



“To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one.”

--Henri Bergson, *Laughter* (1900)

**American Studies 407**  
**American Humor**  
**Thursday 7:00-9:45**  
**Fall 2011**  
**EC 11**  
**Code: 18216**

**John Ibson**  
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**Hours: TR 10:15-11:15,**  
**1:00-2:00**  
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### **Required reading:**

John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (2009)

Rich Shyder and Mark Schiff, *I Killed: True Stories of the Road from America's top Comics* (2007)

George Carlin, *Last Words: A Memoir* (2009)

Annemarie Bean et al., editors, *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (1996)

Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (1995)

Nancy Franklin, “Man Alone” (on the humor of Louis C.K.)

The five books are available at The Little Professor Book Center. I'll pass out the Franklin article in class.

**The Nature and Requirements of this Course:**

Welcome to American Studies 407! This course examines one of those rare phenomena that seem to be found in virtually every human society, the capacity for being amused. But though amused humans appear across time and space, this class will emphasize how the exact source of amusement and the exact ways of showing amusement vary greatly, depending upon where, when, and among whom we're considering the matter. In other words, the course assumes (though you don't need to agree with this assumption to do well in the course) that nothing is inherently funny, indeed that something that would amuse one person or group might very well not be at all amusing to someone else. Our focus in class sessions this semester will mostly be the contemporary United States, though we'll also give some attention to humor in our society over roughly the past half century and also to a popular form of humor in the nineteenth century, blackface minstrelsy. In your own individual research, though, you'll be free to explore humor in any setting and time period that interest you.

I'll lecture every now and then, but mostly our class sessions will be devoted to our talking together about the assigned reading and about material (provided by you as well as by me) that we'll listen to and watch. Even when I lecture, I welcome your comments.

It is essential that you attend class consistently and do the reading by the day for which it's assigned.

On September 22, when we've finished discussing the Morreall book, I'll give you the topic of an **essay to write outside of class**, due back to me in two weeks, on **October 6**. An essay by an undergraduate must be at least 1,500 words long; a graduate student's essay must be at least 2,000 words.

Additionally, you are to prepare **another essay outside of class**, around 1,500 words for undergraduates and 2,000 words for graduate students, in which you do one of the following:

1. Analyze in cultural terms the humor of an individual professional humorist, from the present or the past, from our society or elsewhere.
2. Analyze in an ethnography the nature and the apparent purpose of humor in a particular setting.

Both types of projects will require research beyond the assigned reading in the course. Your essay must include a bibliography listing every source you consulted, not merely the sources you cited in the essay. Whenever you actually employ one of these sources in the essay, you must cite it, in some consistent form of source citation, preferably not in parentheses. I'll be happy to meet with you outside class to discuss topic selection and the preparation of the essay itself. No later than Thursday, **October 20**, you must have notified me in writing—in a hard copy, not by email—of the topic you've chosen. I'll discuss this assignment further in class, and we'll occasionally discuss in class how your research is progressing. The completed essay is due no later than Thursday, **November 17**.

**American Studies 407****John Ibson**

Lastly, you'll prepare a third essay outside of class, **the final exam**. This essay will cover the entire course, and I'll provide the topic no later than two weeks before our last class meeting. It will be due by 7:30 pm on Thursday, **December 15**.

Please submit all written work in a hard copy, not as an attachment in email.

I will extend a due date, with no penalty, only for a genuinely serious reason, for which I might require documentation.

Working with the Office of Disabled Student Services, I will make any accommodations necessary for **a student with a disability**.

**Grading:**

I use the university's plus-minus grading system. An A for me is a symbolic way of saying that I think your work is genuinely superior, far in excess of my minimum expectations. B is for work that is very good, definitely exceeding my minimum expectations. C is for acceptable work that meets my minimum expectations. D is for work that does not meet those expectations but that has some promise or potential for doing so. An F is for work that falls far below my minimum expectations, perhaps including (as discussed below) my expectation that work will be prepared honestly.

In evaluating your first essay and your final essay, I'll use these criteria, in this order of importance: Understanding, originality, evidence, clarity of expression, and organization.

In evaluating your research project, I'll consider how cleverly and precisely you've conceived the project, how thoroughly you've conducted research, and how creatively and lucidly you've presented your findings.

**Academic dishonesty** is an extremely serious matter: either the presentation of assigned written work actually done by someone else, without attribution, as if it were one's own work; or else the preparation of assigned written work for a classmate. Penalty for such deceit will range, depending on my judgment of the severity of the offense, from a failing grade on a particular assignment to failure in the course. An even more severe penalty might result should I decide to report an instance of dishonesty to the Dean of Students Office.

In determining your grade in the course, I'll first determine your grade for written work, counting the first essay and the research project as 30% each, and the final essay as 40%. Then I'll consider your participation in the class: your attendance; your contributions to class discussions; and, especially if you're not a person inclined to say much in class, your discussions with me outside the classroom, in my office or in email. If your participation has been noteworthy, in either a positive way or a negative one, to determine your grade in the course I'll then raise or lower your grade for written work up to a full letter. If your participation has not been notably bad or good, your course grade will just be the grade for your written work.

## COURSE OUTLINE

8/25 What We're Doing and Why We're Doing It

### I. MAKING IT FUNNY: HUMOR AS A CULTURAL PROCESS

#### 1. Varieties of American Humor

9/1 **Assignment:** When I call on you, be amusing.

#### 2. "Just Kidding"? Humor's Hidden Agenda

9/8 **A.** Disposition, Purpose, and Meaning: Psychological, Social, and Cultural Dimensions of Humor (lecture)

What Have We Done? Interpretation of the class project (lecture)

Funny or Not? Your response to Louis C.K.

**Reading: Franklin, "Man Alone" If you're not already familiar with Louis C.K., also watch some YouTube videos of him before class.**

**B.** Laughing in the Laboratory: Investigating Humor without Killing It

**Reading: Morreall, *Comic Relief***

9/11 Chapter 1, No Laughing Matter: The Traditional Rejection of Humor and Traditional Theories of Humor; Chapter 2, Fight or Flight—or Laughter: The Psychology of Humor; Chapter 3, From Lucy to "I Love Lucy": The Evolution Of Humor; Chapter 4, That Mona Lisa Smile: The Aesthetics of Humor, pp. 1-89.

9/22 Chapter 5, Laughing at the Wrong Time: The Negative Ethics of Humor, Chapter 6, Having a Good Laugh: The Positive Ethics of Humor, Chapter 7, Homo Sapiens and Homo Ridens: Philosophy and Comedy; Chapter 8, The Glass is Half Empty *and* Half Full: Comic Wisdom, pp. 90-145.

**Midterm Exam: Prepared Outside of Class, Covers Material to This Point**

## II. WHO GETS THE JESTER'S JOB? MAKING A LIVING BY BEING FUNNY

Reading: Shydner, *I Killed*  
Carlin, *Last Words*

9/29 Shydner, pp. xvii-xix, 1-140.

10/6 Shydner, pp. 141-260.

\*\*\*Midterm Essay Due 10/6\*\*\*

10/13 Carlin, pp. xi-xx, 1-153.

10/20 Carlin, pp. 155-294.

\*\*\*Notification of Course Project Topic Due 10/20\*\*\*

## III. LAUGHTER AND POWER: HUMOR AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

### 1. A Tradition of Ridicule: American Humor and Racial Identity

Reading: Bean et al., *Inside the Minstrel Mask*

10/27 Eric Lott, "Blackface and Blackness: The Minstrel Show in American Culture," in Bean, pp. 3-32; Alexander Saxton, "Blackface Minstrelsy," in Bean, pp. 67-85; Robert C. Toll, "Social Commentary in Late-Nineteenth-Century White Minstrelsy," in Bean, pp. 86-109.

11/3 William J. Mahar, "Ethiopian Skits and Sketches: Contents and Contexts of Blackface Minstrelsy, 1840-1890, in Bean, pp. 179-220; Annamarie Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide: The Female Impersonator in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy, in Bean, pp. 245-256; Barbara Lewis, "Daddy Blue: The Evolution of the Dark Dandy," in Bean, pp. 257-272; W.T. Lhamon, Jr., "Ebery Time I Wheel About I Jump Jim Crow: Cycles of Minstrel Transgression from Cool White to Vanilla Ice," in Bean, pp. 275-284.

11/10 African American Humor Today: The Appeal and the Dilemma of Dave Chapelle  
Videos in class: *Inside The Actors Studio: Dave Chappelle*; excerpts from *The Chappelle Show*.

**2. Women Taking Charge? Humor and the Shifting Boundaries of Gender**

**Reading:** Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*

**11/17** Introduction: "Feminist Theory and the Question of Laughter," Chapter 1, Pig Ladies, Big Ladies, and Ladies with Big Mouths: Feminism and the Carnavalesque," Chapter 2, "Roseanne: The Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess," Chapter 3, "Narrative, Comedy, and Melodrama," pp. 1-115.

**\*\*\*Course Project Due 11/17\*\*\***

**Fall Recess**

**12/1** Chapter 4, Romantic Comedy and the Unruly Virgin in Classical Hollywood Cinema," Chapter 5, "Professor-Heroes and Brides on Top," Chapter 6, "Dumb Blondes," Chapter 7, "Masculinity and Melodrama in Post-Classical Romantic Comedy," Afterword: Shape-Shifting," pp. 116-219.

**12/8** Conclusions  
Course Evaluations

**12/15 \*\*\*Final Examination due by 7:30 pm.\*\*\***

