

HSS 404-025 | Bleak Comedy | syllabus

T & F, 10-11:20

Instructor: Calista McRae

Cullimore 111

Office: 408 Cullimore

Office hours: [...]; email me to set up another day

mcrae@njit.edu / 973-596-5726

1. Course Description

This course explores bleak comedy in a range of genres, mainly poetry, films, and short stories, but also possibly TV episodes, nonfiction prose, music, and visual artwork. Our focus will be on how to describe and analyze complex moments that are both very funny and very sad: we will look in detail at how form and content interact in such moments. Doing this analysis can help you become a better observer of the various kinds of languages—verbal, visual, cinematic—at work around you. In just about every meeting of the class, you will be writing at least briefly, and sometimes you'll build on this writing outside of class; the writing—and discussions—are meant to help you practice thinking critically and communicating effectively.

2. Course Goals

- Describe and analyze films and texts in detail, through close reading
- Understand major theories of comedy and tragicomic genres
- Understand basic cinematic techniques
- Understand basic literary techniques
- Make conscious decisions about your own writing style

3. Prerequisites

ENGL 102 with a C or higher, and 6 credits at the 300-level History and Humanities GER with a grade of C or higher; 3 credits at the 300-level may be taken concurrently as a co-requisite.

4. What you have to buy or rent

No books, but quite a few movies. Wait to buy/rent each until we near the week we watch it, since the syllabus might change. [JustWatch](#) can help you find each movie, but also get a [Newark Public Library card](#): it's free, you can sign up online, and it gives you access to Kanopy and Hoopla. Don't use your NJIT email address when making an NPL account, because you'll need to access both NJIT's and NPL's Kanopy selections, and Kanopy can get confused if you use the same email address.

Each day, bring your laptop to class, so that you can have the day's movie or reading up on your screen and/or can type, if needed.

5. Warnings!

This course includes a number of "feel-bad works," to adapt David Fincher's phrase--both depressing work and work with intense, disturbing, or controversial subject matter. Several of the stories and films use wildly offensive language. Some deal with graphic violence (including the death of a child), suicide, addiction, domestic violence, and terminal illness. In general for this class, focus on *how* the writer or filmmaker handles such subjects, rather than on what you think of the subject

itself. Thoughtfulness towards your classmates should be a consideration at all times. You are always welcome to talk with me further about any movie outside of class.

Also: most of the movies are close to two hours long, which means preparing for discussion will take at least two hours. Several are old or experimental.

6. Assignments

| | | |
|----------------------------------|---|-----|
| short in-class writing responses | throughout semester | 15% |
| participation | throughout semester | 15% |
| midterm exam | Oct. 7 | 15% |
| longer in-class response | Oct. 28 | 10% |
| gradual essay | second half of semester, due Dec. 5 | 10% |
| semi-optional presentation | if you plan to do one, sign up here by Oct 10 | 10% |
| final exam | Dec. 9 in class | 25% |

7. Grading and Revising

Work will be evaluated according to the university's grading scale. If you are concerned about a grade, contact me as soon as possible; waiting until near the end of the semester means there will be no way to improve the grade. (Also read over the assignments handouts linked just above, and the section on attendance below.)

A = 100-90 (superior) B = 86-80 (very good) C = 76-70 (acceptable) F = 59-0 (inadequate)
B+ = 89-87 (excellent) C+ = 79-77 (good) D = 69-60 (minimum)

8. Attendance Policy

I use class meetings in part to assess your performance, and the meetings should give you the tools and practice you need to do well in the exams and writing. If you have a lot of unexcused absences, do your best to make up for it by being as engaged as possible when you do come. In general, you can pass the class even if you have a lot of absences or significant lateness, but not with a high grade.

If you have an absence that NJIT can "excuse" (illness, family emergency, jury duty, etc.), please ask the Dean of Students to review the request; they keep your personal information confidential and can email all your professors at once.

Otherwise, you can miss two classes--except the days of the midterm and long in-class response--for any reason, without it affecting your grade; there is no need to tell me why you're not in class. After those two absences, additional unexcused absences do start to bring your participation grade down. If you have an emergency on the midterm or final day, you need a DOS note.

According to university policy, students who expect to miss classes or exams because of religious observance must send their instructors, by the end of the second week of classes, a list of dates that will be missed. If you are on an NJIT athletic team with fall competitions, please do the same.

9. Submitting Work

For most writing, you will be working on paper in class. But for any out-of-class writing, I'll give you a Canvas link or a Google Form.

10. Late Work

Extensions are handed on a case-by-case basis and depend on the assignment. In-class writing can't be made up.

For the semi-optional presentations, changing days without a note from the DOS will result in a reduced grade. No-shows without a note from the DOS will just mean that your final grade for the class won't be above a B.

11. Academic Integrity

[Here is NJIT's policy on academic integrity](#): for this class, pay attention to the section on plagiarism. And for this class, do not use AI chatbots/LLMs to produce or refine any work. That includes presentations and posts. When I encounter work that for any reason seems (1) as if it may be using others' work (including from LLMs) and (2) is not clear about that use, NJIT requires me to send it to the DOS, so that their office can look into what happened. To avoid this situation, [please read this handout](#).

12. Accessibility/Accommodations

If you think you may have any difficulties related to the format or materials of this course, or if you would like to discuss any accommodations that might be helpful, please contact me at the start of the semester. If you have a documented disability, or if you think you might have a disability, you should also be in touch with [OARS](#) (Office of Accessibility Resources and Services) either to request an official accommodation or to discuss requesting one.

13. The Writing Center

The Writing Center (G17 Central King) is available for 45-minute remote or in-person appointments with writing tutors, who can help with planning, structuring, or refining essays. You can make an appointment [here](#). When you go, please bring any rubrics/handouts, so the consultant can see how you'll be graded. And please ask the consultant to send me a note so that I know you made that effort.

14. If You Have Problems

If you find that you are dealing with a serious, life- and coursework-affecting problem, please do not just go off the radar. Let both me and the DOS know, right away (you may have to provide paperwork to them, but their office really does want to help). Because of NJIT's policies and HSS policies, having the DOS involved may give me more flexibility in helping you with deadlines, etc.

15. Tentative Schedule

This schedule is tentative and will change. Any Canvas announcements or emails take precedence over what's here. As of August 16, all film links work--but please let me know right away if one isn't working for you.

1. Intro

Tue., Sep. 2. What is form, what is close reading?

Before class: Read the syllabus. Come with questions.

In class: introductory writing and some tasks: download the [FireShot](#) extension (for screenshots from most movies), download and test [VLC](#), request a [NPL card](#).

Fri., Sep. 5. Read this handout on close reading and form, and Teju Cole's *small fates* (tweet-sized short stories from real life crime logs).

2. Mise-en-scène and sound

Tue., Sep. 9. Read the Mise-en-scène chapter of *Introduction to Film & TV*, and Sharman's chapter on ["Sound."](#)

Fri., Sep. 12. Chaplin, *Modern Times* (1936; 87 min.)

3. Cinematography

Tue., Sep. 16. Read Bordwell, [chapter on cinematography](#) (159-215 with a few bits crossed out).

Fri., Sep. 19. Kubrick, *Dr. Strangelove* (1964; 94 min.).

4. Editing

Tue., Sep. 23. Sharman, "Editing"; Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye*, 1-4, 15-20.

Fri., Sep. 26. Tentatively Fincher, *Fight Club* (1999; 139 minutes).

5. Perspective and narrators

Tue., Sep. 30. O'Connor, "A Late Encounter with the Enemy"; narrative handout

Fri., Oct. 3. Davis, four short stories.

6. Midterm exam

Tue., Oct. 7. Midterm exam, in class.

Fri., Oct. 10. Peele, *Get Out* (2017; 104 min.)

7. Experiments in other genres

Tue., Oct. 14. Bleak comedy in the visual arts.

Fri., Oct. 17. Bleak comedy in song and prose.

8. Scripts and screenplays

Tue., Oct. 21. McDonagh, *In Bruges* (2008; 107 min.). Also this handout on [writing about film](#).

Fri., Oct. 24. Pryor, *Live on the Sunset Strip* -- begin approximately ten minutes in. [link TK]

9. Tragicomedy

Tue., Oct. 28. Longer in-class response; options TBD.

Fri., Oct. 31. Hemon, "Blind Jozef Pronek and Dead Souls"

10. Satires on class and money

Tue., Nov. 4. Riley, *Sorry to Bother You* (2018, 112 min.)

Fri., Nov. 7. Bong, *Parasite* (2019; 132 min.)

11. Poetry about life

Tue., Nov. 11. Poems by Hughes, Larkin, Berryman [TK]

Fri., Nov. 14. Poems by Hayes, Parker [TK]

12. Antifascist comedies

Tue., Nov. 18. Anderson, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014, 100 min.)

Fri., Nov. 21. Waititi, *Jojo Rabbit* (2019, 108 min.)

13. Compressed week

Tue., Nov. 25. TBD. Maybe Coens, *Fargo* (1996, 98 min.)

Weds. Nov. 26: Friday classes meet; TBD.

Fri., Nov. 28. No class

14. TBD (partly on class interests).

Tue., Dec. 2. TBD. Maybe Wong Kar-wai, *Chungking Express* (1994, 98 min.)

Fri., Dec. 5. TBD. Maybe Suleiman, *Divine Intervention* (2002, 92 min.)

The finished 'gradual essay' is due at the end of the night on Friday.

15. End

Tue., Dec. 9. Final exam, in class.