

# Sitcom, Satire, Sketch

## American TV Comedy: 1990-present

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This course familiarizes students with American television comedy from 1990-present, focusing specifically on sitcom, satire, and sketch (some subgenres will necessarily overlap). We will consider the history of each comedy type as well as its cultural significance then and now. Finally, we will explore the ways American TV comedy represents race, gender, age, religion, politics, sexuality, and even the industry itself. Classes will consist of lectures, screenings, and discussion.

### Required Texts

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- All readings are available on D2L.
- ALL SCREENINGS ARE REQUIRED TEXTS.

### Learning Objectives

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After completing MCS 351, students should 1) be familiar with the history of American TV comedy, particularly its recent history; 2) understand the conventions of sitcom, satire, and sketch comedy; 3) recognize how TV comedies reflect certain shifts in American society and within the industry; 4) identify ways these shows communicate (often troubling) notions about gender, race, and sexuality; 5) feel comfortable analyzing any television comedy from an argumentative perspective.

### Course Expectations

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This course has been designed with the following set of assumptions in mind. If you fit the profile below and are willing to make the commitment, you should find the course challenging but manageable. If not, you might think carefully about how you will work this course along with its expectations and requirements into your existing schedule.

**Attend class.** While attendance is not taken, we will have several in-class assignments. Should you choose to use our class time to hang out with friends, make a dentist appointment, or grab a sandwich at Jimmy John's, that is your decision. You are responsible, however, for understanding the material covered during your absence, and your work will be graded under the assumption that you have mastered that material.

**Be on time.** Students whose personal schedules prevent on-time arrivals and departures are encouraged to find a more appropriately scheduled course. Not only are being tardy and leaving early disruptive behaviors, but they will be taken into

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consideration if borderline grades are a concern (see below). **If you are tardy, enter quietly, and NEVER walk across the front of the classroom or your classmates.**

**Be courteous.** Disruption—which includes engaging in conversation while others are talking or during screenings, texting, ringing cell phones, browsing non class-related websites, entering late, wandering about during lectures—is NOT allowed. The DePaul University Code of Student Conduct prohibits "disrupting the peace and impeding classes [...] through actions or words."

**Be prepared;** you will be expected to discuss your thoughts about the course material. Most professors and academic staff agree with this general rule of thumb for prepping an undergraduate class: spend 2 hours/week of outside class time for every 1 credit hour in which you are enrolled. Assignments for this course have been calculated with this rule in mind.

**Ask questions.** If students do not understand something, they should ask questions. If students withhold queries because they are afraid of appearing ignorant, they will have a hard time excelling in college; remember that professors are here to answer students' questions.

**Use email etiquette.** Unless you specify otherwise, I will send all emails to the account you have registered with DePaul. Email is not the same as text or Twitter. **If you want a response, follow this good form for student-teacher emailing:**

- See if the ANSWER IS ON THE SYLLABUS!
- Include course/issue in subject line (MCS 351: My Project).
- Choose an appropriate salutation (Hi, Dr. Marshall...), and sign emails.
- Avoid apologies for missing class.
- Proofread what you write.

<sup>1</sup> Advice on reading secondary source material (like academic essays)... First, **skim and scan** for the author's thesis, key points, and supporting evidence as well as specialized words (those in boldface and italics), and underline or highlight those things. Second, **write/type notes** in margins to indicate something of importance. Third, **make use of supplemental material** (study questions, reading guides, etc.) as it has been created to help you succeed.

- Don't send unexpected attachments.

## Grading

Grades will be given on a 10-point scale, with pluses/minuses: A = 100-90, B = 89-80, C = 79-70, D = 69-60, F = 59-below. *Sloppy, illegible, improperly formatted, disorganized, and un-proofread work will earn NO MORE THAN HALF-CREDIT.*

Any concerns about grades should be discussed in person—not over email or social media. **NOTE: At the end of the term, borderline grades may be bumped up** if the student has attended class, arrived on time, and actively participated in discussion. Finally, other than the final project, all work will be returned to you, so there's no need to inquire about grades or averages throughout the term.

## Assignments

1. SCREENINGS: Students will screen several television episodes in the classroom. We will split our classes into sections: 1) lecture/discussion (90-100m); 2) break (10m); 3) screening (40-50m); 4) Screening Responses (10m). **We will discuss the shows and readings the session AFTER we screen and read them.** Eating/drinking during class is fine as long as you clean up afterward.
2. READINGS: All readings are on D2L.<sup>1</sup>
3. SCREENING RESPONSES (35%): Every session, during the last 5-10 minutes of class, students will respond to a brief set of questions based on our screenings. These exercises serve three purposes: a) to ensure students are understanding and keeping up with the material, b) to gauge students' critical



- approach to media literacy, and c) to guide our subsequent class discussion. *NOTE: Screening Responses may not be made up, submitted late, or emailed; the lowest grade will be dropped.*
4. VISUAL ESSAY (40%): Using methods and theories discussed in class, students will analyze one American sitcom, satire, or sketch comedy series (1990-present) NOT covered at length on our syllabus. They will shape their analysis into a visual essay using these three perspectives: industry or historical, cultural, and reception. Students may use iMovie, Windows Movie Maker, Microsoft Sway, Prezi, or any other software that can combine still images, video, text, and sound. More info including a full description, breakdown of percentage points, and list of deadlines will be discussed in Session 2. *Due online by 11:00 PM, Sun., Jul. 16.*
  5. FINAL EXAM (25%): Exam material comes from the lectures, readings, and screenings. For the exam, students may create a "tip sheet," or notes limited to 1 sheet of paper, front/back. The "tip sheet" must be turned in with the exam. *Make-up exams* will only be given to students with documented emergencies I am made aware of before the exam is handed out (e.g., bereavement, scheduled medical procedure, court hearing). Letters from parents or significant others are not acceptable. If a student misses an exam and does not have the required information, he/she will earn a zero on the exam. Exams will be kept on file until the end of fall quarter 2017. *Exam: Wed., Jul 12; same time, same place.*

## University/Dept. Policies

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**Course Evaluations:** This course will be available for you to review during the ninth and tenth week of the quarter. Close to that time, you will receive a notification to this effect via email. As instructors, we appreciate learning what we are doing well in the classroom and where we can continue to improve. Your feedback makes a difference.

**Policy Statement on Academic Dishonesty:** Work done for this course must adhere to the University Academic Integrity Policy, which you can review in the Student Handbook or by visiting Academic Integrity at DePaul University (<http://academicintegrity.depaul.edu>). Violations include but are not limited to the following categories: cheating; plagiarism; fabrication; falsification or sabotage of research data; destruction or misuse of the university's academic resources; alteration or falsification of academic records; and academic misconduct.

**Religious Holidays:** Students who believe they have a need for religious accommodation during any course, clerkship or other required educational activity shall notify the faculty member as soon as possible after an impending conflict becomes apparent—preferably prior to or at the beginning of the course. Absences excused for religious holidays or observances do not relieve a student from responsibility for curriculum content during an absence.

**Office of Accessibility:** Students who feel they may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact me privately to discuss their specific needs. All discussions will remain confidential. To ensure that you receive the most appropriate reasonable accommodation based on your needs, contact me as early as possible in the quarter (preferably within the first week of class), and make sure that you have contacted the: PLS Program (for LD, AD/HD) at 773-325-1677, Student Center #370, and/or The Office for Students with Disabilities (for all other disabilities) at 773-325-1677, Student Center #370.



## Class Calendar

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Readings are listed by the date on which they are due. Again, we will **discuss all shows the session after we screen/read them.**

### SITCOMS

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#### JUN 12 — THE AMERICAN SITCOM: FORMS & HISTORY (1950-90)

READING: None; bask in the glory of your ONLY assignment-free day.

SCREENING: **Modern Family** "Game Changer" (1.19) and **Black-ish** "The Nod" (1.3).

#### JUN 14 — GENDER, CLASS, AND RACE IN AMERICAN SITCOMS

READING: "Who Rules the Roost?" "Half-Century of Class and Gender in TV Sitcoms," and "The Hidden Truth in Black Sitcoms."

SCREENING: **Girls** "The Pilot" (1.1) and **Louie** "Joan" (2.4).

#### JUN 19 — AUDIENCE RECEPTION AND "QUALITY" COMEDY

READING: "If It's Not TV, Then What?" "From the Golden Age of Television," "Loving *Girls*," and "How Lena Dunham Set Me Free."

SCREENING: **The Office** "Diversity Day" (1.2) and **Curb Your Enthusiasm** "Palestinian Chicken" (8.3).

#### JUN 21 — COMEDY VERITÉ, IMPROV, AND THE TELEVISUAL SITCOM

READING: "Comedy Verité: Contemporary Sitcom Form," "The Americanization of *The Office*," and "Negotiating Jewishness."

SCREENING: **1/2 Hour News Hour** (1.1) and **South Park** "Over Logging" (12.6).

### SATIRE

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#### JUN 26 — SATIRE: A HISTORY

READING: "The State of Satire," "The (Thankfully) Short Life of the *1/2 Hour News Hour*," and "*South Park* as Carnavalesque Satire."

SCREENING: Excerpts from **The Colbert Report** (2005–14), **Last Week Tonight** (2014- ), and **The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore** (2015-17).

#### JUN 28 — COMEDY AND ENACTING POLITICAL CHANGE

READING: "Modern-Day Jesters in the American Court," and "Emancipatory Racial Humor As Critical Public Pedagogy."

SCREENING: **30 Rock** "TGS Hates Women" (5.16) and **Episodes** "Episode 1" (1.1).

#### JUL 3 — SATIRIZING THE INDUSTRY

READING: "Challenging Sitcom Conventions" and "Reflexivity in Television Depictions of Media Industries."

SCREENING: Sketches from **Chappelle's Show** (2003–2006) and **Inside Amy Schumer** (2013- ).



## SKETCH

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### **JUL 5 — "THE FUNCTION OF HUMOR": CHAPPELLE'S SHOW AND INSIDE AMY SCHUMER**

READING: "Sketch Comedy," "The Politics of Crossover Comedy" and "Race, Gender, and Representation on Comedy Central."

SCREENING: Sketches from *Portlandia* (2011– ) and *Key & Peele* (2011–2015).

### **JUL 10 — SKETCH COMEDY AFTER CHAPPELLE**

READING: "Key & Peele's Edgeless, Post-Racial Lie," "Building Buzz with Bite-Sized Content," and "Postmodern Authenticity."

SCREENINGS: various sketches provided by graduate student presentations.

### **JUL 12 — FINAL EXAM (UNDERGRADUATES ONLY)**

Same time, same place. Don't forget your tip sheet!

