

Comparative Literature R1B:5 Fall 2013

Laughing Matters

Tuesdays and Thursdays 9:30-11 a.m. in 105 Dwinelle

Instructor:

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Office Hours: _____

Class Description:

What's the opposite of laughter? The tear? The sigh? Or the particularly grave, slightly condescending expression of the person who informs us, reproachfully, that a situation is serious and therefore "no laughing matter?"

Insanity, terrorism, totalitarianism, class conflict, racial tension, famine, murder, hopelessness, and, of course, death: the texts we'll study in this class concern themselves with the most serious subject matter possible. And yet each text is also essentially and irrefutably funny. As we discuss them, we'll ask whether comedy can also work as social critique, how humor might help us face the dark realities of life, and why laughing matters.

The goals of this course fall into two categories: reading and writing. The course will develop students' abilities to read texts closely and carefully, to examine both points of coherence and moments of tension within them, and to analyze the relationship between meaning and textual form. The other major aim is to help students express increasingly complex ideas in writing. The various writing activities in the class, from the major analytical essays to shorter creative exercises, will connect critical thinking and writing, improve students' control over their writing voice, and introduce new ways of thinking about structure and development.

Texts:

Required books (available at the Cal Student Store, 2470 Bancroft Way):

- 1) Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, translated by Mike Mitchell (Oxford University Press, 2009)
- 2) Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (Grove, 2011)
- 3) Roberto Bolaño, *By Night in Chile*, translated by Chris Andrews (New Directions, 2003)

Required screenings (dates, times, and locations to be announced in class):

- 1) Joel and Ethan Coen, *Fargo* (1996)
- 2) Luis Buñuel, *The Exterminating Angel* (1962)
- 3) Pedro Almodóvar, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988)

All other texts will be included in the course reader, which will be available at Zee Zee Copy, 2431 Durant Avenue.

Class Format:

Since this is a discussion-based seminar, your participation is key to the success of the course. You should arrive at each class ready to discuss that day's reading: generally, this will mean that you've not only done the reading, but also marked the text with questions and observations. (For films, you should plan to take notes during the screenings.)

In addition to talking about the course texts, we'll also have regular writing workshops and peer review sessions. I'll let you know beforehand if you need to prepare anything for these activities.

Assignments:

The bulk of the writing you'll do in this class will go into the **two major papers**. The first will be an essay that develops your own analysis of a literary text, while the second will also require you to engage with secondary sources. Rather than giving you prompts, I expect you to come up with your own topic for each paper, which you can then develop in conversation with me and with your classmates.

For each major paper, you'll hand in three pieces of writing: an outline, a polished draft, and a revised final version. An important aim of the class is to help students use the writing process to develop and refine their ideas; most successful students make substantial changes to their argument between the outline and the draft, and again between the draft and the final version.

Grading:

The two major papers will account for a full 50% of your grade in the course. (The first is worth 20% and the second worth 30%.) Although the final version is most important, I'll also consider the quality of your outline and draft when determining your overall grade for the paper cycle.

Another 30% of your grade will come from short writing assignments, which will include a close-reading exercise, several creative projects, and posts to our course bSpace forum.

The final 20% will come from your overall class participation. I recognize that different students tend to participate in different ways, so I'll consider your participation in a variety of formats: small-group discussion, prepared presentations, peer review conversations, and office hour visits as well as whole-class discussion.

That said, if you aren't comfortable with participating in whole-class discussion but would like to be, please come to office hours so we can discuss some strategies.

Rules and Procedures:

Timely **attendance** is mandatory. You may miss two classes without any penalty but for every subsequent absence I'll drop your participation grade by a third (from an A- to a B+, for example). I'll also count every two instances of your coming to class late as an unexcused absence.

I'm similarly strict about **deadlines**. For every calendar day that your paper is late, its grade will be one third of a grade lower (again, an A- becomes a B+ and so on). If you face an emergency that forces you to miss a deadline, please let me know at least 24 hours before that deadline.

Outlines can be single-spaced but every paper you turn in must be in a **regular font, double-spaced, and feature one-inch margins all around**. I'd rather you be honest and turn in work slightly under the expected page count rather than try to trick me by changing your formatting.

Please get yourself a good-sized **folder** that you can devote exclusively to this class. You'll be submitting your work in this folder and every time you turn in a new assignment, all your previous assignments should be in it as well.

Laptops are not permitted in class except on days in which we're conducting a peer-editing workshop. **Cell phones** should be put away for the duration of class time.

Finally, all **plagiarized work will receive a failing grade**. Plagiarism isn't just copying or buying an entire paper or writing exercise from another student; plagiarism is also copying paragraphs, sentences, or ideas without credit; "quoting without quotation marks"; cutting and pasting (whether from another essay or from a reference work like Wikipedia); or otherwise passing off the thoughts, words, and/or ideas of others as your own, consciously or unconsciously. Having seen your papers through from conception to outlining to the draft stage, I'll notice any attempts at plagiarism. So don't waste your time—it's faster and easier to do your own work. For further information, please see:

<http://writing.berkeley.edu/about-us/academic-honesty>

<http://catalog.berkeley.edu/policies/conduct.html#cheating>

Additional Help: If you'd like some extra help on your writing, especially with the mechanics of composition, please head over to the **Student Learning Center** at the César Chávez Student Center for free tutoring. Depending on your needs, they can either help you on a drop-in basis or arrange for you to meet with a tutor regularly throughout the semester. You can find their website at <http://slc.berkeley.edu>.

Note: If you require any disability-related accommodations or other special arrangements for this class, please inform me immediately by speaking with me privately after class or in office hours.