

Charles University, Faculty of Arts
East and Central European Studies

Humour, Resistance and Czech Culture

CUFA ART 312

Course Description

Since Antiquity, humour has been listed as one of the defining traits of human beings. At the same time, it often serves to express antagonism or resistance. Jokes can be the “weapon of the weak” in a repressive regime. But humour can also serve a disciplinary function by means of ridicule. And although laughter and humour seem to be universally present among human beings, humour can be very idiosyncratic and culture-dependant. For this reason, it can serve as a great gateway to the study of the peculiarities of a particular culture.

This course will take an interdisciplinary approach to the phenomenon of humour, combining literary studies, culture studies, rhetoric, philosophy, ethics, psychology and political theory. The course will present a historical introduction, comparing examples of humour and comedy from different parts of the world and different eras, focusing on the political power of laughter and comedy. Key concepts like satire, irony, parody, black humour, wit, resistance, subversion, absurd humour etc. will be clarified and major philosophical theories of humour will be discussed. The main focus of the course will be Czech culture and the many ways humour is present in it. Was communism a “regime that was laughed out of existence”? Why did Czechoslovak citizens find absurd humour so relatable? Is there “nothing sacred” for Czechs?

Apart from literary masterpieces by Hašek, Kafka, Havel, Kundera and others we will take a look at comedy in theatre (Jára Cimrman Theatre), film (Czechoslovak New Wave) and other forms of art. The readings will always include an excerpt from a humorous text and a short theoretical text pertaining to the type of humour or the problem presented. From the divine to the obscene, from the hyper-intellectual to the nonsensical, from practical jokes to political satire, the rich palette of humour will give us a unique view of Czech culture.

Course Goals

Students will have the opportunity to gain a unique insight into Czech history and culture through an intriguing and entertaining topic. Czechs take pride in their sense of humour and humour is present everywhere in the Czech Republic, in everyday life, in art, even in politics. We will explore how humour has served as a means of resistance and how it fulfils this role today. Current problems like the limits of humour, political correctness, identity and outgroup derogation will be introduced. The course will also provide theoretical tools to cope with such difficult questions. The aim is also to improve students’ comprehension, critical thinking and analytic skills through the close reading of various literary and theoretical texts, to broaden their knowledge of Eastern European history, and to improve their writing skills through essay assignments.

Required Readings

Readings for each class are specified in the course outline.

Recommended Readings

Noël Carroll: *Humour, A Very Short Introduction*

Ben Lewis: *Hammer & Tickle. A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes.*
London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008.

James C. Scott: *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts.* New Haven:
Yale University Press, 1990.

Jan Bremmer, Herman Roodenburg (Eds): *A Cultural History of Humour: From
Antiquity to the Present Day*

Michael Billig: *Laughter and Ridicule, Towards a Social Critique of Humour*

Classroom Procedures

For each class, readings are assigned. The specified readings are strictly required unless labelled “optional”.

Each student shall give one short presentation (15-20 min.). Students will choose their topics at the beginning of the course.

Mid-term paper: 3-5 page essay (900-1600 words), MLA style. Full references of the quotations (from primary and/or secondary texts) that you use should be provided at the end in the Works Cited section.

Final paper: 3-5 page essay (900-1600 words), MLA style. Full references of the quotations (from primary and/or secondary texts) that you use should be provided at the end in the Works Cited section.

Final in-class test in the last session

Students are not allowed to use electronic devices during class unless given approval by the lecturer.

Assignments and Grading Policy

Grades based on letters A through F will be given. ECES does not provide courses with pass/fail grades.

Classification:

25% presentation. Each student should have one presentation on a text from the syllabus. The presentations should be 15-20 minutes long and contain a short bio of the author, summary of the text and some questions for discussion.

25% mid-term paper. Mid-term paper (3-5 pages) MLA format. This is a research paper on a topic of student's choice related to the course readings. The project is evaluated according to the following criteria: knowledge of the subject proven by quoting authors covering the chosen topic. Best grade is given only to original papers, providing student's own commentary, while using secondary sources as well (or more texts from the reader). The work should have resonance with materials covered in class: apply the terminology offered.

25% final paper. Same requirements as midterm paper.

25% final test. The final test will consist of five open-ended questions on the texts and topics covered in the class.

Grades based on letters A through F will be given.

Attendance

Regular and punctual class attendance is mandatory for all students. Absence of 180 minutes is allowed. Three or more absences (90 minutes each) lower the grade automatically (A to A-, A to B+ in case of 4 absences etc.). Students must attend at least 70 % of the course. If a student attends less than 70 % of the class meetings, he or she will receive the final grade 'F' on their transcript.

Presentation Policy: Missing the presentation will result in an F (when applicable). If the student wants to switch the date, he/she must find someone to do it and both students must confirm the change in e-mails to the professor at least 10 days in advance. If the student is sick and has a medical note, then the professor must agree with the student on how the work will be made up for.

Final Test or Paper Policy: Completing the final test or paper is required. Failure to submit the final test or paper according to the deadline will result in a letter grade F for the entire course.

For further details, please see the Attendance Policy at the ECES website under "Academic Policies and Procedures": <http://eces.ff.cuni.cz/>.

Student Responsibility and Code of Conduct (required)

Standards of study and conduct in the ECES Program are set and maintained. You are subject to the general standards and requirements of Charles University in regard to attendance, examinations, and conduct, as well as to specific requirements of the program. The student is expected to assume the initiative in completing all requirements at the time specified.

It is the responsibility of the student to be informed concerning all regulations and procedures required. In no case will a regulation be waived or an exception granted because a student pleads ignorance of the regulation or asserts that he/she was not informed by an advisor or other authority.

Charles University expects all students to adhere to the highest standards of ethics and academic integrity. Students certify that all work (whether an examination, research paper, research

project, form of creative expression, or any other academic undertaking) submitted for evaluation, presentation, or publication meets these standards.

All forms of academic fraud are strictly prohibited. An automatic grade of F will result for the entire course if a student is found guilty of academic misconduct. These include, but are not limited to:

- Plagiarism
- Cheating
- Falsification
- Violation of professional ethics
- Misrepresentation or research data

Weekly Schedule

(the schedule is subject to change with prior notice).

Week 1. Introduction: Humour, Resistance and Play

Marjolein T. Hart, 'Humour and Social Protest: An Introduction'

Week 1. Superiority Theory, Antiquity

Aristophanes: The Clouds (excerpt)

Noël Carroll: "The Nature of Humour"

Week 2. Forbidden Laughter

Umberto Eco: The Name of the Rose (excerpts)

Jacques Le Goff: "Laughter in the Middle Ages"

Optional: Zen Stories (selection)

Week 2. Incongruity Theory, Carnival and the Renaissance

François Rabelais: Gargantua and Pantagruel (excerpt)

Mikhail Bakhtin: Rabelais and His World (excerpt)

Week 3. Black Humour, Satire

Jonathan Swift: "A Modest Proposal"

Patrick O'Neill: "On Dark Humor in Literature"

Week 3. Guest Lecturer/Field Trip

Week 4. Local Colour, Irony, Wit, Parody, Release Theory

Eudora Welty: "Petrified Man"

Sigmund Freud: Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (excerpt)

Optional: Laurence Sterne: The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman (excerpt)

Week 4. Women's Laughter as Subversion, Women in Comedy

Dominica Radulescu: Women's Comedic Art as Social Revolution (excerpt)

Optional: Noël Carroll: Comedy Incarnate (excerpt)

Week 5. Domination, Resistance and Jokes

James Scott: Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts (excerpt)

Week 5. Nonsense, dada and absurd humour

Lewis Carroll: Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass (excerpts)

Deleuze: The Logic of Sense (excerpt)

Optional: Daniil Kharmis: Selected Prose

Week 6. Czech Political Satire, Interwar Theatre

Hašek – Švejk, The Party of Moderate Progress... (excerpts)

Ruben Quintero: "Understanding Satire"

Week 6. Subtle and Private Humour

Kafka – Short stories

Hurley, Dennett, Adams: Inside Jokes (excerpt)

Week 7. Jewish Humour

Poláček: Jewish Anecdotes

Ruth R. Wisse: No Joke, Making Jewish Humor (excerpt)

Optional: Roth: Portnoy's Complaint

Week 7. Guest Lecturer/Field Trip

Week 8. The Regime that Was Laughed out of Existence

Ben Lewis: Hammer & Tickle. A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes

Week 8. Comedy of Embarrassment: Czechoslovak New Wave Cinema I

Forman

Robin Bates: The Ideological Foundations of the Czech New Wave

Week 9. Comedy of Embarrassment: Czechoslovak New Wave Cinema II

Chytilová, Passer

Zdena Škapová: "Daisies"

Week 9. Kinds of Laughter, Evolution of Laughter

Kundera: The Joke (excerpt)

Optional: John Morreal: "From Lucy to I Love Lucy"

Week 10. Comedy of the Absurd

Havel – Audience, The Garden Party, Memorandum

Martin Esslin: "The Plays of Samuel Beckett and the Theatre of the Absurd"

Week 10. Mystification and Czech Theatre

Liberated Theatre, Semafor, Jára Cimrman Theatre...

Julia L. Abramson: Learning from Lying: Paradoxes of the Literary Mystification (excerpt)

Week 11. Caricature

From Arcimboldo to Hoffmeister

Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann: Arcimboldo; Visual Jokes, Natural History, and Still Life Painting (excerpt)

Optional : Roland Barthes: "Arcimboldo ou Rhétoricien et Magicien"

Week 11. Joke Books, Caricature, Derogation and the Ethics of Humour

Michael Billig: Laughter and Ridicule, Towards a Social Critique of Humour (excerpt)

John Moreall: "The Negative Ethics of Humor" in: Comic Relief (excerpt)

Week 12. Performance Art and Happenings, The Limits of Humour and Political Correctness

Petr Blažek: "Happenings Against Totalitarianism"

Sharon Lockyer, Michael Pickering (eds): Beyond a Joke, The Limits of Humour (excerpt)

Week 12. Guest Lecturer/Field Trip

Week 13. Humour in Music, Visual Art, Poetic Humour/ Review

Hrabal: Closely Watched Trains, Too Loud a Solitude (excerpts)

Week 13. Test