

Spring 2013

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**The Development of Jewish Humor**  
Jewish Studies  
563:396:01

Monday/Wednesday, 5th period (2:50-4:10 PM)  
Bildner Center, 12 College Avenue, #107

Instructor: Edward Portnoy  
Office: Room 108, Miller Hall  
14 College Avenue  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901  
Office Hours: Monday 10am-12pm; Wednesday 10am-12pm

**Course Description:**

Known historically as the “People of the Book,” the Jews are perhaps better known in the modern era as the “People of the Joke.” With a history of popular humor production that dates from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, Jewish comedy writers contributed heavily to the entertainment world in a variety of locales. The comedy industry, particularly in the United States, would come to be dominated by Jewish writers, whose cultural backgrounds frequently played a role in their comedic products. This course will survey the development of Jewish humor as a cultural phenomenon during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, focusing mainly on the history of American Jewish comedic output, but also delving into Jewish material from Eastern Europe, the USSR, and Israel.

By analyzing the development of Jewish humor, we will be able to gain insight into the variety of Jewish cultures and the ways in which they are affected by historical valences, as well as issues such as acculturation, assimilation, and methods employed in matters of cultural maintenance.

**Course Books:**

Allen, Woody. The Insanity Defense

Epstein, Lawrence. The Haunted Smile

Roth, Philip. Portnoy’s Complaint.

Other course materials (articles and primary source materials) will be available on Sakai or other online resources.

## **Course Requirements**

**Class attendance, preparedness, and participation:** Regular attendance of class and active participation in class discussion is required. Students are expected to come to class on time, having prepared the reading or reserve screening due that day, with comments, questions, etc., regarding the assigned material; to respect the protocols of classroom conduct (e.g., turning off cell phones, not eating during class, avoiding distracting chatter); to check their email regularly for class announcements (e.g., changes in assignments); and to turn in written work on the dates due. Students with three unexcused absences will have their course grade reduced. Students with six or more unexcused absences will receive an F for the course. Students should be prepared to provide the instructor with documentation of excusable absences, such as family emergencies, illness, religious observance; these must be submitted by the due date for the final exam. *Students who find that they are unable to attend class regularly for some pressing reason are required to notify their dean as well as the instructor.*

**One mid-term analysis:** This assignment is an essay of 4-5 double-spaced pages (ca. 1000-1500 words), in which students write an analysis of an assigned text or other exercise, addressing questions provided by the instructor. See Class Schedule for due date.

**Outside analysis:** Students will be required to write two short (2-3 pages) analysis of a piece not on the syllabus, but which they research on their own. This can include a film (or film clip); television show (or clip), novel, short story, monologue, etc. Please confirm the topic with me before you begin writing.

**Final examination:** A take-home examination that will consist of a series of identifications and an essay question. Examination will be distributed on the last day of class; due date (during exam period) to be announced.

*All written work that a student submits must be his/her own independent effort. Students must cite properly all outside sources consulted in preparing written assignments. Failure to comply with this policy can result in failure of the course.*

Please take a look at this plagiarism tutorial (not a how-to): <http://sccweb.scc-net.rutgers.edu/douglass/sal/plagiarism/Intro.html>

Course grades will be decided as follows: midterm analysis (30%), outside analysis (25%), final exam (30%), class preparedness and participation (15%).

Please note: Some of the source material we will use in this course may be offensive to certain people. Please be aware that we will not be censoring the material to accommodate any particular worldview, so if you are easily offended by ethnic, gender, racial and/or religious stereotypes, profanity, and sexually explicit material, you may have a difficult time engaging with some of the source material we will be using. Caveat lector, caveat auditorem, caveat specator.

In addition, while this is a class on Jewish humor, it is not a place for you to try out your own comedic stylings. If that is your inclination, The Stress Factory Comedy Club is on 90 Church Street. Open Mic Night is usually on Wednesday.

This syllabus is subject to change.

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**Class topics:**

**Week 1 - January 23 – Introduction: What is humor? What is Jewish? What is Jewish humor? Defining Jewish humor: development and theories.**

**Week 2 - January 28-30 - Origins of Jewish Humor: Traditional folklore, Wise Men of Chelm; Hershele Ostropoler; the badkhn (wedding jester)**

Weinreich, B. Yiddish Folktales, pp. 203-255.

Sholem-Aleichem. Competitors, Baranovitsh Station, Third Class.

Yoysef Perl. Excerpts from Revealer of Secrets.

Y.Y. Linetski. Excerpts from The Hasidic Boy.

Dan Ben-Amos, The "Myth" of Jewish Humor in Western Folklore, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Apr., 1973), pp. 112-131.

Halkin, Hillel. "Why Jews Laugh at Themselves" in *Commentary*; Apr 2006; 121, 4; ProQuest pg. 47-54

**Week 3 - February 4-6 - Freud and his Jewish jokes. The science of humor. Theories of humor. Defining and theorizing ethnic and Jewish humor.**

Freud, Sigmund, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious: The Standard Edition, with a biographical introduction by Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989): pp. 6-13; 106-139.

Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson. "Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival" in *American Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Special Issue: American Humor (Spring, 1985), pp. 81-97.

Richard Raskin. "The Origins and Evolution of a Classic Jewish Joke" in *Semites and Stereotypes: Characteristics of Jewish Humor*, Greenwood Press, 1993, pp. 87-97.

Bernard Saper. "Since When is Jewish Humor Not Antisemitic?" in *Semites and Stereotypes: Characteristics of Jewish Humor*, Greenwood Press, 1993, pp. 71-84.

#### **Week 4 - February 11-13 - Vaudeville and popular entertainment: the nature of ethnic humor in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century America**

Mp3s:

Cohen on the Telephone (1916); Cohen on his Honeymoon (1916); Goldberg's Automobile Troubles (1917); The Yiddish Professor (1913).

For similar fare, please consult the University of California, Santa Barbara Library Special Collections:

<http://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/search.php?query=jewish&queryType=%40attr+1%3D1016>

Milt Gross, Excerpts from *Nize Baby*, 1926.

Vaudeville Humor: The Collected Jokes, Routines and Skits of Ed Lowry, pp. 152-612.

Jewface CD + Liner notes.

Laurence Epstein. *The Haunted Smile: the Story of Jewish Comedians in America*, pp. 3-52

Lawrence E. Mintz. "Humor and Ethnic Stereotypes in Vaudeville and Burlesque" in *MELUS*, Vol. 21, No. 4, *Ethnic Humor* (Winter, 1996), pp. 19-28.

#### **Week 5 - February 18-20 – Entering the mainstream: Betty Boop, The Marx Brothers, The Three Stooges.**

Betty Boop:

The Three Stooges: *Ants in the Pantry*; *You Nazty Spy*; *I'll Never Heil Again*.

The Marx Brothers: *Animal Crackers*

Laurence Epstein. *The Haunted Smile: the Story of Jewish Comedians in America*, pp. 79-103.

Stephen J. Whitfield. "The Distinctiveness of American Jewish Humor" in *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Oct., 1986), pp. 245-260.

Amelia Holberg. "Betty Boop: Yiddish Film Star" in American Jewish History 87.4, 1999, pp. 291-312.

**\*Short analysis 1 due Feb. 18.**

**Week 6 - February 25-27 – Stand-up comedy: from the Borscht Belt to Broadway**

Mp3s on sakai:

Barton Brothers, Jewish Comedy

Mickey Katz, Greatest Shticks

Allen Sherman, My Son the Folk Singer

Marty Gale, Sexy Stories with a Yiddisha Flavor

Laurence Epstein. The Haunted Smile: the Story of Jewish Comedians in America, pp. 104-128.

Cohen, Mark. "My Fair Sadie: Allan Sherman and a Paradox of American Jewish Culture," in American Jewish History, Volume 93, Number 1, March 2007, pp. 51-71.

Josh Kun. "The Yiddish Are Coming: Mickey Katz, Antic-Semitism, and the Sound of Jewish Difference" in American Jewish History, Volume 87, Number 4, December 1999, pp. 343-374.

Donald Weber. "Taking Jewish American Popular Culture Seriously: The Yinglish Worlds of Gertrude Berg, Milton Berle, and Mickey Katz" in Jewish Social Studies. 5, No. 1/2, 1998-1999, pp. 124-153.

Sanford Pinsker. "Shpritzing the Goyim/Shocking the Jews" in Jewish Wry, Indiana University Press, 1987, pp. 89-104.

**Week 7 - March 4-6: The ladies of Jewish comedy: Sophie Tucker, Belle Barth, Pearl Williams, Joan Rivers, etc. Film; Making Trouble. Guest speaker: Judy Gold**

Mp3s on sakai:

Belle Barth

Pearl Williams

Sophie Tucker

Joan Rivers

Laurence Epstein. The Haunted Smile: the Story of Jewish Comedians in America, pp. 253-269.

Joyce Antler. "One Clove Away from a Pomander Ball: The Subversive Tradition of Jewish Female Comedians," in Studies in American Jewish Literature, 2010, pp. 123-138.

Judith Stora-Sandor. "From Eve to the Jewish American Princess: The Comic Representation of Women in Jewish Literature" in *Semites and Stereotypes: Characteristics of Jewish Humor*, Greenwood Press, 1993, pp. 131-140.

**Week 8 - March 11-13: Literary humor: Philip Roth, Woody Allen**

Woody Allen: *Hassidic Tales*, *No Kaddish for Weinstein*, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, *The Kugelmass Episode*.

Philip Roth: *Portnoy's Complaint*.

Christie Davies. "Exploring the Thesis of the Self-Deprecating Jewish Sense of Humor" in *Semites and Stereotypes: Characteristics of Jewish Humor*, Greenwood Press, 1993, pp. 29-43.

Sam B. Girgus. "Philip Roth and Woody Allen: Freud and the Humor of the Repressed" in *Semites and Stereotypes: Characteristics of Jewish Humor*, Greenwood Press, 1993, pp. 121-130.

**\*Midterm Analysis Due, March 11.**

**Week 9 - March 18-20 Spring Break**

**Week 10 - March 25-27 - No Class – Passover**

**Week 11 - April 1-3: The Jews of Prime Time:** *The Goldbergs*; *Your Show of Shows*; *Seinfeld* (*The Bris*; *The Yada Yada*, *The Serenity Now*) *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (*Trick or Treat*; *The Baptism*; *The Survivor*)

Laurence Epstein. *The Haunted Smile: the Story of Jewish Comedians in America*, pp. 129-154.

Battaglio, Stephen. "When the Jewish Mother Was an Icon" in *Commentary*; Oct 2010; 130, 3

**Cartoon Jews:** *Simpsons* (*Like Father, Like Clown*; *Today I Am a Clown*); *South Park* (*Passion of the Jew*; *Jewbilee*) *Family Guy* (*Family Goy*; *When You Wish Upon a Weinstein*).

**Week 12 - April 8-10: Humor and the Holocaust: Gallows humor.**

*Life is Beautiful*; Sarah Silverman's, "Wowschwitz;" *Robot Chicken's Anne Frank* (on sakai).

Ben-Ghiat, Ruth. "The Secret Histories of Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*" in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, Volume 14, Number 1, Spring 2001, pp. 253-266.

Timothy B. Malchow . “George Tabori's Jubila□um: Jokes and Their Relation to the Representation of the Holocaust” in *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (Spring, 1999), pp. 167-184.

Paul Lewis. “Three Jews and a Blindfold: The Politics of Gallows Humor” in *Semites and Stereotypes: Characteristics of Jewish Humor*, Greenwood Press, 1993, pp. 47-56.

Sander L. Gilman. “Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah Be Funny? Some Thoughts on Recent and Older Films” in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Winter, 2000), pp. 279-308.

### **Week 13 - April 15-17: Soviet Jewish humor, Israeli humor**

Excerpts from David Harris. *The Jokes of Oppression*, Aronson Pub., 1988, pp. xi-xiv; 3-36.

Elliott Oring. “Risky Business: Political Jokes under Repressive Regimes” in *Western Folklore*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Summer, 2004), pp. 209-236.

Joseph Telushkin. “Pardon Me, Do You Have Another Globe?: Persecution and the Jewish Sense of Homelessness,” in *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say about the Jews*, William Morrow & Co. 1992, pp. 107-124.

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Ephraim Kishon. *The Travel Bug, Jewish Poker, Fuhrman Pays, A Wife For Izzy in The Funniest Man in the World*, Shapolsky, 1989.

“Pini” Israeli webseries. Watch seasons 1-3, <http://pini.ynet.co.il/Eng/index.aspx>.

Nevo, Gidi. “Arbinka, Shtucks and Co.--The Makings of Kishon's Social Satire” in *Israel Studies*, Volume 10, Number 2, Summer 2005, pp. 129-146.

**\*Short Analysis 2 due April 15.**

### **Week 14 - April 22- 24: Jews on film I**

Mel Brooks, *The Critic* ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DiYjwRZK\\_NM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DiYjwRZK_NM)); *The Producers* (the original, 1968).

Kirsten Fermaglich. “Mel Brooks' *The Producers*: Tracing American Jewish Culture Through Comedy, 1967-2007” in *American Studies*, Volume 48, Number 4, Winter 2007, pp. 59-87.

Woody Allen, *Annie Hall*.

**Week 15 - April 29-May 1: Jews on film II:** Hebrew Hammer: Guest speaker, Jon Kesselman; Sasha Baron Cohen: *Borat*; *The Dictator*.

Eliot Borenstein. "Our Borats, Our Selves: Yokels and Cosmopolitans on the Global Stage" in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (Spring, 2008), pp. 1-7.

**Week 16 - May 6: Wrap up.** Final exam handed out, Due date TBA.