

## **Syllabus: American Film Comedy American Studies 285**

Instructor: Dan Thornton

Time: Mondays and Wednesdays 3:00pm-5:10pm

Place: R101

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### **Course Goals:**

- Describe the process and history of the motion picture evolving from arcade entertainment to a dominant storytelling medium
- Discuss the history and techniques of great early American film comedy pioneers inside the U.S., and study the roots of American Humor
- Analyze the journey from the golden age of American silent film comedies to the creation of the Hollywood studio system, and its' subsequent celebrity culture
- Discuss film genres and comedy sub-genres.
- Write and research aspects of American humor with a focus on film
- Explore comedians, comedic techniques and the writing of humor
- Analyze the politics of American film comedies as they relate to race, class and gender

### **The course will have weekly modules that will roll out consecutively:**

**Week 1:** (Beach: Chapter 1) *note that reading assignments are to be done by the second class of the week they are assigned* Introductions and Expectations. Genres and Sub-Genres. What is humor? Is there a particular American form of humor? The role of various comedic traditions from Mark Twain to Will Rogers through Vaudeville, Minstrel and "Borscht Belt" cultures. Sub-Genre: **Slapstick**.

#### **(Suggested films)**

**The General (1927)** - United Artists

**Director:** Buster Keaton, Clyde Bruckman

**Stars:** Buster Keaton; Marion Mack; Jim Farley

**Week 2:** (Hornby: pp. 1-30)

From early arcade "flicks" to Edwin S. Porter's "The Great Train Robbery" the motion picture moves from entertainment to story teller. Explanation of film/literature Dramas. The ultimate expressions of comedy— Profile: Wes Andersen.

*Arbuckle, Chaplin, Keaton* Sub-Genre: **Slapstick/Safety Last/Deadpan**.

**Modern Times (1936)** - United Artists

**Director:** Charlie Chaplin

**Stars:** Charlie Chaplin; Paulette Goddard; Henry Bergman

**Week 3:** ((Beach: 1, Hornby: pp. 30-60)

United Artists: the journey from the golden age of American silent films to the creation of the first Hollywood studio, and its subsequent celebrity culture. The comedian as director—Profile: Woody Allen , Sub-Genre: **Verbal Comedies**.

**Duck Soup (1933)** - Paramount

**Director:** Leo McCarey

**Stars:** Groucho, Harpo, Chico, Zeppo Marx; Margaret Dumont; Louis Calhern

Week 4: (Beach: 2, Hornby pp. 60-90) Talkies: how an acceleration of technologies in film making sets the stage for Hollywood's "Gilded Age". The "Screwball Comedy" and the Marx Bros. Sub-Genre: **Screwball**.

**It Happened One Night (1934)** - Columbia

**Director:** Frank Capra

**Stars:** Clark Gable; Claudette Colbert; Walter Conn

Week 5: (Beach: 3, Hornby pp. 90-120 )

The "Screwball Comedy", the Hays Code and the Great Depression. Literary America moves west to write for the movies. Class-consciousness becomes funny. Sub-Genre: **Screwball**.

**The Thin Man (1934)** - MGM

**Director:** W.S. Van Dyke

**Stars:** Myrna Loy; William Powell; Maureen O'Sullivan

**Bringing Up Baby (1938)** - RKO

**Director:** Howard Hawks

**Stars:** Katharine Hepburn; Cary Grant; Charlie Ruggles

Week 6: (Beach: 4, Hornby pp. 120-150)

WWII, Stalin & Hitler Was there anything funny about the 1940's? How humor was used as propaganda. Sub-Genre: **Satire**.

**The Great Dictator (1940)** - United Artists

**Director:** Charlie Chaplin

**Stars:** Charlie Chaplin; Paulette Goddard; Jack Oakie

**Sullivan's Travels (1941)** - Paramount

**Director:** Preston Sturges

**Stars:** Joel McCrea; Veronica Lake; William Demarest

**To Be or Not to Be (1942)** - United Artists

**Director:** Ernst Lubitsch

**Stars:** Jack Benny; Carole Lombard; Robert Stack

(Mid-Term given as take home)

Week 7: (Beach: 5, Hornby pp. 150-180)

“Man in the Grey Flannel Suit” The bland 1950’s are surprisingly funny. The rise of the standup comedian as star.

Mort Sahl, Woody Allen, Lenny Bruce. Sub-Genre: **Social Commentary**

**Adam's Rib (1949)**

**Director:** George Cukor

**Stars:** Spencer Tracy; Katharine Hepburn; Judy Holliday

**Some Like It Hot (1959) - Ashton/Mirisch**

**Director:** Billy Wilder

**Stars:** Jack Lemmon; Tony Curtis; Marilyn Monroe, Joe E. Brown, George Raft

**The Apartment (1960) - United Artists**

**Director:** Billy Wilder

**Stars:** Jack Lemmon; Shirley MacLaine; Fred MacMurray

Week 8: (Hornby pp. 180-210)

Movies in the TV Era – emerging technologies and experiments, influences of television on movies and vice versa, From Sc-Fi and surfers to Sinatra and cocktail kitsch, More 1950’s Humor. Sub-Genre: **Slapstick/Farce**

**Ocean’s 11 (1960)**

**Director:** Lewis Milestone

**Stars:** Sinatra, Martin, Davis, Lawford, Bishop

**The Seven Year Itch (1955) - 20th Century-Fox**

**Director:** Billy Wilder

**Stars:** Marilyn Monroe; Tom Ewell; Sonny Tufts

Week 9: (210-240) Sex Drugs and Rock n’ Roll. The 60’s change everything. How humor and rebellion mixed in American movies. Laugh-in, George Carlin, the Monkeys. Sub-Genre: **Black Comedy**

**The Producers (1968) - Embassy**

**Director:** Mel Brooks

**Stars:** Zero Mostel; Gene Wilder; Dick Shawn

**Casino Royale (1967)**

**Director:** Val Guest et al

**Stars:** David Niven, Woody Allen, Ursula Andress, Orson Welles

**Catch-22 (1970)**

**Director:** Mike Nichols

**Stars:** Alan Arkin; John Voigt; Orson Welles; Art Garfunkel

Week 10: (Hornby pp. 240-finish) The Big Hang Over. Cynicism versus nostalgia as America comes to terms with itself after Watergate and Vietnam. New Film School Generation – Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese among others-their influence and achievements during the 1970's and beyond. Sub-Genre: **Social Commentary.**

**American Graffiti (1973) - Universal**

**Director:** George Lucas

**Stars:** Richard Dreyfuss; Ron Howard; Candy Clark; Harrison Ford; Paul LeMat; Cindy Williams; Mackenzie Phillips; Charles Martin Smith

**Shampoo (1975) - Columbia**

**Director:** Hal Ashby

**Stars:** Warren Beatty; Julie Christie; Goldie Hawn; Lee Grant

Week 11: (Beach: 6, 7) New beginnings, old laughs. Woody Allen Hits his stride. Animal House ushers in a new era of Frat films. Sub-Genre: **Slapstick/Gross out.**

**Annie Hall (1977) - United Artists**

**Director:** Woody Allen

**Stars:** Woody Allen; Diane Keaton; Tony Roberts

**National Lampoon's Animal House (1978) - Universal**

**Director:** John Landis

**Stars:** John Belushi; Tim Matheson; John Vernon

Week 12: The future is now: From the Coen Bros. to Wes Andersen. A postmodern sensibility moves into American film comedies.

**Raising Arizona (1987) - 20th Century-Fox**

**Director:** Joel Coen

**Stars:** Nicolas Cage; Holly Hunter; John Goodman

**Rushmore (1998)**

**Director:** Wes Anderson

**Stars:** Jason Schwartzman, Bill Murray, Olivia Williams

Students' grades will be based on two essays, a midterm exam (week 6) and a final exam that will have a hands-on visual component.

The Text Books will be:

**About a Boy**

by Nick Hornby

Publisher: Riverhead Trade (April 30, 2002)

# ISBN-10: 1573229571

# ISBN-13: 978-1573229579

**Class, Language, and American Film Comedy**

by Christopher Beach

Cambridge University Press (November 1, 2001)

# ISBN-10: 0521002095

# ISBN-13: 978-0521002097