

IDH 3005 U011/IDH 4007 UO11  
AESTHETICS, VALUES AND AUTHORITY: HUMOR AND LAUGHTER  
FALL 2009/ Tuesday 8-10:45

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I. Course Objectives

A. Theories of Laughter

This course begins with the specific object of examining the critical scholarship on humor and laughter. That literature is vast: it ranges from physiology and medicine, through anthropology, psychology, and sociology to philosophy, morality and ethics. Our investigation takes up four of these fields: anthropology, sociology, theology, and philosophy. We will read texts that posit answers to some of the following questions: What is laughter? What is the relationship between laughter and smiling? What is the phalanges of laughter? Why do all peoples and cultures have jokes? What does the comic mean for human order or human existence, in this regard, how does religion relate to the comic?

B. Experimentation

The course also requires a hands-on investigation into humor and laughter that tests the theories of the comic addressed in the class texts. This component necessitates a scientific understanding and execution that demonstrates some hypothesis about what makes people laugh - or not. All students - as individuals or small groups - will define a research project, execute it, present it to the class and then work it into a major presentation for the SRAI conference in the spring.

C. Writing, Argumentation, and Conceptualization

The course also emphasizes conceptualizing, thinking and expression. Your ability to develop lucid arguments and to express yourself clearly in writing or orally ranks equally with your mastery of data and information. As a seminar, it demands active discussion and participation. Just so, the course also requires a formal, oral presentation once in the semester. Finally, it involves considerable written work. You will be expected to write well in a variety of forms, from formal book reviews to general essays. Improving both written and verbal skills constitutes a critical component of this course.

As an exercise in writing, the course has two objectives:

1. First, you will learn to analyze texts and make arguments based on these analyses. You will produce five essays towards this end. The course allows the opportunity of redrafting the first three of these in order to improve your style and your grade. The highest grade always counts.

2. Second, you will develop or sharpen your skills in word usage, grammar, syntax, and the technicalities of good writing, such as constructing good paragraphs and vigorous sentences. We will hold volunteer writing sessions for those of you wishing to improve your expression. In this regard, you will have access to the Pyronian guide to good writing upon which you should base the structure and style of your presentations.

#### D. Aesthetics, Values and Authority

While dealing chiefly with humor itself, its nature, sources, and interpretations, the course also aims to understand laughter in the context of the third year themes.

1. Aesthetics. Of the three third year objects, aesthetics offers the greatest difficulties, and it will receive the least attention. Because much of humor is spontaneous and uncalculated, brief and fleeting, “aesthetics” applies with difficulty to laughter in general. We will not ignore the search for the “perfect” joke or the ideal quip or gag even in the fall semester, but only in the second semester, when we deal more consistently with literary manifestations of humor will the course emphasize the search for beauty or perfection in the comic. We will also address some of the difficulties in making aesthetic generalizations about humor or comedy - why, for example, the Academy Awards have no category for comedy, and why Aristotle’s discourse on tragedy survives but his purported analysis of comedy has vanished. In this regard, the course considers as a corollary of comedy the study of tragedy - but, again, chiefly in the second semester.

2. Authority and values. These figure much more prominently in humor, and the course will deal more directly with these themes. At the outset, humor depends on authority, specifically, on the violation of authority or of social values or norms. Classically, then, in primitive societies with rigid religious, gender or other social rules, humor invariably lies in challenging or inverting such rules. Just so - if paradoxically, humor has regularly served as a means of enforcing or encouraging social norms, values or authority by mocking or ridiculing deviants. Indeed, one standard interpretation of laughter asserts its moral value in mocking ill-doers. Thus humor possesses its own ambivalent authority of both threatening and confirming authority and values. We will examine different sources of humor as a means of understanding different manifestations of authority and values over time and from place to place with particular reference to ethnicity, gender, sex, physicality, age, class, and religion.

## E. Culture

The class has a still more general objective in something like “culture appreciation.” It aims to build or enhance students’ general culture and knowledge. As the comic has engaged some of the best minds in our civilization - from Aristotle and Plato through Hobbs and Kirkegaard to Sigmund Freud, we will learn some of the basic texts, terms, artifacts, and categories of Western Civilization (and even non-Western, on occasion). This part of the course develops through cataloging terms, characters, and categories in the texts assigned, executing “cultural quizzes”, and the constructing of a “cultural dictionary” (all students being responsible for successive chapters of our texts)

Finally, through “culture quizzes” and our readings themselves,

## F. The Human Condition

Finally, the latent object of the entire course is to understand what laughter tells us about what it means to be human. Man is the only animal that laughs (Dogs just look like they are smiling; just so with chimps). Laughter, smiling, and humor, then, offer - at least potentially - a critical means of understanding the human condition or what humanity is about. Perhaps not incidentally, man is also the only animal that prays. Not coincidentally at all, laughter and religion regularly go hand in hand. Just so, tragedy and comedy - the horrible or dreadful and the hilarious or ludicrous - always go together as well. Their relationship reveals much about human nature even as the comic and religion suggest fundamental values about human meaning and existence as well. The course will consider what makes people laugh, then, but in a specific context of tragedy and religion - chiefly fear and dread, with the view of illuminating human purpose.

## II. Required Texts

1. Apte, Mehadev, Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach

(This is out of print; you will buy a Xerox cc for class, or pdf file:

<http://honors.fiu.edu/downloads/humor.pdf>)

2. Critchley, Simon, On Humor

3. Berger, Peter, Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience.

4. Gary Larson, A Prehistory of the Far Side.

5. Extra readings to be circulated in class, for example, excerpts from Mulkay, Michael, On Humor and encyclopedia entries on “Comedy” and “Humor”

## III. WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

A. Short essay on Men in Tights 2 pp

DUE Sep 1

B. Two formal book reviews - in class texts 2 pp (each)

1. DUE	Sep 27	
2. DUE	Oct 20	
C. Mid-term take home essay		4 pp
DUE	Oct 27	
D. Experiment precis (for spring project)		2 pp
Preliminary Draft		
DUE	Nov 17	
Final Version		
Due	Dec 1	
E. Concluding essay		5 pp
DUE	Dec 8	

#### IV. SCHEDULE OF CLASS MEETINGS

[NOTE. This schedule is approximate. Given the seminar-type nature of the course, we will allow for the potential of change and flexibility.]

AUG 25	Introduction: The Syllabus	
	MOVIE "Men in Tights"	
SEP 1	Apte, Chap 1 "Joking Relationships"	
	Apte, Chap 2 "Sexual Inequality"	
	"MEN IN TIGHTS" WRITING DUE	
8	Apte, Chap 3 "Children"	
	Apte, Chap 4 "Ethnicity"	
15	Apte, Chap 5 "Religion"	
	Apte, Chap 6 - "Language"	
22	Apte, Chaps 7 & 8 "The Trickster"/"Biosocial Elements"	
	Berger, Chaps 1-3 (1-43)	
29	MOVIE: "To Be or Not To Be."	
	APTE REVIEW DUE	
OCT 6	Theology and the Funny	
	Berger, Chaps 4-6 (pp. 1-43)	
13	Berger, Chaps 7 & 8 (pp. 99-133): "Benign Humor"/"Tragicomedy"	
	Berger, Chaps 9 & 10 (135-155): "Wit"/"Satire"	
	CIRCULATE TAKE HOME ESSAY	
20	Berger, Chaps 11 & 12 "Folly" (pp. 175-196)	
	Berger, Chaps 13 & 14/Epilogue	
	TAKE HOME ESSAY DUE	
27	"Humor" and "Comedy" (encyclopedia entries; copies circulated)	
	Planning Spring Projects	
	SECOND REVIEW DUE	
NOV 3	Critchley, Chap 1 "Introduction"(1-	
	Critchley, Chaps 2 & 3: "Animals"/"Bodies"	

NOV 10 Critchley, Chaps 4 & 5 “machines”/Ethnicity  
Critchley, Chaps 6 & 7 “Society”/ “The Id”  
NOV 17 The Far Side  
Pre-History of the Far Side  
PRELIMINARY PROJECT PROPOSALS DUE  
NOV 24 Mulkay Reading (pp tba)  
Pulling It Together  
CIRCULATED FINAL WRITING ASSIGNMENT  
DEC 1 MOVIE  
SPRING PROJECT PRECIS DUE  
8  
FINAL WRITING ASSIGNMENT DUE

## V. GRADING

“Tights”	1/10
Book Review	1/10
Book Review	1/10
Mid-term	2/10
Final Essay	3/10
Partic/quizzes	2/10

## VI. QUIZZES

Expect a short, objective quiz every time you have a reading assignment. Note, too, each class generally has two sessions with separate chapters/readings. On those days, be prepared to stand two quizzes.

## VII. ACADEMIC HONESTY

You will be quizzed almost daily on the material assigned; do not cheat or crib on these quizzes. In addition, if you turn in any papers that or not your own work, you will get an F. You should not consult anyone else's paper who has taken the course previously. Note, too, the person who assists another in plagiarizing is as culpable as the receiver. If you study with someone or let someone read your essay and they crib from it, you, too, will be charged with cheating. If you have doubts about the assignments, speak with the teacher.

## VIII. ATTENDANCE

You are expected to attend every class meeting and to come on time. You will be allowed one absence; otherwise your grade will drop with each session missed. If you must miss class unavoidably, you should confirm with your professor. Note, too, that this class meets only once a week, so to miss one class equals two effective absences.

## IX. GOOD MANNERS

Never chew gum in class; never eat crunchy food or soft food that comes in crinkly packages. Coffee is ok. Never whisper or mutter to your classmates or pass notes. Barring emergencies, don't leave class early and expect to escape unscathed. Reading in class is also forbidden: reading the assigned text (for the day) is as bad as non-class material. Turn off your telephones before you enter the classroom, and unless you cover your head for religious reasons, men must doff their hats in class. Also if you come in late do not ever walk in front of the professor as he lectures (this is resolved by coming to class early).

## X. WORK AND COURSE SCHEDULE

This course requires considerable reading and writing. It also demands something of a critical mass of time for conceptualizing and thinking. Especially as most students - even smart Honors students - are not used to critical reading and formal writing, you must allow yourself plenty of time to study if you want to pass or to pass well.

In addition, you should be very especially cautious about your course schedule in relation to your employment. As a rule of thumb, consider every 10 hours of employment the equivalent of an additional regular session class. The math is clear: twenty hours of work plus four courses equals about a 60-hour work week or a six course load. Because you have been able to work and take a full load in the past means nothing. Be prepared.

Literary humor has generated another body of explanation among Westerners beginning with the examination of the plays of the classical Athenian playwrights Aristophanes and Menander, the Roman comedies of Terence and Plautus and the satires of Juvenal, among many, many others. If little on medieval humor exists (not to mention non-Western cultures - the Chinese, Indians, Aztecs, and Muslims, to cite a few), comedy itself picked up in the renaissance with the commedia del'arte in Italy, Shakespeare in England, and other writers on the continent. These have their own interpreters. Since the mid-eighteenth century - especially with the rise of the popular press and democratic entertainment, comedy and humor have taken still new forms with scholars ready to examine them as well. Novel writing, cartooning (political and otherwise), vaudeville, film, radio, television, stand-up comedy, and now internet have all provided new outlets for laughter in the process of effecting ideas of humor. We will read some of the various theories of humor and laughter, and test them in class discussion. We will read four theoretical books on jokes and laughter that answer some of the following questions: What makes people laugh? How universal is laughter? In what ways is laughter place-bound or culture bound? What is the difference between male and female sources of humor, between one ethnic, national or religious groups? What is the significance of national expressions of humor? In what ways does laughter define who we are as groups, tribes, and nations? What does laughing mean? What are the different expressions of humor? What, if anything, bind them together, what separates them? What is the relationship between tragedy or horror on the one hand, to laughter on the other? And last, of course, how does laughter inform our knowledge about the human condition.

Some of the concerns from theories of laughter apply to this part of the course as well. Gendered humor will provide one way of understanding authority and values, for example. Thus, if males and females laugh at different things in different ways, how is this a reflection of gender authority? What would become of this classic source of laughing (gender differences) in a society freed from sexual differentiation? Is there any natural authority that governs why we laugh and smile? How does laughter violate social values about respect for all peoples? Is it wrong to laugh those who fail to fit standard values of size, shape, dress, and deportment? What does it signify to smile at a transsexual cross-dresser? A man missing a front tooth? By extension, what counter values are suggested at the failure of laughter at such circumstances.

The course asks a series of questions about these categories, among them the following: Is it possible to define an aesthetics of comedy? What are standards for judging for comedy? Is there any such thing as the "perfect comedy" or the "perfect joke"? Are there any objective, aesthetic standards for judging a comedic production bad or good? Good, better, or best? Successful or unsuccessful? What, in short, is Comic Beauty? Aristotle devoted much thought to tragedy, little to comedy. The bias persists. Why do comedies never win Academy Awards? Indeed, the paucity of our own generalizations here relate both to the difficulty of such questions, and the absence of theoretic work in this area. We will, however, rate the subjects we examine always looking towards formulating an aesthetics of humor.

"Values" generates another category of questions. What is the relationship between comedy and "values"? How does comedy reflect social values? Does comedy sustain or challenge those values? How does it effect moral values? Is comedy moral, amoral, and or immoral? In truth, "values" has merited greater examination than aesthetics, with one school of thought arguing that comedy and humor reflect essential moral values by mocking wrong-doing. From another perspective comedy and laughter reflect social values, and define difference from one social order to another. It also suggests values within an individual society. Why was opera a standard subject of humor in the 1930s (from Bugs Bunny cartoons to the Marx brothers) but is no longer? What does this shift suggest about class or cultural values in our own country?

Authority represents another critical element in the exploration of humor. How does comedy challenge or affirm social or political authority? What is the relationship between social or political authority and comedy? What does it mean for almost all cultures to joke about sex and religion? How does this suggest a kind of natural authority about these subjects?