Structural elements: anticipation/repetition/variation/inversion</u></li> <li>• <u>Slapstick</u></li> </ul> <p>Reading: <u>Eric Weitz, Chapter 3 Comic Devices in The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy, pages 63 – 92 (ARES)</u></p>

Week 2	<p><u>Comic Theories (or how other people discuss comedy) and how to apply them</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Superiority Theory</li> <li>• Incongruity Theory</li> <li>• Relief Theory</li> </ul> <p>Reading: John Morreall, <i>Comic Relief</i> pages 1 – 26 (on ARES)</p>
Week 3	<p><u>How to analyse Comedic Performance</u></p> <p>Reading: Louise Peacock, Joan Rivers – <i>Reading the Meaning</i> (on Blackboard) Viewing: See Blackboard for Youtube links.</p>
Week 3	<p><u>How to analyse Comedic Performance</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Class exercises</li> </ul>
Week 4	<p><u>The Ethics of Comedy</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can comedy cause more harm than good?</li> <li>• What can comedy do?</li> <li>• What should comedy do?</li> </ul> <p>Reading: Michael Pickering: <i>Ethics</i>. (PDF on Blackboard)</p>
Assignment 1 Due 9/19	<p>Analyze one of the performance examples set. You should draw on whichever theory and vocabulary you find most helpful. An assignment brief is provided on blackboard</p>
<b>Block 2</b>	<p><b>Comedy, Identity and Ethics</b></p>
Week 4	<p><u>The Building Blocks of Comedy</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tropes</li> <li>• Narratives</li> <li>• Jokes</li> </ul> <p>Reading: Frank Krutnik and Steve Neale, Chapters 1-3 from <i>Popular Film and Television Comedy</i> (ARES)</p>
Week 5	<p><u>Comedy and Offence</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Sarah Silverman</u></li> <li>• <u>Amy Schumer</u></li> <li>• <u>Doug Stanhope</u></li> <li>• <u>Daniel Tosh</u></li> </ul> <p>Viewing: See Blackboard for youtube links</p>

	<p>Reading: When the truth hurts tell a joke: why America Needs its comedians. Available online: <a href="https://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledge_detail/when-the-truth-hurts-tell-a-joke-why-america-needs-its-comedians/">https://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledge_detail/when-the-truth-hurts-tell-a-joke-why-america-needs-its-comedians/</a></p> <p>Research task: find and read an article which deals with comedians being criticized for offensive material. Your example should be as recent as possible.</p>
Week 5	<p><u>Comedy and Gender</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Simpsons</li> <li>• How I met your Mother</li> </ul> <p>Reading: Nothing Suits me like a suit: Performing Masculinity in <i>How I met your Mother</i></p> <p>Viewing: See Blackboard for youtube links</p>
Week 6	<p><u>Comedy and Sexuality</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wanda Sykes</li> <li>• Will and Grace</li> <li>• Ellen</li> </ul> <p>Reading: Parody as Subversive performance: Denaturalising gender and reconstituting desire in Ellen in Text and Performance Quarterly vol 21 isee 2 2001 (ARES)</p> <p>Viewing: See Blackboard for youtube links</p>
Week 6	<p><u>Comedy and Religion</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• George Carlin</li> <li>• Jim Jeffries</li> <li>• Sarah Silverman</li> <li>• Eddie Griffin.</li> <li>• Azhar Usman</li> </ul> <p>Reading: Is it ok for comedians to joke about religion? Available at: <a href="http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/09/opinions/obeidallah-comedians-religious-jokes/">http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/09/opinions/obeidallah-comedians-religious-jokes/</a> and</p> <p>When God and Comedy meet: Stephen Colbert on Christianity. Available at: <a href="https://www.vulture.com/2012/09/when-god-and-comedy-meet-stephen-colbert-on-christianity.html">https://www.vulture.com/2012/09/when-god-and-comedy-meet-stephen-colbert-on-christianity.html</a></p> <p>Viewing: See Blackboard for Youtube links.</p>

Midterm Assignment Due 10/15	Annotated bibliography. Assignment brief on blackboard
Week 7	<p><u>Comedy and Race</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chris Rock</li> <li>• Blackish</li> </ul> <p>Reading: The Hidden Truths in Contemporary Black Sitcoms from <i>The Sitcom Reader: America Re-viewed, still skewed.</i> (ARES)</p> <p>Viewing: See Blackboard for youtube links</p>
Week 7	<p><u>Silent Comedy</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slapstick, jokes and narrative</li> </ul> <p>Viewing: Charlie Chaplin's <i>The Kid</i> (on course reserve) and Buster Keaton's <i>Steamboat Bill Jr</i> (on course reserve)</p> <p>Reading : Frank Krutnik and Steve Neale, Hollywood Comedy and the case of Silent Slapstick from <i>Popular Film and Television Comedy</i> (ARES)</p>
Week 8	<p><u>Commedia dell'Arte</u></p> <p>Reading: A Servant to Two Masters (available in USC bookstore)</p>
Week 8	No Class – Fall Recess
Week 9	In Class Midterm (10/22/19)
Week 9	<p><u>Film Comedy</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Viewing: <i>Home Alone</i> (available to view online via library catalogue)</li> </ul> <p>Why Pain and Violence can be funny.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading: <i>No Pain No Gain: The Provocation of Laughter in Slapstick Comedy</i> by Louise Peacock. Can be accessed online:</li> </ul> <p><a href="https://novaajs.newcastle.edu.au/ojs/index.php/pes/article/view/26">https://novaajs.newcastle.edu.au/ojs/index.php/pes/article/view/26</a></p>
Assignment 2 10/29	Examine the function of comedy in performance. What purposes can comedy serve?
Block 4	The Comic Tradition

Week 10	<p><u>Shakespeare's Comic Devices</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Twelfth Night</li> </ul> <p>Reading: <i>Twelfth Night</i> can be accessed online:  <a href="http://shakespeare.mit.edu/twelfth_night/full.html">http://shakespeare.mit.edu/twelfth_night/full.html</a></p>
Week 10 Wednesday	<p><u>Shakespeare's Comic Devices</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Twelfth Night</li> </ul> <p>Reading: <i>The Comedy of Errors</i> can be accessed online:  <a href="http://shakespeare.mit.edu/twelfth_night/full.html">http://shakespeare.mit.edu/twelfth_night/full.html</a></p>
Week 11	<p><u>Moliere</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tartuffe</li> </ul> <p>Reading: Moliere's <i>Tartuffe</i>. Available online at:  <a href="#">Tartuffe</a></p>
Week 11	<p><u>Moliere</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tartuffe</li> </ul> <p>Reading: Moliere's <i>Tartuffe</i>. Available online at:  <a href="#">Tartuffe</a></p>
Week 12	<p><u>Comedy of Manners</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Importance of Being Earnest</li> </ul> <p>Reading: <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i> by Oscar Wilde. Can be accessed online.  <a href="http://www.gutenberg.org/files/844/844-h/844-h.htm">http://www.gutenberg.org/files/844/844-h/844-h.htm</a></p>
Week 12	<p><u>Comedy of Manners</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Importance of Being Earnest</li> </ul> <p>Reading: <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i> by Oscar Wilde. Can be accessed online.</p>

	<a href="http://www.gutenberg.org/files/844/844-h/844-h.htm">http://www.gutenberg.org/files/844/844-h/844-h.htm</a>
Assignment 3 11/19	To what extent have the concerns and techniques of comic writers changed with the passage of time. Your response must compare at least one pre- 20 <sup>th</sup> century example with at least one post 20 <sup>th</sup> century example.
<b>Block 5</b>	<b>Contemporary Comedy</b>
Week 13	<u>Satire: Social and Political</u> <u>Who is America?</u>  Viewing: Any episode of Who is America? Reading: Nicholas Holm, 'The Political (un)consciousness of American Satire' (on Ares)
Week 13	<u>Late Night Talk Shows</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Daily Show with Trevor Noah</li> <li>• Full Frontal with Samantha Bee</li> </ul>
Week 14	<u>Contemporary Film</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Viewing to be decided in class in advance</li> </ul>
Week 14	No Class – Thanksgiving.
Week 15	<u>The contemporary sitcom</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Viewing: <i>Modern Family</i></li> <li>• Reading: Christina Vecchia, Of Peerenting, Trophy Wives, and Effeminate Men: <i>Modern Family's</i> Surprisingly Conservative Remediation of the Family Sitcom Genre available at: <a href="http://harlotofthearts.com/index.php/harlot/article/view/85/65">http://harlotofthearts.com/index.php/harlot/article/view/85/65</a></li> </ul>
Week 15	<u>Contemporary Stand-up Comedy</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Viewing to be decided in class in advance</li> </ul>

### Accessing Reading and Viewing Material

All reading listed above details where it can be accessed either online, via ARES or at the bookstore.

YouTube links for viewing before the lecture will be provided via Blackboard.

All clips shown in lectures will also be made available as YouTube links via Blackboard.

**All PowerPoints will be made available via Blackboard after the lecture has taken place.**

## **Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems**

### **Academic Conduct**

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Section 11, Behavior Violating University Standards <https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/>.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* <http://equity.usc.edu/> or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage [sarc@usc.edu](mailto:sarc@usc.edu) describes reporting options and other resources.

### **Support Systems**

A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students.

*The Office of Disability Services and Programs*

[http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home\\_index.html](http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html) provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu/> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.