PHIL 130: PHILOSOPHY AND POPULAR CULTURE -- WINTER 2015

Focus: Philosophy of Fun
Instructor: Amy Billingsley
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Office Hours: [tba]

Classes: Monday and Wednesday from 10am-11:50am in 104 CON

Course Description:
What makes something fun, and why might we derive fun from such varied sources as stand-up comedians and horror films? What are the implications of having fun for our personal and social understanding of the world? And how should we understand fun from the vantage point of philosophy specifically, which often emphasizes such serious thought? This course is designed to provide a starting point for thinking philosophically about the many experiences of fun offered by popular culture. To do so, we will begin by discussing the serious story of Socrates, and how his method is related to our enjoyment of puzzles and riddles. After this, we will question the relationship between philosophy and fun through Aristophanes and Nietzsche, which will transition to a discussion about particular sources of fun in popular culture. After considering the fun involved in activities ranging from scary stories to Internet memes, we will end by discussing critical perspectives on popular culture at large.

Course Objectives:
By the end of this course, students will be able to:
1. Understand the dynamics between seriousness and fun in philosophical thought.
2. Expand their ability to think philosophically about various aspects of popular culture.
3. Apply philosophical argumentative techniques to their essays.
4. Understand larger ramifications of popular culture in relation to society.

Philosophy Learning Outcomes
This course fulfills Philosophy Department learning outcomes, as students will be able to:

1) Link the study of fun in popular culture to key authors in philosophy, including Plato, Nietzsche, and critical theory. Students will be able to consider how various philosophical perspectives matter when engaging with popular culture.

2) Conduct philosophical interviews with other people about activities such as puzzles, write argumentative essays on philosophical materials, and be able to think philosophically about fun experiences in popular culture. This will include an explicit engagement with logic and argumentation during the second week of class.
3) Critically engage with fun in popular culture from a variety of perspectives, including discussions of race and gender.

4) Compare, contrast, and critique various approaches to the question of fun in popular culture from a variety of different philosophical traditions and historical periods.

Required Course Materials

- *Little Inferno*, any platform acceptable (PC, Mac, iOS, Android, Linux, Wii U) ([http://tomorrowcorporation.com/littleinferno#getitnow](http://tomorrowcorporation.com/littleinferno#getitnow))
- All readings available on Blackboard.
- Occasionally, movies will be assigned. These can be watched during scheduled screenings or accessed from the Knight Library Reserve Desk.

Grade Breakdown

Attendance and Participation 10%
Puzzle Interview Project 15%
Argumentative Essay I 25%
Argumentative Essay II 25%
Fun Project 25%

- **The Puzzle Interview Project** will test the student’s ability to philosophically consider fun activities when undertaken by others. This will proceed by providing the interviewee with a logic or brain-teaser puzzle, observing how they approach the problem, and then interviewing them after they have solved it. Students will be graded on (1) their ability to apply our discussion of argumentation and inquiry to both the observed process of puzzle-solving and the interviewee’s understanding of their puzzle-solving process; and (2) the clarity, insightfulness, and structure of the essay through which the student communicates their overall findings. More details will be provided before the essay is due.

- **The Argumentative Essays** will test the student’s ability to construct their own philosophical argument in relation to materials presented throughout the term. Students will be graded primarily on (1) their ability to accurately reconstruct the arguments of relevant assigned authors, (2) their ability to interpret the texts and formulate a strong critique in relation to a specific, manageable point (thesis), and (3) the overall structure and effectiveness of their essay. More specific directions and ideas for topics will be provided later in the term. The essay will be 4 pages in
length, double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12-point font, standard margins. Spelling and grammar will also affect the grade.

- The Fun Project will task students with analyzing a specific fun activity, medium, or item from popular culture of their own choice, with references to both material we have read throughout the term and relevant independent research. More specific directions and ideas for topics will be provided later in the term. The Fun Project will be 5-6 pages in length.

- Attendance and Participation will be evaluated based on the number of times a student attends class, and their level of participation (inclusive of contributing in class or visiting during office hours). Missing class makes it easy to fall behind with this material, so students are allowed only 4 absences during the term. These 4 absences are your choice, but should be reserved for illnesses or emergencies. If a student has more than 4 absences without a documented excuse, that student can receive no higher than a C in this course. It is the student's responsibility to catch up on classes that they have missed.

Additional Policies: Electronics, Plagiarism, Accommodations

- The only electronic devices permitted in the classroom are laptops, unless the student has a documented accessibility requirement allowing the use of other technology. Laptop privileges may be revoked at any time, and non-class-related laptop use (broadly construed) may affect your Attendance and Participation grade. If you look at memes during class you're gonna have a bad time.

- Academic Dishonesty will automatically result in a failing grade on the associated assignment. This includes Plagiarism, Fabrication, and Cheating. Academic Misconduct details can be found at http://uodos.uoregon.edu/StudentConductandCommunityStandards/AcademicMisconduct/tabid/248/Default.aspx

- Please let the instructor know right away if you require learning accommodations. You can acquire documents for assistance from the Accessible Education Center on campus.
COURSE SCHEDULE

*The Instructor may choose to alter the Schedule in class or via e-mail depending on the needs of the students or the requirements of the texts assigned.*

**Week 1:** The Serious Practice of Philosophy

**Jan. 5:** Introduction to the Course
**Jan. 7:** Plato’s *Apology* (20-42)

**Week 2:** Riddles & Puzzles

**Jan 12:** Julian Baggini, *The Philosopher's Toolkit* (1-27)
**Jan 14:** Scott Pratt, *Logic* (40-53)
Lewis Carroll, selections from *Alice in Wonderland*

Puzzle Project Prompt

**Week 3:** In which we Laugh at Philosophy

**Jan. 19:** Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday (**NO CLASS**)
**Jan. 21:** Selections from Aristophanes’ *Clouds*
Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (3-9, 27-29)
Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (153-156, 27-29)

Puzzle Project due no later than 5pm on Friday via SafeAssign on Blackboard

**Week 4:** Humoring Humor

**Jan. 26:** Hurley et al., *Inside Jokes* (9-36)
**Jan. 28:** Cynthia Willett, “Laughing against Hubris” (18-40)

**Week 5:** Frightful Fun

**Feb. 2:** Noel Carroll, “The Paradox of Horror” (159-194)
**Feb. 4:** Julia Kristeva, “Approaching Abjection” (1-7)
H. P. Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space”

Essay #1 Prompt
Week 6: Fun with Gender

Feb. 9 Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” (519-531)
Screening of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* at 7 p.m., location TBA
Feb. 11 Discussion of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*

Essay #1 due no later than 5pm on Friday via SafeAssign on Blackboard

Week 7: Fun & Film

Feb. 16: Watch *The Matrix* (available in Knight Library Course Reserves)
Plato’s Allegory of the Cave (227-230)

#WeekEight #Internets

Feb. 23: Delia Chiaro, selections from *The Language of Jokes* (on graffiti)
Lawrence Lessig, The Future of Ideas, pp. 3-16, 234-9
Colin Koopman, “The Age of Infopolitics”

Essay Prompt #2

Week 9: Video Games

March 2: Play *Little Inferno*
Harlan Ellison, “Video Games and Sisyphus”
March 4: Jane McGonigal, *Reality is Broken* (1-34)

Essay #2 due no later than 5pm on Friday via SafeAssign on Blackboard

Week 10: Critiquing Popular Culture

March 9: Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (7-34)

March 11: Adorno, “The Culture Industry Reconsidered” (9 pages)
“Free Time” (10 pages)

Fun Project Due on [Finals Due Time] via e-mail.