

# The Comedy of Politics

Denn das Lächerliche behandle ich ernsthaft,  
wenn ich es lächerlich behandle. — Karl Marx

55-02181501, Hauptseminar Fall 2017  
Mo. 14:15-15:45, Rothenbaumchaussee 34

This course explores the relationship between politics and comedy, beginning with the role of ancient comedy in Athenian and Spartan society and driving towards an analysis of contemporary political satire in the age of political leaders such as Trump, Putin, Erdogan and Jong-un. Comedy has historically played a subversive role in society. The comic stage—like critical philosophy—turns a political stage into a joke, calling out hidden or overt ideology and hypocrisy. As Marx puts it, “I treat that which is ridiculous seriously when I ridicule it.”

A political system that perpetuates contradiction within our social life—alienating us from each other and ourselves—might be identified as tragic. Thus, Marx claims that a tragic stage of history must be overturned by a revolutionary comedy. In other words, the logic of a tragic stage must be made to play out its paradoxes until it reaches its own comic ruin. Does history repeat itself in this way: first as tragedy, then as farce (*then as Trump*)?

Comedy may give us the freedom to laugh in the face of corrupt authority and oppressive regimes. But does it actually have the power to seriously challenge the conditions of a tragic stage of history? Is the comedy of politics mere entertainment? Does critical laughter hide its own kind of ideology? Can comedy have a deeper transformative power on the world political stage?





	DATE	TOPIC	TEXT	COMIC STUDY
1	6 Okt. 2017	Introduction: The Object of Comedy		
	23 Okt. 2017	No Class		
2	30 Okt. 2017	The Censorship of Comedy: Violence & Laughter	Halliwell. "To Laugh or not to Laugh." <i>Greek Laughter.</i> pp. 38-50	Euripides. <i>The Bacchae</i>  Aristophanes. <i>Frogs</i>
3	6 Nov. 2017	Fake News vs. Satirical News	Marx. <i>"On Prussian Censorship"</i>	Charlie Hebdo & Titanic
4	13 Nov. 2017	When Politicians Play the Comedian	Marx. <i>The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.</i> pp. 15-26	SNL: US elections 2008 & 2016  White House Correspondents' Dinner
5	20 Nov. 2017	Trolling Hitler: Comic Doubles	Dolor. "To Be or Not to Be? No, Thank You"  Bronfen. "Lubitsch's War: Comedy as Political Ploy in <i>To Be or Not to Be</i> "	Chaplin. <i>The Great Dictator</i>  Lubitsch. <i>To Be or Not To Be</i>
6	27 Nov. 2017	The Mechanics of Comic Repetition	Zupancic. <i>The Odd One In.</i>	Political Memes



7	4 Dez. 2017	Comic Combat	Zizek. The Pervert's Guide to Cinema.	Kubrick. Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb
8	11 Dez. 2017	Caricatures of History		Visit Warburg-Haus Research Center for Political Iconography
9	18 Dez. 2017	When the Object of Laughter Laughs Back	Willett, Willett. "Going to Bed White and Waking up Arab."  Willett, Willett. "The Seriously Erotic Politics of Feminist Laughter."	Selected Stand-Up
		Winter break		
10/11	22 Jan 2018	Double Session: Presentations		
12/13	29 Jan 2018	Double Session: Presentations		
14	5 Feb 2018	Make up class if needed		



## GRADING

Class participation and preparation: 25%  
Weekly contribution to class comic forum: 25%  
Final Presentation: 25%  
Final Paper: 25%

## READINGS

I will give you the readings in the form of PDFs. You will be required to bring a hardcopy or electronic copies of the readings with you to class. I expect that you have read the text, marked your copy, and have taken notes.

## COMIC FORUM

We will curate a shared comic forum in the form of either a private facebook page or wordpress blog. Throughout the week you are invited to post examples of contemporary or historical comic political commentaries. At the start of each class we will discuss the posts of the week.



## FINAL PAPER & PRESENTATION

Choose a specific political comedy as the object of your study. It may take the form of a novel, play, film, comedy sketch, comic strip, graphic novel, satirical new source, or social media trend (exp. a specific meme or series of memes, a viral youtube video).

Analyze your comedy by addressing the questions below in a your final term paper (5-7 pages, 1.5-space, Times New Roman, 12 font, 2,54 cm margins). Incorporate at least two of the theorists that we have read in our course. Prepare a final 20-minute presentation based on your research.

Summarize your comedy, using excerpts or clips.

Who is the agent of laughter?

Who/What is the object of laughter?

Who is the target audience? What were the various responses to the piece?

What is the historical context of this comedy (use and cite secondary sources)?

What political controversies or critiques does your comedy highlight?

How does the medium of your comedy reflect the content of its critique?

How effective is this comedy in challenging the political issue that it targets?