I. General Plan

This two-semester course explores the interconnections of aesthetics, values and authority through the examination of comedy and humor. It begins with two sets of questions. Among the first, these stand out: What makes people laugh? Is laughter natural or simply a convention? Are there universal principles behind a comic sense? What accounts for local variations in peoples' sense of the humorous? Why do some folks or groups laugh at one thing and not another? Why do some people disdain what others think are hilarious? Why and how do some cultures value laughter more than others? Why should some groups doubt or even dislike humor while others laugh at anything? What do such differences mean? Here is a second set of questions: If comedy might suggest some general truths about the human condition, what does it reveal more particularly about peoples' social and institutional structures and social authority? What is the relationship between humor and authority? If humor can be seen generally as inverting social order, is humor by definition, rebellious? How does it challenge the social order? How can humor support authority even as it challenges it? In the absence of prevailing norms, can humor even exist? Even so, why do revolutionary regimes general outlaw humor and comics?

The course will pose answers to these questions through anthropological, sociological, and psychological studies geared specifically to humor.

Beginning with a theoretical appreciation of the nature, meaning and significance of humor and laughter, the course will also examine the varieties of humor, specifically, visual and verbal or literary. We will study various expressions of both. With preliminary forays into the nature of language itself, the course places particular emphasis on the written word from puns, epigrams, doggerel, songs, limericks, and skits to full-blown satire, comic plays, dramas, and - that intermediary between the visual and the literary - films and videos.

The course - will of course! - examine a lot of funny things, beginning with Aristophanes in the context of Fifth Century Athenian politics, religion, and society. It will follow this model of inquiry through time and various cultures into the modern American society of Mel Brooks, UNDERCOVER BROTHER, and Chris Rock.
II. Required texts

1) M. Apte, HUMOR AND LAUGHTER: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH. (This book, now out of print, will be available in Xerox form in the bookstore)

2) Aristophanes, THE COMEDIES

3) A.M. Bowie, ARISTOPHANES: MYTH, RITUAL AND COMEDY

4) Ted Cohen, JOKES: PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHTS ON JOKING MATTERS

III. Non-textual requirements

1. We will see movies and plays, attend comic performances that might include stand up routines, drag shows, and comparable manifestations of fun. We will have guest lecturers, including some stand up comics.

2. Students will be required to keep a FUNNY BOOK, a "creative scrapbook" of things they find funny on a daily basis. It might include things like comic strips, photos and pictures they see printed, stories and jokes they hear or pick up off the web, things they read, episodes and affairs they encounter in the to and fro of their lives. These can be straight-forward records or they can be maintained and constructed with some art - and humor. Students will share these periodically with the class.

3. Finally, we will have a major project the second semester (and maybe in the fall). This could be a research project, a research paper, or the creation of some "artwork" or another - a play, a comic routine, a satire or the like.

4. Broader expectations
Beyond such in-class work, the students should aim to offer their work on a larger stage, as it were: publishable work, the production of a play, the creation of panel, etc., that individuals, groups, or the class might share with a larger audience - the Honors College, the University, THE WORLD! This course should be a lot of fun.
IV. Course Schedule (preliminary)

Weeks 1-4: Reading and discussion, Apte, HUMOR AND LAUGHTER

Weeks 5-8 Aristophanes (the selections to be announced later) and Bowie, ARISTOPHANES

Week 9 Cohen, JOKES

Weeks 10-14 Book Reports due to be chosen from the following texts - unless you check otherwise with Pyron:

  Goldstein and McGhee, THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HUMOR
  Haig, THE ANATOMY OF HUMOR
  Jacobson, SERIOUSLY FUNNY
  Machovec, HUMOR
  Mulkay, ON HUMOR
  Schutz, POLITICAL HUMOR
  Shaeffer, THE ART OF LAUGHTER