

## C627: Humor in Use

Spring 2007

Wed 10:10 a.m. -12:40 p.m. (+ M 7:00 – 9:00 p.m. film screenings)

Indiana University, Graduate Seminar

Dept. of Communication & Culture

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This seminar begins from the premise that humor is a good site for the ethnographic study of culture. We will look at a variety of cultural contexts for humor, from staged public performance to private joking, and be primarily concerned with the many and varied social uses to which humor is put. Our focus this spring will be the (very male) world of stand-up comedy, and the women who brave it. While grounded in humor theory, we will explore how our understanding of theoretical models changes when we engage in making comedy of our own (yes, we will!). Our springboard for the study of theories of gendered humor will be Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. In studying Freud's paradigm in relation to other theoretical models, and updating these with our own, our aim is to recognize the role of cultural knowledge in what we find funny.

### Course Requirements:

#### 1) Reading.

a) There are **four required books** for the course, available at the IU bookstore:

- Freud, Sigmund. 1960 [1905]. *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. Ed. and trans. James Strachey. NY: W.W. Norton and Co.
- Basso, Keith H. 1979. *Portraits of "the Whiteman": linguistic play and cultural symbols among the western Apache*. Cambridge U. Press.
- Seizer, Susan. 2005. *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India*. Duke University Press.
- Newton, Esther. 1972. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. University of Chicago Press.

b) **Five recommended books** from which there are several chapters assigned over the course of the semester. The assigned chapters are available on ERES but you might like to own these books:

- Gray, Frances. 1994. *Women and Laughter*. Virginia U Press.
- Morreall, John. 1987. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. SUNY Press.
- Simon Critchley, 2002. *On Humour..* Routledge.
- Kathleen Rowe, 1995. *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*. University of Texas Press. [OUT OF PRINT – try to find a used copy]
- Koestler, Arthur. 1989 [1964]. *The Act of Creation*. London & NY: Arkana Penguin/ Putnam Inc. [OUT OF PRINT – try to find a used copy]
- Jenkins, Ron. 1994. *Subversive Laughter*. NY: Free Press. [OUT OF PRINT – try to find a used copy].

c) The bulk of the reading for the course is comprised of articles. These are available on electronic reserve [ERes] through Wells library. The primary benefit of electronic reserve over the traditional hard-copy course pack is financial; ERES costs only the paper on which you print. The articles are available on ERes to download and print at your leisure; some students download the entire course pack all in one sitting, others download only the required readings week by week.

**2) Class Participation:** As a seminar, the course will utilize both lecture and discussion formats during class meetings, and on-line discussion and journal entries throughout the week.

a) **In Person**: In-class discussion will be based on both the readings and film/video viewings. A high level of class participation is expected, both on-line and in-person.

b) **Oncourse** Within our course folder, there are two subfolders. One is for responses to the weekly reading and is entitled Reading Responses. The other is entitled Joke Journal, the purview of which is detailed below.

- ***Reading Responses folder***: This is the place to post your responses to the week's reading. Write an approximately one-page response (roughly one paragraph per reading/essay/chapter). Your post will be read both by me and by your fellow class members. Let us know 1) what you understand to be the author's main point; 2) what you learned from the reading; 3) what, if anything, you found clarifying, or confusing, about this reading. Feel free to ask questions to the class as a whole, as well as to respond to other students' questions; this folder should be a forum for discussion to supplement our class meetings. You must post ten times over the course of the semester, and each posting counts for 2% of your grade, so a total of 20% of your final grade. **YOU MUST POST BY NOON ON THE TUESDAY BEFORE CLASS** to give everyone a chance to read before class.
- ***Joke Journal folder***: As a means of opening our eyes to the culture of humor that surrounds us, all class participants are asked to keep a joke journal. Each week, write down at least one humorous event (or attempt at a humorous event) to which you were witness or in which you participated. If you maintain your journal privately, share at least one weekly entry with the class by posting it in this folder. When recounting a joke's telling, or when writing an account of a humorous event (or an attempted humorous event), try to remember and record as much of the context of the event as possible: who said what to whom, where, and when; what happened prior to and after the telling; who laughed; who didn't; what kind of laughter did the event elicit; and anything else that strikes you as important to the telling/event. The instance of humor should be "live" for these journals, i.e. **not** a list of jokes you downloaded from the internet, or a joke from a sitcom (unless this proved the trigger for a "live" incident among a particular viewing audience). I expect this journal will prove useful to think with throughout the course, as well as providing the raw materials for your mid-term exam (and potentially for a final paper/project). Again, you must post ten joke journals over the course of the semester, and each posting counts for 2% of your grade for a total of 20% of your final grade. **YOU MUST POST BY 2:45 PM ON THE TUESDAY BEFORE CLASS.** Have fun with this!

### 3) Class structure:

In each of our class meetings, we will address both the theoretical issues raised by the readings, and the more embodied, experiential aspects of our study of humor in use as they arise in your joke journals. The first half of the class (10:10-11:40) we will attend primarily to the import of the readings, and the last 45 minutes (11:55-12:40) we will explore their relation to the more experiential responses the class has generated, becoming a bit more exploratory with our approaches to humor, whether in the form of conversation, story telling, enactment, or any other improvisational genre.

### 4) Exams and Grading:

There will be a **midterm** exam consisting of two short essays, to review and synthesize the material covered in the first half of the course.

#### For the **final project**:

Conduct a research and/or ethnographic project of your selection. This may be either a group or an individual undertaking, and you may present your research either in a paper (approx. 10 pages) or as a live presentation/performance to the class. If the latter, you must provide a written statement and outline of your project as a handout to accompany your presentation. All students will present on their final projects to the class during the last two meetings of the semester. However those who chose the presentational format for their final project in lieu of a paper may have until finals week to work on their presentations, to be made to the class at the official meeting time for the final exam (May 2, for example).

\*All students must discuss their ideas for final projects with Prof. Seizer by the 10<sup>th</sup> week of the semester.

Grading for the course is based on the following percentages:

- Class participation and attendance = 10%
- On-line postings = 40% (Readings folder = 20%, Joke Journal folder = 20%)
- Midterm exam = 15%
- Final paper or project = 35%

## Syllabus

### **Class 1, Jan. 10:** Introduction to course

- Organization, requirements, syllabus.
- Examples of joke journals from Prof. Seizer
  - Discussion of “gentile jokes” hand-out
  - In-class viewing of “Roseanne” (the Bar Mitzvah episode).

<b>MONDAY NIGHT SCREENING:</b>
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“The Celluloid Closet” Vito Russo (dir. Rob Estein & Jeffrey Friedman, 1995, 102 min.) “Ellen” (the coming-out episode, original broadcast date 4/30/97; 647 min)
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### **Class 2, Jan. 17: The basis for humorous deviation in cultural norms & standards; the classics of humor theory: “superiority,” “relief,” and “incongruity”**

#### Reading:

- Mandel, Oscar. 1970. “What’s So Funny: The Nature of the Comic,” in *The Antioch Review*, Vol. XXX, No.1, pp. 73-89.
- Apte, Mahadev. 1985. “Introduction,” *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 13-26.
- Morreall, John. 1987. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, “Introduction,” pp. 1-7, and excerpts:
  - Plato, p. 10-13 (+Eres supplemental pages from Plato, *Republic*, 386a-398b; 605c-608b)
  - Aristotle, p. 14-16 (+Eres supplemental pages from Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1447-1450, Pts. 1-6, 12-13 & catharsis, 81-91).
  - Hobbes, p. 19-20
  - Spencer, p. 99-110
  - Bergson, p. 117-126 (+Eres supplemental pages from Bergson, pp 186-190 in Sypher, ed., *Comedy*)
- Simon Critchley, 2002. Ch. 4, “The Laughing Machine: A Note on Bergson and Wyndham Lewis”, pp. 55-62, in *On Humour*. Routledge.
- Gray, Frances. 1994. “Theoretical Perspectives,” Ch.1, *Women and Laughter*, pp1-40.

#### In-class viewing:

- Homophobic jokes in sit-coms: 15 minutes of clips from 1995 episodes of “Seinfeld,” “Frasier,” “Ellen,” “The Nanny,” “Friends.”
- Charlie Chaplin, excerpts from “Modern Times” and “The Gold Rush” (the first 17 minutes of “Modern Times,” and the shoe-eating scene from Gold Rush)

<b>MONDAY NIGHT SCREENING:</b>
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“The Mask”, Jim Carrey (dir. Chuck Russell, 1994, 97 min.)
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### **Class 3, Jan 24: Freud’s triangulated model of dirty jokes and the gendered locations of pleasure, relief and aggression in Freud’s theory**

#### Reading:

- Freud, Sigmund. 1905. *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. Read the whole book if you can. If not, skim pp. 1-105 and read pp. 106-193 carefully.

MONDAY NIGHT SCREENING:

“Smoke Signals” Sherman Alexie (dir. Chris Eyre, 1998, 89 min.)

**Class 4, Jan. 31: The importance of context (1): ethnic humor**

Reading:

- Keith Basso, 1979. *Portraits of “the Whiteman”*: linguistic play and cultural symbols among the western Apache. Cambridge U. Press. Read the whole book, focusing on Chs. 3-5, pp. 35-82.
- Alan Dundes, 1987. Ch. 6, “The Jewish American Princess and the Jewish American Mother in American Jokelore,” in *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humor Cycles and Stereotypes*. Ten Speed Press, pp. 62-81.
- Simon Critchley, 2002. Ch. 5, “Foreigners are Funny: The Ethnicity and Ethnicity of Humour”, pp. 65-76 in *On Humour*. Routledge.

Recommended:

- Mahadev Apte, 1985. “Humor, Ethnicity, and Intergroup Relations,” Ch. 4 in *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach*, Cornell U Press, pp. 108-148
- James Sterngold, “A Racial Divide Widens on Network T.V.,” N.Y. Times article, 12/29/98.
- Donna Goldstein, 2003. Chapters 6-7, pp. 227-274 in *Laughter Out of Place: Race, Class, Violence and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown*. Univ. of California Press.

MONDAY NIGHT SCREENING

“The Aristocrats” (dir. Paul Provenza, 2005)

**Class 5, Feb. 7: The importance of context (2): sociolinguistic analyses of jokes.**

Reading:

- Seizer, Susan. 2005. Introduction, Chs 4 & 6, *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage*.
- Sacks, Harvey. 1989. “An Analysis of the Course of a Joke’s Telling in Conversation,” in *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*, ed. Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer, second ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 337-353.
- Simon Critchley, 2002. Ch. 6, “The Jokes All on Us: Humour as Sensus Communis”, pp. 79-91 in *On Humour*. Routledge.
- English, James F. 1994. “Humor as Social Practice: Rethinking Joke-Work” in *Comic Transactions*, Cornell U. Press, pp. 5-19.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblet, Barbara. 1975. “A Parable in Context: A Social Interactional Analysis of Storytelling Performance,” in Ben-Amos and Goldstein, eds., *Folklore: Performance and Communication*. The Hague: Mouton, pp. 105-130.

In-class viewing:

- Video footage from Prof. Seizer’s fieldwork on Tamil popular theater.

MONDAY NIGHT SCREENING

An episode of “Absolutely Fabulous,” for mother/daughter relationship  
An episode of “All in the Family,” for the father-in-law/son-in-law relationship

**Class 6, Feb. 14: Anthropological “joking relationships” as structured interaction**

Reading:

- Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1952 [1940]. “On Joking Relationships,” and “A Further Note on Joking Relationships,” Chs. 4 & 5 in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, pp. 90-115

- Terry, Charles. 1997. "The Function of Humor for Prison Inmates." Pp 336-347 (ERES)
- Apte, Mahadev. 1985. "Joking Relationships" in *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 29-81.

Reference [on reserve]

- Douglas, Mary. 1975. "Jokes," in *Implicit Meanings*, Routledge, pp. 90-114.
- Bateson, Gregory, 1958 [1936]. *Naven*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 1-107 [skim]

A TWO-PART TAKE-HOME MIDTERM

with two essay questions. Each answer should be 1-3 pages (double spaced). The first essay gives you an opportunity to apply your understanding of Freud's analysis of jokes. The second allows you to consolidate several of the ideas on humor we've encountered thus far by analysing an event from your own or a classmate's joke journal. Your analysis should apply at least two of the theories from the first half of the course.

MONDAY NIGHT SCREENING

"Play It Again Sam," Woody Allen (dir. Herbert Ross, 1972; 85 min.)

**Class 7, Feb. 21:** Are we ashamed or proud of our shit?

Reading:

- Woody Allen
- Simon Critchley, 2002. "Why the Super-Ego is Your Amigo" Ch 7, pp. 93-111

In class:

- Listen to stand-up comedy routines of Woody Allen

MONDAY NIGHT SCREENING

"Jesus is Magic," Sarah Silverman (dir. Liam Lynch, 2005; 72 min.)

**Class 8, Feb. 28:** Let's look at it from a different perspective: Creating Humor

Read:

- Arthur Koestler, 1989 [1964]. Part One: The Jester (Chs. I-IV, pp. 27-100), in *The Act of Creation*. Arkana Books.

**Class 9, March 7: Folly, Clowning, and the Carnavalesque!**

Reading:

- Bakhtin, M.M. 1984 [1965]. Selections from *Rabelais and His World*, Indiana U Press, pp. 1-12, 239-244.
- Willeford, William. 1969. "The Fool and the Woman," in *The Fool and His Scepter*, Northwestern U Press, pp. 174-191.
- Davis, Nathalie Zemon. 1975. "Women on Top," in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, Stanford U Press, pp. 124-151 [and notes, 310-315]

Recommended reading:

- Mitchell, William E. 1992. "Introduction: Mother Folly in the Islands," in *Clowning as Critical Practice*, University of Pittsburgh Press, pp. 3-37.
- Vilsoni Hereniko, 1992. "When She Reigns Supreme: Clowning and Culture in Rotuman Weddings," in *Clowning as Critical Practice*, University of Pittsburgh

Press, pp. 167-191.

In-class viewing:

[open to student suggestions: The Simpsons? South Park? Beavis & Butthead?]

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**Spring Break (March 11-18)**

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MONDAY NIGHT SCREENING

Johnny Carson Show

Dick Cavett Show

**Class 10, March 21: Performances commenting on modernity: distance, detachment, alienation, and reassurance (what kind of impact does a performance have, and how is this impact created?)**

Reading:

- Ron Jenkins, 1994. "Preface" pp ix-xii, "Urban Slapstick and Survival" Ch. 1, and "America's Comedy of Detachment" Ch. 7 in *Subversive Laughter*.
- Brecht, Bertolt. 1964. "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," in *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett. NY: Hill and Wang, pp. 91-99.

Recommended:

- Zijderveld, Anton. 1968. "Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality." *Social Research* V35 N2 Summer 1968

MONDAY NIGHT SCREENING

Rosanne Barr, "Domestic Goddess" stand-up routine

"A Question of Silence" (dir. Marleen Gorris, 1983)

**Class 11, March 28: Can feminists be funny? the female grotesque**

Reading:

- John Lahr, 1995. "Dealing with Roseanne," *The New Yorker*, July 17, pp. 42-61
- Kathleen Rowe, 1995. *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*. Introduction, Chs 1-2, Afterword (pp. 1-91, 213-219).
- Frances Gray, 1994. "Born in the USA," Ch. 2 in *Women and Laughter*, pp. 41-79

Recommended reading:

- Mary Russo, 1995. "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," in *The Female Grotesque: risk, excess and modernity*. Routledge. pp. 53-73 (+196-200, endnotes)
- Helene Cixous, 1980. "The Laugh of the Medusa" in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Marks & de Courtivron, U of Massachusetts Press, pp. 245-264
- Sian Mile, 1992. "Roseanne Barr: Canned Laughter -- Containing the Subject," in *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, ed. Regina Barreca. Gordon & Breach, pp. 39-46
- Caliskan, Sevda. 1995. "Is There Such a Thing as Women's Humor?" *American Studies International*, Oct. 1995, Vol. XXXIII, No.2
- Mahadev Apte, 1985. "Sexual Inequality in Humor," Ch. 2 in *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 67-81.

- Mary Klages, 1992. “What to do with Helen Keller jokes: a feminist act” in *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, ed. Regina Barreca. Gordon & Breach:13-22
- Judy Elsley, 1992. “Laughter as Feminine Power in ‘The Color Purple’ and ‘A Question of Silence’” in *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, ed. Regina Barreca. Gordon & Breach, pp.193-199

In class:

- Cartoons: “Sylvia”; “Cathy”; “Dykes to Watch Out For”; “Hothead Paisan”
- Magazines: Ms. “No Comment” back covers; Playboy and Esquire cartoons

<p>MONDAY NIGHT SCREENING  “Blackmail” (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1929)  “The Incredible Shrinking Woman” Lily Tomlin</p>
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**Class 12, April 4: “Getting it” and the female spectator**

Reading:

- Doane, Mary Ann. 1982. “Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator,” in *Screen* 23.3-4, Sept-Oct 1982, pp. 74-87.
- Modleski, Tania. 1988. “Rape vs. Mans/laughter: Blackmail” in *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*. NY: Methuen. Ch. 1, pp. 17-30.
- Doane, Mary Ann. 1989. “Masquerade Reconsidered: Further Thoughts on the Female Spectator,” in *Discourse* 11.1, Fall-Winter 1988-89, pp. 42-54.

Recommended reading [for clarification on the Lacanian theory of masquerade]:

- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble*, pp. 49-54

<p>MONDAY NIGHT SCREENING  “The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert” (1994)</p>
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**Class 13, April 11: Camp as a survival strategy: the normative performative, or gender as meta-text**

Reading:

- Newton, Esther. 1972. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*.
- Sontag, Susan. 1966. “Notes on Camp,” in *Against Interpretation*. Dell, pp. 275-292.
- Dyer, Richard. 1992. “It’s being so camp as keeps us going,” in *Only Entertainment*. Routledge, pp. 135-147.
- Dyer, Richard. 1993. “Straight Acting,” *The Matter of Images*. Routledge, pp. 133-136.

Recommended reading [on against-the-grain theatricality, and female reappropriations of camp and cross-dressing]

- Case, Sue-Ellen. 1993. “Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, pp. 294-306.
- Davy, Kate. 1992. “Fe/male Impersonation: The Discourse of Camp,” in *Critical Theory and Performance*. Reinelt and Roach, eds., U of Michigan Press, pp. 231-247.

**Class 14, April 18:** Student presentations of final projects

**Class 15 (last class), April 25: student final project presentations**

**Final: Friday May 4** due in my office by noon.