



Communication 421-03 • 315-03



## Silent Film Comedy and American Modernity

### Contact Information

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### Course Summary

From the vantage point of the early 21st century, silent films appear hopelessly quaint: black-and-white antiquities documenting a bygone and more innocent time. From the vantage point of the early 20th century, however, those same silent films were radical experiments in modernity and crucial touchstones of modernization. This course will examine historical sources—most prominently the work of two key silent comedians, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton—in order to gain insights into the anxieties and hopes of the modernizing American nation. What can these films and the discourses surrounding them tell us about the tensions that Americans were working through in the early 20th century? What can we learn from them about race relations, the "closing" of the west, the ascendancy of corporate capitalism, the changing nature of war, the rise of the "New Woman," the technologization of everyday life, and more?

## Learning Goals

By the end of this class, you should:

- have a solid understanding of "modernity" as one way of thinking about the social, cultural, political, economic, and technological changes of the late-19th and early-20th century United States.
- gain a meaningful introduction to major artist and works in American silent comedy, with special attention to the ways in which they were both producers and products of this thing we're calling "modernity."
- have a working grasp of important concepts that relate to the constitutive approach to communication, including *representation, identity, power, discourse, subjectivity, and social construction*.
- be able to *think critically* about the relationships between cultural texts and their social contexts, and be able to analyze cinema about and beyond formal style and textual representations.
- be able to conduct effective primary historical research in the area of early American cinema and society, and be able to use those sources to construct an original argument.
- 315: gain practice in producing original scholarship in the field of Communication.
- 421: produce high-quality original scholarship in the field of Communication while improving your ability to write effectively.

## Required Texts (available in the Denison Bookstore)

There are no required texts for this class; all readings will be available on NoteBowl. All readings must be printed out for class, so please budget printing costs if necessary.

## Assignments

### 421 Students

Primary Sources Exercises	10%	Presentation	05%
First Draft of Paper	10%	Final Paper	25%
Blog Post	14%	Reading Notes (DERNs)	15%
Abstract	06%	Class Engagement	15%

### 315 Students

Primary Sources Exercises	10%	Final Paper	30%
Annotated Bibliography	20%	Reading Notes (DERNs)	15%
Presentation	05%	Class Engagement	15%

## Grade Scale

A	=	93 - 100%	C	=	73 - 76.9%
A-	=	90 - 92.9%	C-	=	70 - 72.9%
B+	=	87 - 89.9%	D+	=	67 - 69.9%
B	=	83 - 86.9%	D	=	63 - 66.9%
B-	=	80 - 82.9%	D-	=	60 - 62.9%
C+	=	77 - 79.9%	F	=	0-59.9%

## Policies and Expectations

You and Me: I strongly encourage you to come to office hours, if only to introduce yourself more fully—I love getting to know students better. Furthermore, I am committed to making our class and the Denison community a respectful and inclusive environment; if I could do be doing better in this respect, I am grateful to learn from you.

Attendance: Your attendance and participation are integral to the success of the course as well as your own personal achievement. I will be taking attendance daily, and missing class or failing to participate constructively will definitely impact your class engagement grade. You are responsible for all class content from days that you have missed.

Lateness: Be in your seat and ready to begin class at the scheduled start time. Do not come in late without a valid, unavoidable reason.

Engagement: The primary responsibility for creating a productive and enjoyable class rests with you. Your active engagement affects not only what you but also what your classmates get out of the course. Merely attending and taking notes will not be enough to do well in this course.

Preparation: Always bring that day's readings to class with you—failure to do so will result in your being dismissed from class and counted as absent for the day.

The syllabus will always state clearly what you should read prior to each class, which assignments you should hand in, etc. Late assignments will be penalized by a half-grade for each 24 hours of lateness (e.g. from B+ to B). If you know that you will have difficulty completing an assignment on time, let me know before the deadline and I will try to work with you if possible.

Written Work: Except as otherwise indicated, all written work must be typed (double-spaced), spellchecked, and proofread. Failure to run your work through a spellchecker (one more time before printing is a good idea) will automatically result in the equivalent of a letter-grade deduction on that assignment. Multi-page documents must be stapled—I will not accept unstapled work. See also "Gateway Criteria for Written Work" on p. 4 of this syllabus.

Grades: All assignments must be completed in order to receive a passing grade. The calculation of your grade will be based on a 1,000-point scale, and the weight of each assignment is listed above. If you are concerned about your grade, come talk to me as early as possible. Late assignments will be penalized a half-grade per day (e.g. B+ to B).

In-Class Behavior: You may not eat in class (beverages are okay). You may not leave class except in actual emergency situations—no casual trips to the restroom or water fountain.

Electronics: This class has a **no electronics policy**. You may not use computers/tablets/phones in class—all readings must be printed out and brought with you. Your phone must be turned off and put away during class. If you absolutely must have your phone on for some reason, talk to me at the beginning of the semester or the particular class session.

Email Policy: I use email to send out announcements, changes in the syllabus, reminders about due dates, etc. It is your responsibility to check your email/Notebowl regularly to keep up-to-date with these announcements. During normal class weeks I promise to answer all time-sensitive email from students within 24 hours (36 hours on weekends) and will hold you responsible for any announcements made via email within 24 hours of the announced change (36 hours on weekends).

Accessibility and Special Accommodations: It is important that the course be accessible to all students. If you need any alternative accommodations in the curriculum, instruction, or evaluation materials and procedures in order to participate fully in the course, or if there are any external issues that may affect your work in this course, please contact me privately as soon as possible to discuss your specific situation.

Academic Honesty: You may not turn in substantially similar work in two classes without the express consent of both instructors. Plagiarism in any form will not be tolerated: do your own work and cite all of your sources correctly. You are encouraged to use the resources available in the library system and the Writing Center to guide your research. In addition, I call your attention to Denison's statement on academic integrity:

"Proposed and developed by Denison students, passed unanimously by DCGA and Denison's faculty, the Code of Academic Integrity requires that instructors notify the Associate Provost of cases of academic dishonesty, and it requires that cases be heard by the Academic Integrity Board. Further, the code makes students responsible for promoting a culture of integrity on campus and acting in instances in which integrity is violated.

"Academic honesty, the cornerstone of teaching and learning, lays the foundation for lifelong integrity. Academic dishonesty is intellectual theft. It includes, but is not limited to, providing or receiving assistance in a manner not authorized by the instructor in the creation of work to be submitted for evaluation. This standard applies to all work ranging from daily homework assignments to major exams. Students must clearly cite any sources consulted—not only for quoted phrases but also for ideas and information that are not common knowledge. Neither ignorance nor carelessness is an acceptable defense in cases of plagiarism. It is the student's responsibility to follow the appropriate format for citations. Students should ask their instructors for assistance in determining what sorts of materials and assistance are appropriate for assignments and for guidance in citing such materials clearly.

"For further information about the Code of Academic Integrity see <http://www.denison.edu/about/integrity.html>."

### **Gateway Criteria for Written Work**

Below are the bare minimum requirements of professionalism for all written work you turn in, unless explicitly stated otherwise in the assignment prompt. If any of these criteria are not met, I will stop reading and give you a zero on the assignment. Depending on the assignment, you *might* be able to revise your work to meet the gateway criteria and hand it back in, at which point a grade penalty will be assessed; if that option is available to you, it will be spelled out in the assignment prompt.

1. The work must be typed in twelve-point font, with one-inch margins on all sides, and double-spaced.
2. Your name and the date of completion must be given at the top.
3. If work is printed out and more than one page, it must be stapled. Please note that paper clips and dog-ears are *not* staples.
4. All citations must be in Chicago full-footnote/bibliography style unless otherwise specified (or you make other arrangements with me).
5. The version that you turn in must have been properly spell-checked.
6. The work must adhere to any word counts or page counts given in the prompt unless otherwise authorized.
7. All titles of media works must be formatted as follows: italicize titles of books, plays, films, albums, magazines, journals, newspapers, and TV programs; use quotation marks around titles of individual articles, songs, poems, chapter titles, short stories, and TV series episodes.

Example: In a *New York Times* article entitled "Heels on the Ground," the author analyzes the song "Formation" from Beyoncé's album *Lemonade*.

## Criteria for Class Participation

Points	Criteria
59 or below	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High absenteeism.</li> <li>• Disruptive, distracted, or frequently nodding off.</li> <li>• Frequently engaged in side conversations.</li> <li>• Is using electronics in violation of class policy.</li> </ul>
60-69	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present, not disruptive.</li> <li>• Demonstrates little non-verbal evidence of paying attention and/or rarely contributes to discussion.</li> <li>• Engages in side conversations or occasionally nods off.</li> </ul>
70-79	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates ongoing non-verbal evidence of paying attention (e.g. taking notes, looking alert) but does not contribute to class discussion.</li> <li>• Contributes on occasion, but offers straightforward information (e.g., straight from the case or reading), without elaboration or very infrequently (perhaps once a class).</li> <li>• Demonstrates sporadic engagement (e.g., distracted by side conversations).</li> </ul>
80-89	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates good preparation: knows reading facts well, has thought through implications of them.</li> <li>• Offers questions, interpretations, and analysis of reading (more than just facts) to class.</li> <li>• Contributes well to discussion in an ongoing way: responds to other students' points, thinks through own points, questions others in a constructive way, offers and supports suggestions that may be counter to the majority opinion.</li> <li>• Demonstrates consistent ongoing engagement.</li> </ul>
90-100	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates excellent preparation: has analyzed reading exceptionally well, is able to relate it to other material (e.g., other course materials, readings, discussions, experiences, etc.).</li> <li>• Offers analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of readings and/or asks critical/thoughtful questions.</li> <li>• Contributes in a very significant way to ongoing discussion: keeps analysis focused, responds very thoughtfully to other students' comments, contributes to the cooperative argument-building, etc.</li> <li>• Demonstrates ongoing very active engagement.</li> </ul>

## Reading Notes (DERNs)

Twelve times over the semester, I will collect your reading notes. This has several purposes, including helping you engage effectively with the reading and gauging how well students are understanding the material. This also helps foster good class discussion: as you know from experience, the best classes happen when students are well prepared, having completed and thought about the reading. With that in mind:

- For each day's reading, please use a specific note-taking method called "Double-Entry Reading Notes" (DERNs). A separate handout will explain how to take notes in this style.
- Between Jan. 30 and May 1, you must turn in a total of six DERNs. This gives you a great deal of flexibility and autonomy to manage your workload: you may choose the six readings for which you want to hand in DERNs (available readings each week are marked by an asterisk).
- DERNs will be collected at the end of each class period. You may not turn in your notes after that point: no exceptions, period. If I don't have them by the time I walk out of the room after class, then you will not receive credit for them. You may not make up missed DERNs.
- You may make the notes as long and detailed as you wish, but they should be clearly organized in the DERN format. Most readings can be summarized effectively in two single-spaced pages.
- The daily notes do not need to be typed but they must be legible; I reserve the right to insist that your notes be typed if I cannot read your handwriting. Gateway criteria do not apply, but multi-page notes must be stapled. I will give only minimal feedback on the DERNs, but I will skim through them and grade them as ✓+, ✓, ✓-, or 0 (if they are done so poorly that they don't reflect minimal acceptable engagement with the reading, or if they are on the wrong reading). Cumulatively these will be worth 20% of your final grade, with each ✓+ worth 25 points, each ✓ worth 20 points, and each ✓- worth 15 points (out of 1000 total for the semester).
- The DERNs will be graded primarily on your demonstrated effort to comprehend, synthesize, and apply the reading. To do well, you should summarize the authors' points in your own words (do not simply quote their words) and then seek to apply or extend those ideas to your own examples, connect them to other readings, or challenge them using your own reasoning.
- See the separate handout for more information on completing the DERNs.



## Daily Schedule

Readings will be available on Notebowl; should be completed by that day's class, and you should come prepared to discuss them. You *must* bring each day's reading to class, including your own printout of readings.

\* = You may write a DERN on that article (one DERN per class session)

Jan. 23	Introduction	<u>In Class:</u>	<i>Easy Street</i> (Chaplin, 1917) <i>Cops</i> (Keaton, 1922)
Jan. 30	No class—cancelled for weather	<u>Watch:</u>	<i>Crash Course Film History</i> , "The First Movie Camera" (Ep. 2) <i>Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat</i> (Lumière Brothers, 1895) <i>Crash Course Film History</i> , "The Lumiere Brothers" (Ep. 3) (Porter, 1902) <i>A Trip to the Moon</i> (Méliès, 1902) <i>An Interesting Story</i> (Williamson, 1905) <i>The Immigrant</i> (Chaplin, 1917)
Feb. 6	What is Modernity?	<u>Watch:</u> <u>Read:</u>	<i>Crash Course Film History</i> , "The Silent Era" (Ep. 9) Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" *Singer, "Modernity, Hyperstimulus" Pomerance, <i>Cinema and Modernity</i> , pp. 10-15
		<u>421:</u> <u>In Class:</u>	Lamott, "Shitty First Drafts" <i>Sherlock Jr.</i> (Keaton, 1924)
Feb. 13	Gender I: The Crisis of Masculinity	<u>Read:</u>	Roosevelt, "The American Boy" *Kitch, "Dangerous Women and the Crisis of Masculinity" *Fusco, "Squashing the Bookworm"
		<u>421:</u>	Genn, "The Bachelor Girl—Is She a Menace?" Bruce, "Stiffening your Mental Backbone"
		<u>Turn In:</u> <u>In Class:</u>	Primary Sources Exercise #1 by Feb. 15 <i>The Kid</i> (Chaplin, 1921)
Feb. 20	Class	<u>Read:</u>	*Korte, "New World Poor through an Old World Lens" King, "The Kid from <i>The Kid</i> "
		<u>In Class:</u>	<i>Ella Cinders</i> (excerpt) (Green, 1926) <i>It</i> (Badger & von Sternberg, 1927)
		<u>421:</u>	Watch: McClean, "How to Kill a Word" Ep. 1 & 2
Feb. 27	Gender II: The New Woman	<u>Read:</u>	Sharot, "The New Woman" *Ross, "Good Little Bad Girls"
		<u>In Class:</u>	<i>Steamboat Bill, Jr.</i> (Reisner and Keaton, 1928) <i>Singin' in the Rain</i> (excerpt) (Kelly and Donen, 1952)
		<u>421:</u>	Watch: McClean, "How to Kill a Word" Ep. 3 & 4 Primary Sources Exercise #2 by Mar. 1

- Mar. 6 The Environment Read: Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air* (excerpts)  
\*Fay, "Buster Keaton's Climate Change"  
In Class: PBS, "Blacks and Vaudeville"  
*Natural Born Gambler* (Williams, 1916)
- Mar. 13 **NO CLASS (Bill at a conference)** ~~315: Turn in Primary Sources Exercise #2 by 10:00 p.m.~~  
~~421: Email first draft of paper by 10:00 p.m.~~

----- **SPRING BREAK: MAR. 18-22** -----

- Mar. 27 Race Read: \*Lemons, "Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920"  
\*Stephens, "The Comic Side of Gender Trouble"  
In Class: *The Gold Rush* (excerpts)  
315: Email Primary Sources Exercise #2 by 10:00 p.m.  
421: Email draft of paper by 10:00 p.m. on Fri., March 29
- Apr. 3 American Modernity Abroad Read: \*Hake, "Chaplin's Reception in Weimar Germany"  
\*Saunders, "Comedy as Redemption"  
In Class: *The General*
- Apr. 10 Inclusion/Exclusion Read: \*McGowan, "The Location of Silent Comedy"  
In Class: *Ballet Mécanique* (Léger, 1924)  
*Modern Times* (Chaplin, 1936)  
315: Email annotated bibliography by 10:00 p.m.  
421: Paper consultations
- Apr. 17 The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction Read: Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"  
Maland, "The Depression, Technology ..."  
\*Howe, "Charlie Chaplin in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"  
In Class: *Hugo* (Scorsese, 2011) — first half  
421: Email blog post by 10:00 p.m. on Mon., April 22
- Apr. 24 Presentations Read: \*Duckett, "Unwinding the Spool"  
In Class: *Hugo* (Scorsese, 2011) — second half
- May 1 Summary and wrap-up 421: Email abstract by 10:00 p.m.  
421: Paper consultations

