Writing About American Comedy

Gallatin SPRING 2016

Course Description:

Writing about comedy is a treacherous affair, and one that raises numerous intractable questions: What is comedy? What path has it carved out for itself over the past century? And how do we write about it? This advanced writing course will survey the story of American comedy in all its multifarious formats—the sitcom, the film comedy, the stand-up act, the variety show—while also serving as a workshop for cultural criticism that goes deeper than the recap. Utilizing a combination of reading, viewing, live performances, and workshopping, this course will sharpen students’ skills as writers by exposing them to the wide range of American comedy.

To explain a joke, we have long been told, is to kill it, so how do we write about the glorious blooms of comedy without stomping all over the flowers? In this course, we will wrestle with the complexities of writing about comedy, including, but not limited to, the question of whether being funny about what’s funny is a faux pas or a necessity.

Writing assignments will offer students the opportunity to learn about the craft of cultural criticism by attending a stand-up show and writing a review, writing about a work of comedy that makes you uncomfortable, and other prompts. Readings will include essays by Clive James, Emily Nussbaum, James Agee, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Wesley Morris, Roxane Gay, and others.

Required Texts:

Course Reader, at NYU Bookstore

Course requirements:

- Attendance & participation
- Close readings of required texts
- Writing exercises
- One political essay piece (1500-2000 words)
- Close readings of required texts
- One profile (2000-3000 words)
- One essay on comedy and discomfort (1500-2000 words)
- One draft for each story
Format
Papers are to be typed, double-spaced, and stapled. When you are up for workshop, you must submit your paper to the class email list by the deadline we determine in class. You must staple all drafts to the final papers. Please do not submit written work that you do not want others to see.

Workshopping
Each student will present two of their three papers for workshopping. Students should submit their work via the NYU Classes website for the class to read prior to our meeting. The writer whose work is being discussed will have an opportunity to respond to the class’ comments at the end of the workshop. Any suggestions about how to organize or structure the workshopping experience will gladly be considered. Students will be expected to turn in their marked-up drafts of the essays being workshopped at the end of each class.

Late and Missed Assignments
Grades for later papers will be progressively downgraded for each day of lateness. If a student and I determine a new deadline and this is also missed, the grade may drop further. Although drafts will not be graded, they still must be turned in on time. If you do not turn in a draft, you are still responsible for turning in a final version of the paper, the grade of which may be lowered as well. Remember that late or missed exercises or drafts often take their toll on the quality of final papers.

Grading
The final grade for the semester will be determined as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exercises/ Short Writing Assignments</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>(note: these are not graded individually, but rather as a whole)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class participation</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discomfort essay (with drafts)</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political essay (with drafts)</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profile (with drafts)</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You must complete all of your work in order to pass the class.

Attendance
This class only meets once per week, so your attendance is vital. Aside from religious observances, you are permitted only one absence without penalty. Your final course grade will be lowered for subsequent absences. Also, three significant lates count as one absence.
Plagiarism
Plagiarism, the submission of another’s words or ideas as your own, is a serious offense. Cases of plagiarism will be handled in accordance with the official university policy on academic dishonesty.

Devices
Cellphones should not be used in class. The professor reserves the right to drop students’ class participation grades without warning for use of cellphones, or for non-class-related use of laptops or tablets.

Printing
Unless an individual wishes to make copies of his paper for the whole class, all students are required to post their manuscripts to the class page for workshop. Students are responsible for printing their peers’ work and bringing these copies to class.

Coursepacks
To order coursepacks, follow these instructions:

Go to the NYU Bookstore web site: http://www.bookstores.nyu.edu
Click on the "Search All Books" link under Textbook Inquiry & Ordering
In the "Search by ISBN" option
Enter 978200009183B
Proceed to Checkout and complete your order.
After completing your order you will receive an email with your access code and instructions regarding accessing the Digital Coursepack.

Weekly Schedule

Class One
First day of class: introduction
(At least) 12 Ways to Consider “Anchorman”

Class Two
Reading: Emily Nussbaum- “Difficult Women”
Jennifer Keishin Armstrong- “Mary and Lou and Rhoda and Ted”
Jonah Weiner- “The Man Who Makes the World’s Funniest People Even Funnier”
“Freaks and Geeks” oral history

Comedy and death
Surprise and reversal
Screening: “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” “Sex and the City”

Class Three

Reading: James Harvey- “Romantic Comedy in Hollywood”
James Agee- “Comedy’s Greatest Era”
Stephen Winer- “A Smile and a Tear”

Silent comedy aesthetics
Comedy and melodrama
The performer’s aura

Screening: “City Lights”

Class Four

Reading: Clive James- “Woodhouse Walkies”

Obsession in comedy, and comedic obsession in writing

FIRST DRAFT OF DISCOMFORT PIECE DUE

Workshop

Class Five

Reading: Willa Paskin- “Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt,” “Catastrophe”
Paul Slansky- “Albert Brooks Is Funnier Than You Think”

Should we be funny about being funny?

Workshop

Class Six

Reading: Emily Nussbaum- “The Great Divide”
Wesley Morris- “Key & Peele”
Richard Zoglin- “Comedy at the Edge”
Hilton Als- “A Pryor Love”

Comedy and race
Shock value
Does comedy get stale?

Screening: “All in the Family,” “Richard Pryor: Live in Concert”

FINAL DRAFT OF DISCOMFORT PIECE DUE

UCB PERFORMANCE?

Class Seven

Reading: Roxane Gay- “Girls, Girls, Girls”
Jonathan Rosenbaum- “Ace Ventura Reconsidered”
Stuart Klawans- “Sullivan’s Travels”

Comedy and politics
Is comedy serious business?
What can we ask of comedy?

Screening: “Sullivan’s Travels”

IN-CLASS ASSIGNMENT: REVIEW OF UCB SHOW

Class Eight

Reading: Brian Raftery- “Cheers” oral history

Memoir and oral history in comedy

Workshop

FIRST DRAFT OF POLITICS ESSAY DUE

Class Nine

Reading: Martin Amis- “No Laughing Matter”
Dave Kehr- “Lost in America,” “Risky Business”

Style and comedy

Workshop

Class Ten

Reading: Lee Siegel- “Not Remotely Controlled”
Emily Nussbaum- “Tool Time”
James Kaplan- “Angry Middle-Aged Man”

Comedy and self-awareness
“A show about nothing”

Screening: “Seinfeld,” “Curb Your Enthusiasm”

FINAL DRAFT OF POLITICS ESSAY DUE

Class Eleven

David Shields- “Reality Hunger”
A.O. Scott- “Overrated Movie”
A.O. Scott- “Entourage”
Amy Wallace- Garry Shandling profile

TV about TV
Celebrity
Star appeal, and the star persona

Screening: “The Larry Sanders Show,” “I Love Lucy”

Class Twelve

Reading: Philip Lopate- “Tea at the Plaza”

The comedy of daily life

Workshop

FIRST DRAFT OF PROFILE DUE

Class Thirteen

Reading: Geoff Dyer- “Otherwise Known as the Human Condition”

Comedy and philosophy

Workshop

Class Fourteen

Final Class

FINAL DRAFT OF PROFILE DUE