

**‘Whatever it is, I’m Against it’; A Study of Carnavalesque
Comedy in the films of the Marx Brothers**

Alicia McManus

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfillment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Animation. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Alicia McManus

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Abstract

Throughout their career the Marx Brothers won over the hearts of America and are still adored globally today, their comedy was wild and frequently made fun of high society without a care for the potential consequences. They weren't hesitant to mock those in positions of authority, including the President, providing a safe place for people to laugh at things they otherwise wouldn't dare. In this thesis I will be examining three of their earlier films, *The Cocoanuts*, *Monkey Business* and *Duck Soup*. The first chapter will centre on *The Cocoanuts* as I discuss the challenges they faced with new technology of the film industry as well as the plot, which revolves around the Florida land boom. In Chapter 2, I will cover *Monkey Business*. I will talk about the immigrant experience and how the brothers, as sons of immigrants, represented various minorities and how they depict the struggles of settling into a new place. I'll then discuss the movie's gangster parody aspect as gangsters were becoming more prominent in society. Chapter 3 will concentrate on *Duck Soup*, one of their most controversial films. I will address the brothers' opinion on corrupt government as well as their position on war. The brothers used their style of comedy to mock people in the social classes above them mirroring the essence of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque comedy and this thesis will review this theory in relation to each of the three films whilst also analysing their themes.

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Introduction

‘We couldn’t sing, we couldn’t dance. We were comedians because we had no other kind of ability. We were forced into comedy and it is because of comedy that the Marx Brothers are almost immortal’ (Marx, Marx and Anobile, p.24). The Marx Brothers were a comedy troupe who became beloved in America throughout the span of their career and are now loved around the world. Their comedy was chaotic and they often mocked high society in their acts with little consideration of any backlash, they were unafraid to taunt people of the highest power, such as the President, creating a safe place for the public to laugh at things they wouldn’t dare laugh at. In this thesis I will be looking at three of their earlier films, *The Cocoanuts*, *Monkey Business* and *Duck Soup*. Chapter 1 will be focusing on *The Cocoanuts*, their first film, and I will be discussing the challenges they faced with the new technology of the movie industry and also the plot of the film, the Florida land boom, and I will go into detail about how the brothers represented and highlighted the ludicracy of the event. Chapter 2 will be about *Monkey Business*. I will be delving into the immigrant experience and how the brothers, who are sons of immigrants, represented different minorities and how the film demonstrates their experience when trying to adapt to a new country. I will then go into the gangster parody aspect of the film as gangsters were on the rise at the time and were becoming increasingly involved in society. Chapter 3 will concentrate on *Duck Soup*, one of their most notorious movies. In this chapter, I will be discussing the brothers comments on the corrupt government at the time and also their stance on war. The brothers used their style of comedy to ridicule the people in the social classes above them, this mirrors the essence of carnivalesque comedy as devised by Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘civil and social ceremonies and rituals took on a comic aspect as clowns and fools, constant participants in these festivals, mimicked serious rituals’ (Bakhtin, p.5). This is the core of the Marx Brothers comedy, they were constantly insulting the high society they were not a part of, they were ‘experts in the overturning of established orders’ (Austerlitz, p.52).

CHAPTER 1 - THE COCOANUTS

BACKGROUND

Leonard was the eldest of the five, being born in 1887, followed the next year by Arthur. Julius was born in 1890, Milton in 1893 and Herbert in 1901 (Gehring, p.1). They are more commonly known by their stage names Chico, Harpo, Groucho, Gummo and Zeppo. Their names came from a monologist named Art Fisher as Julius recalls, 'He was in the habit of giving people nicknames and they stuck. He named Leonard Chico because girls were named chicks in those days and Chico loved girls. Arthur became Harpo for obvious reasons [his love of the harp], Gummo [Milton] got his name because he was fond of gum sole shoes, and he named me because I was stern and rather serious. Herbert who became Zeppo was too young at that time and wasn't in the act. He got his name later on' (Marx and Anobile, p.18).

Groucho was the first of the five to go into performing in 1905 when he starred in the Leroy Trio (Gehring, p.13). In 1910 Minnie Marx, their mother acting as manager, put Groucho, Harpo and Gummo together as a vaudeville act named, '3 Marx Bros. & Co.', and with the addition of Chico the number changed from 3 to 4. Their first vaudeville show, *Fun in Hi Skule*, brought their names into the spotlight as it was their first show where they emphasised comedy as opposed to music, and it was a hit (Gehring, p.18). In May 1924 they debuted on Broadway with their show, *I'll Say She Is!*, which once again proved to be a success (Gehring, p.29). In 1929 they released their first film, *The Cocoanuts*, which was just a recorded performance of the Broadway show (Marx and Barber, p.270). Over the next 20 years the brothers released a further 12 films with *Love Happy* being the final film in 1949 (Gehring, p.67). Each film was met with varying amounts of appreciation when initially released but are all beloved today.



Fig. 1 Harpo, Zeppo, Groucho and Chico Marx

The Cocoanuts was the first film ever released starring the Marx Brothers. It was initially a play for the stage that had toured around America with great success. It opened at Tremont Theatre in Boston in late October 1925 (Enss & Kazanjian, p.43). On December 8th 1925, it premiered on Broadway in the Lyric Theatre in New York city and ran until August 7th 1926 with a total of 276 performances (The Broadway League).

In mid 1928, the brothers' agent approached them with the idea of turning *The Cocoanuts* into a 'talking picture'. Following the popularity of *The Jazz Singer*, the first 'talking picture', producers were inspired to buy popular stage plays and turn them into movies. United Artists' executives were the first to seriously approach the Marx Brothers for rights to *The Cocoanuts*, but thought the asking price of \$75,000 to be too high for the material and original cast. Paramount Pictures also thought the price to be too expensive, but Walker Wanger, a producer, didn't want to dismiss the project and organised a meeting with Zukor, a studio founder, the Marx Brothers' agents and Chico to discuss the potential of the film. When the meeting

concluded, Chico, who was known for his sharp negotiation skills, had managed to secure a price of \$100,000 for the material and cast (Enss & Kazanjian, p.47).

With the shooting of talking films being a new breakthrough, the recording of *The Cocoanuts* faced many challenges. The first problem was the logistics of making the film. The brothers were performing *Animal Crackers* on Broadway throughout filming which accounted for their nights and some matinees resulting in the brothers not being able to be on set at all times. On top of that, when the brothers were supposed to be on set, they often would disappear to various places between shoots as they weren't used to having to wait till they were needed, resulting in further delays and problems (Weir, p.20). The script also had to be cut considerably to make it enticing for film distributors to support but also for the time. The play itself was very long and the movie ended up being an hour and a half. The script was reworked, and whilst the initial play was a musical, most of the musical pieces were cut from the final recording. In the play, there were 18 musical acts with 4 reprises, but in the film there were only 8 acts (Weir, p.21). They also faced many technical problems, because the concept of a talking film was so new, the technology used to create them wasn't very advanced. The recording levels had to be extremely high to be able to record dialogue but that created the problem of other noises being heard as well. The paper had to be soaking wet so it wouldn't crinkle over the actors speaking (see fig. 2), and the 'grass' had to be painted wood shavings to try and mask the sound of stomping feet. The camera operators also had to be kept in soundproof rooms so they didn't disturb the recordings either. On top of that, all of the stage actors had to adjust to screen acting which some struggled with. Margaret Dumont often bellowed as if she were in a theatre, which affected the recording, and most people missed their marks as they were used to having the freedom of a stage (Weir, p.22). Despite the setbacks, the film premiered on May 3rd 1929 at New York City's Rialto Theatre to mixed reviews. Some critics said the film was 'another step forward for the talkies', and some were saying the medium of film was not as thrilling, with one critic stating, 'It is certain that the stage has little to fear from audible pictures'. Martin Dickstein, a critic with the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, wrote that the film was 'in nearly every respect as enjoyable as the original copy is. [...] Here, through the medium of the talking and singing and dancing screen comes a production that combines the best features of the musical comedy stage with the resourcefulness of the motion picture' (Enss & Kazanjian, p.50).



Fig. 2 *The Cocoanuts* (1929) Dir. Florey & Santley

FILM SUMMARY

The film takes place in Hotel de Cocoanut in Florida. Run by Mr. Hammer (*Groucho Marx*), it's facing financial struggles and Hammer starts cosyng up to Mrs. Potter (*Margaret Dumont*), a wealthy paying customer, for financial aid. Chico and Harpo check into the hotel as petty thieves in an attempt to earn some quick money. Harvey Yates (*Cyril Ring*) is a con artist and with the help of his partner Penelope (*Kay Francis*), they steal Mrs. Potter's necklace and frame Bob Adams (*Oscar Shaw*) for the theft. Adams is an architect who is currently working as a hotel clerk and has struck up a romance with Polly (*Mary Eaton*), Mrs. Potter's daughter. The storylines all come to a conclusion at the climactic auction scene at the end of the film, it's revealed by Harpo who the crooks are, after their arrests Mrs. Potter announces the engagement of her daughter to Adams and a telegram comes for Hammer announcing a big tycoon intends to buy plans for Cocoanut Manor and that a flurry of guests shall be coming to the hotel.

The Cocoanuts is a clearly satirical take on the real estate boom in Florida in the 20s. It's a 'hilarious comment on the kind of boom-and-bust story that makes headlines and has universal appeal in practically any culture' (Gardner, p.41).

REAL ESTATE BOOM

The 'Roaring Twenties' in America was a time where their economy was thriving, it was easy to get credit with a good job and a person's wealth was measured by what they owned. Some people recognised this economic change and decided to buy land cheaply and sell it quickly at high prices to make quick money, they were known as land speculators (Florida Center for Instructional Technology). Florida quickly became the place to be to be a part of this growth. With the expansion of the rail system and the attractive mild climate of Florida, people flocked to the warm weather during the winter months and it quickly became a vacationer spot, with many deciding to move there permanently (Nelson, p.383). With many big cities developing, land speculators sent in young men and women to show land to prospective buyers and accept 'binders' on a sale. A binder was a non-refundable down payment on a plot of land that enforced the rest of the payment to be paid within the next 30 days. With the price of land rising so rapidly, the buyers would often not have enough money for the full payment, only the binder, and purchase the binder knowing that the plot of land will rise in value within days for them to sell and make a profit on (Florida Center for Instructional Technology). With such an explosion of wealth and real estate, there was an increase in the amount of advertisement for it as well, one Miami Daily news edition was 504 pages long, loaded with real estate ads and weighed 7.5 pounds (Knowlton, p.7). With this outburst of change, there came with it a number of problems. With the demand for housing so high, it caused an increase in rent prices, the people who had moved to Florida could no longer pay and began writing to newspapers to tell them to start warning prospective residents. With so much construction happening, the railroads were overwhelmed with the building materials and it resulted in the railroads not being able to keep up with the demand and having to shut down, which stopped construction. With the abrupt end to construction, land prices began to sink and land speculators couldn't sell their land, leaving thousands of acres empty. The final thing to end the boom were a series of natural disasters, hurricanes and sudden freezes were not what people wanted from the state with a reputation of being 'heaven on earth' and so the boom came to an end in 1925, 4 years before the stock market crash which brought on the Great Depression (Florida Center for Instructional Technology).

Land speculation was a huge part of the boom, often with people buying land without ever visiting Florida, only looking at a blueprint. In a scene between Mr. Hammer and Chico, Hammer initially tries to sell Chico some land as the slick salesman he is.

Hammer : Well, anyhow you wired me about some property. I've thought it over, and I can let you have three lots watering the front, or I can let you have three lots fronting the water.

[...]

Chico : Well, you see, we come here to make money. I read the paper and it say, "Big Boom in Florida," so we come; we're a coupla big booms too.

But as Chico reveals he has come looking to make some quick cash, Hammer ropes Chico into his plan to make himself, and Chico, some money at the auction. He persuades Chico to constantly up the bid in an effort to earn even more money for his plots of land, which resembles some of the fraudulent sales made in the 20s.

Hammer : [...] Here's what I mean, if somebody says a hundred dollars you say two...if somebody says two, you say three.

Chico : Bid up.

Throughout the scene, Chico repeatedly exhausts Hammer with his constant interjections which continue to deflate Hammer's attempts at selling land, which demonstrates how outrageous and ridiculous the land speculation was. Chico's response to Hammer's questions about blueprints highlights the absurdity of purchasing land without seeing it in person beforehand (Gardner, p.47).

Hammer : Well, you can have your choice. Now, in arranging these lots, of course, we use blueprints. You know what a blueprint is, eh?

Chico : It's oysters.



Fig. 3 *The Cocoanuts* (1929) Dir. Florey & Santley

Groucho's character, Mr. Hammer, is a representation of all of the sly salesmen that worked in Florida in the 20s. Land developers would hire auctioneers from California and New York and send them to Florida to entice people to attend land auctions (Gardner, p.45). By having this character act this way it lowers the authority the land auctioneers were thought to have, and by lowering that expectation, it puts someone of what was high regard, on the same level, if not lower, than everyone else, as was seen in carnivals. We first see Mr. Hammer do this when he meets Mrs. Potter in the hotel lobby.

Hammer : You're just the woman I'm looking for and now, whether you like it or not, I'm gonna tell you about Florida real estate. It's the first time it's ever been mentioned down here today.

He wants Mrs. Potter's investments and is doing whatever he can to get her to attend the auction, from ambushing her in the lobby to promising entertainment. The brothers' abhorrence of these sales tactics are evident in this monologue of Mr. Hammers. Whilst advertising the plot of land up for auction, he says, 'There you are, Coconut Manor -- glorifying the American sewer and the Florida sucker', this is an obvious taunt towards the people who flocked to Florida to buy whatever they could, regardless of where it was (Gardner, p.45).

The brothers' disgust with the salesmen continues throughout the film, coming to a close at the big auction speech performed by Mr. Hammer. His opening line, 'All ye suckers who are gonna get trimmed, step this way for the big swindle!', mirrors the way salesmen would grab the audience's attention and tell them to gather around (Gardner, p.49). It also criticises the shady real estate practices that were seen in Florida as he doesn't even try to hide the fact that this whole auction is there in an attempt to scam the potential buyers out of their money (Gardner, p.50).

Hammer : Friends, you are now in Cocoanut Manor, one of the finest cities in Florida. Of course, we still need a few finishing touches, but who doesn't? This is the heart of the residential district. Every lot is a stone's throw from the station. As soon as they throw enough stones, we're going to build a station. Eight hundred wonderful residences will be built right here. Why, they're as good as up. Better. You can have any kind of a home you want to. You can even get stucco -- Oh, how you can get stuck-o! Now is the time to buy while the new boom is on. Remember that old saying: "a new boom sweeps clean" and don't forget the guarantee -- my personal guarantee: If these lots don't double in value in a year, I don't know what you can do about it.

He has a confidence about him that makes you listen when he's speaking, something that was seen in the real estate people. Even though he is outwardly stating that there are multiple issues with these plots of land, his convinced aura persuades the buyers into purchasing land (Gardner, p.48). It's clear who the brothers were attacking with this speech, the intense sales people brought in to sell the land by any means necessary, with their false claims and pressurising speeches. He describes the land as needing, 'a few finishing touches', which is how much of Florida was at that time. Frederick Lewis Allen outlines the settings as being, 'actual cities of bricks and concrete and stucco; unfinished, to be sure ... while prospects stood in line to buy, and every square foot within their limits leaped in price' (Gardner, p.49). People were amassing in Florida to buy up land that had not even been developed yet purely because of the slick sales people's speeches.

CONCLUSION

The Cocoanuts was one of the first of its kind, a singing 'talking picture' and for that reason it's rooted itself in film history. There are many other reasons as to why it's rated as a classic, it features much of the Marx Brothers anarchy, for the first time on screen, from their verbal to physical comedy and everything in between. The movie falls under the 'ritual spectacle' heading as conceived by Bakhtin because it parodies an everyday occurrence, a market (Bakhtin, p.5). This allows it to '[create] special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from

norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times' (Bakhtin, p.10). Mr. Hammers' character representing the sales people of the time stripped the influence of the sales people and created a cartoon out of them and their jobs. With this oversimplification of a character, the audience was on the same level as them and were able to laugh at their seemingly intelligent tactics, and as the land boom had only recently ended, the effects of the crash were still felt.

CHAPTER 2 - MONKEY BUSINESS

BACKGROUND

Monkey Business was the third movie the brothers released, but it was their first movie that was written specifically for the screen, it was also the film that moved them to Hollywood (Krutnik, p.100). Writers Perelman and Johnstone came to the brothers with a script idea for them to be ocean liner stowaways, impressed with the idea, the brothers gave the go ahead to keep developing it and a couple of months later the big day came for their first read through, unfortunately, it did not go well with Groucho plainly stating, 'It stinks' (Gehring, p.60). Thinking their careers could be finished, Perelman and Johnstone went back to working on the script, several months later, the script was up to standard and filming began. Despite all the changes made along the way, premiering in September 1931, it was welcomed with open arms by the audiences and it gave the team, and Paramount Pictures a major hit (Gehring, p.61). As it was their first film written for theatrical release and not just recordings of old shows, the movie differs from their earlier adaptations in two key ways. The first is that their comedy is 'more unrelentingly biting' (Eyles, Gehring, p.56), and the second is that it spends a lot of its time parodying the gangster film genre instead of their typical ongoing attacks at high society (Gehring, p.57).

FILM SUMMARY

Monkey Business primarily takes place on an ocean liner as it makes its way across to America. We follow Chico, Harpo, Groucho and Zeppo as they attempt to smuggle themselves into the 'New World', and are introduced to them as stowaways on the lower decks. After being discovered and a chase ensuing, they make their way onto the upper decks where they continue to wreak havoc. It is on the upper decks where they meet Joe Helton (*Rockliffe Fellowes*) and Acky Briggs (*Harry Woods*), rival gangsters. The four brothers, who in the film have no relation to each other, split off into pairs and are each hired by Helton and Briggs to be their bodyguards. Zeppo meets Mary (*Ruth Hall*), Helton's daughter, and a romance starts developing between the two. They are continuously pursued by the ship's crew until they reach America, where they have trouble getting off the ship. In the next scene we see them attending a party thrown by Helton which is thrown into disarray when Briggs kidnaps Mary. The film ends with a brawl as the four go to rescue Mary.

The film has a 'clearly defined two part structure: the first deals with the disorderly adventures of the stowaways on the ship, while the second charts their hi-jinks at a high class party in the United States. In each case, these underclass insurgents assault the protocols of elite society' (Krutnik, p.101).

IMMIGRATION

Many people flocked to the United States during the 1800s and 1900s as they left their countries in search of a better life. Hearing from other people that America was the land of dreams, they headed there in hopes of succeeding as their friends did, however once they arrived, they realised that there were not that many opportunities for them as they were 'different' from American society at the time and they often struggled to assimilate into society when they were given the chance. By the 1930s America had become 'multiregional, multiethnic, multi gendered and multiclass' (Helfgott, p.109). The brothers became the voice of the people, and their humour and opinion of society of that period reflected an immigrant stance, stuck between assimilating into what was already there or creating something new (Helfgott, p.110).

The brothers are first seen by the audience in kippered herring barrels below deck (see fig.4), this is the first hint of the ongoing theme throughout their films, that they are outsiders trying to find their way into society (Krutnik, p.101). In *Monkey Business*, this theme is inexplicably clear as the brothers are trying to smuggle themselves into America, they aren't trying to climb their way up a social ladder, they are simply at the first step of getting into the country. The brothers repeatedly play the same characters, 'they embody the comedy of the foreigner - the immigrant - putting one over on the well-heeled natives' (Austerlitz, p.52). The brothers, bar Zeppo who consistently played their straight man, represented the major immigrant groups with stereotypical characteristics, Groucho represented the Jews, Chico the Italians and Harpo vaguely represented the Irish. Not only did this broaden their appeal to a wider audience, it also provided them with a small bit of cover against the rampant anti-semitism at the time (Lieberfeld & Sanders, p.105).



Fig. 4 *Monkey Business* (1931) Dir. McLeod

Groucho depicted the Jewish immigrant community in their films. He is a ‘scrawny, smart-mouthed cheapskate - an anti-Semites caricature of a Jew’ (Lieberfeld & Sanders, p.106). It is never explicitly said that he is a Jewish character, but his exaggerated eyebrows and moustache point to Jews’ supposed hairiness and he is the only character that wears glasses, reinforcing the pattern of the feminine Jewish male (Lieberfeld & Sanders, p.106). He is also a trickster, in his own words, a schnorrer, he is incredibly literate and knows the secrets of not only the impoverished but the elite as well. He is clever with his words and understands the wordplay of the immigrants and the small talk of the aristocracy (Helfgott, p.112), this is seen many times throughout the film.

Lucille ; I didn’t know you were a lawyer. You’re awfully shy for a lawyer.

Groucho ; You bet I’m shy. I’m a shyster lawyer.

Chico represented the Italians throughout his career, from stage to screen. Not only was it clear that he was different from society because of the way he dressed and acted, it was made abundantly clear when he began speaking. He feigned a crass Italian accent which immediately

put him on the outskirts of society. He would bend and manipulate the English language in ways no one could see coming and that would benefit him. It reflected the problems immigrants faced with a new language, what sounded like ‘double talk to us had concrete meaning to the immigrant who could barely speak English’ (Helfgott, p.117). In *Monkey Business* this is seen countless times, where Chico twists the words other characters are saying.

Groucho ; ... Columbus was sailing along on his vessel ...

Chico ; On his what?

Groucho ; Not on his what, on his vessel. Don't you know what vessel is?

Chico ; Sure, I can vessel ...

[starts whistling]



Fig. 5 *Monkey Business* (1931) Dir. McLeod

He also portrays a shifty petty criminal who is always on the lookout to earn extra money. He makes a living by continually conning the wealthy without ever having the urge to move into a respected place in the world (Helfgott, p.112).

Chico ; Well, you pay a little bit, we're a little bit tough. You pay very much, very much tough. You pay a too much, we're too much a tough. How much you pay?

Whilst Harpo had shed much of the Irishness he initially portrayed on stage, he retained his curly red wig, crumpled hat and overcoat which immediately announced him as a vagrant. He is childish and impish and has no regard for proper society etiquette, he is a 'sub-human leprechaun and skirt chaser' (Lieberfeld & Sanders, p.106). He does as he pleases, with the actor himself saying, 'Every man wants to chase a pretty girl if he sees one. He doesn't. I do.' (Adamson, p.55). His complete lack of concern for manners makes him a nightmare for people with decorum, making him stand out as being different from them. In *Monkey Business*, there are multiple scenes where Harpo sees a pretty girl and immediately starts chasing her, and at the end of the film, there is a scene where Harpo is hiding in the dress of one of the ladies attending.

Even though the brothers representations of the different ethnic stereotypes are crass and vulgar, they are always full of life and playful, unlike the members of established society, who are often boring and dull (Lieberfeld & Sanders, p.106), in *Monkey Business*, the main representation of this is the Captain of the ship.

The Captain represents the moneyed elite of society in the film. He is responsible for allowing people access to the 'New World', and it's his duty to screen the passengers to see if they are 'acceptable' to be allowed into a new society (Krutnik, p.88). Towards the end of the film, the brothers are stopped by the Captain asking what they were doing with Groucho announcing, 'I'm just trying to sneak off the boat, that's all'. The Captain sends them back telling them they aren't allowed off, acting as a protector of the new land and highlighting the explicit class dynamic between the protagonists and the prejudice they face due to their lowly social status (Krutnik, p.90). The brothers diminished the Captain, and all he represents, to a level of power below even themselves as stowaways as they find a way to sneak off the boat under the Captains nose. This reduction of importance allows people to laugh at authority safely as they were reduced to mere fools by the brothers.

Not only do the brothers insult the Captain to his face, they also do it behind his back. In a scene between Chico and Groucho, Groucho dons the Captains hat, and with it, the 'privileged status as a white American' (Krutnik, p.88). After becoming one of the elite, he starts talking to Chico with disdain and begins giving him a history lesson. Chico, the immigrant, continually interrupts Groucho with his own knowledge of the topic, which frustrates Groucho as it disrupts and insults the history of America as he is telling it (Krutnik, p.88). As the conversation draws to a close, Chico interrupts Groucho again with a, potentially purposeful, misunderstanding of a word which irritates Groucho.

Groucho ; Now one night, Columbus' sailors started a mutiny.

Chico ; Nah, no mutiny's at night. They're in the afternoon. You know, mutinies, Wednesday and Saturdays.

Groucho ; There's my argument. Restrict immigration!

The final comment about restricting immigration said by Groucho imitating the Captain, shows how the wealthy really felt about letting immigrants in. They deemed them as illiterate fools who were not going to assimilate into their population and because of that reason, they should not even be allowed entry to their country.

GANGSTER PARODY

With the widespread monetary and social unrest that followed the Great Depression, the 'American Dream' was proving to be a lie to many Americans as they realised that the chances of them perfecting their lives through hard work was incredibly low. Gangsters had become brutal entrepreneurs, who made business deals with their guns as opposed to having skill to work their way to the top. They were seen as 'bold and daring souls' (Petty, p.74) who were able to take a group of delinquents and turn them into a well-oiled corporate machine (Petty, p.74). The era was full of gangsters trying to buy their way into high society, albeit with dirty money, 'pseudo respectability and emphasis on family life created the illusion of decency among these vicious gangsters' (Gardner, p.59). *Monkey Business* highlights the difference between the reality of what is and what appears to be (Gardner, p.59).

Joe Helton, the retired gang leader, embodies the character of a gangster who has bought his way into high society. He is returning to the U.S from Europe with his daughter Mary on an ocean liner in first class accommodation. The papers report their movements, their clothes are classic yet pricey, and their house in Long Island is a mansion suitable for the wealthiest families. His daughter and he act and look as if they belong to the high society and deserve total respectability, had one not known the source of their income. The superficial decorum is a clear comment on how gang leaders of the time lived their lives. Al Capone, notorious gang leader from Chicago, would often enjoy the freedom and comforts that people of heightened social status traditionally appreciated (Gardner, p.60).



Fig. 6 *Monkey Business* (1931) Dir. McLeod

The wealth displayed by these ruthless criminals contradicts the reality of how the money was earned. Regardless of how elegant the houses looked, how stylish the clothes were, or their enviable social life and education, the world in which they earned their money is always nearby. It was common for rich gang leaders to hire personal armed bodyguards to protect them and guarantee their safety (Gardner, p.60). In *Monkey Business*, Helton hires Harpo and Chico and Briggs hires Groucho and Zeppo as their bodyguards. The brothers jump at the opportunity of work without even questioning the implications of the job. Their keenness ridicules the importance of these bodyguard figures to the underworld gang leaders (Gardner, p.60). The brothers quickly demonstrate that they are not a part of the underworld as Groucho and Zeppo discard the weapons presented to them by Briggs by dropping them in a bucket of water as they run away (Winokur, p.165).

Groucho's character is a representation of Al Capone and his business intelligence that allowed him to rise to the top. He agrees to be Briggs' bodyguard but goes immediately to Helton with a calculating business proposal.

Groucho ; Two fellows are trying to attack you aren't there, and two fellows are trying to defend you. Now, that's 50% waste. Why can't you be attacked by your bodyguards? Your life will be

saved, and that's 100% waste. Now what have you got? You still got me and I'll attack you for nothing.

Even though Groucho is talking nonsense to Helton, he shows a business acumen which impresses others and allows him to rise to the top (Gardner, p.61). It's also clear that he has no real regard for other people, as he was hired as Briggs' bodyguard and yet went straight to Helton as a way to help himself. His disregard for everyone and his selfish tendencies mirror those of prominent gang leaders. The diminishing of the gangster characters to caricatures of ruthless men gave the public something to laugh at, when outside the theatre these men were incredibly vicious and scared many members of the public in reality.

CONCLUSION

Monkey Business was their first film specifically for the screen, and it changed the brothers lives forever, no longer were they just Broadway stars, but they were movie stars as well. Their highlighting of the immigration experience gave an opportunity to the millions of immigrants watching a chance to be seen and comforted knowing that their struggles were being represented. The brothers also showed the immigrants on a level above the American people which allowed the immigrants to laugh at high society safely. Their depiction of gangsters allowed everyone to laugh harmlessly at them as they made them out to be incredibly cartoonish and foolish. 'Imitation is an aspect of the carnivalesque, especially when it ridicules the powerful' (Marx and Sienkiewicz, p.37) and in *Monkey Business*, not only did they imitate the gangsters but also the privileged Americans. At a time where both gangsters and immigration assimilation were rampant in America, the release of *Monkey Business* gave space to millions of people to laugh at the topics.

CHAPTER 3 - DUCK SOUP

BACKGROUND

Duck Soup was released in 1933 and was the brothers fifth and final film with Paramount Studios. The idea for the film came from the brothers, it was initially Groucho who suggested that they make something about dictators, with Chico adding a war could take place. After agreeing with his brothers, Harpo then adds that the dictator could be a weapons salesman and Zeppo highlights the opportunity for multiple gags about spies (Enss & Kazanjian, p.75). Premiering on November 17th, the film was met with mixed reviews from the audiences, whilst they were happy to have the Marx brothers grace their screen once again, they did not feel the film lived up to their expectations, with Martin Dickstein, for the Daily Eagle, reporting, 'Duck Soup is nothing to cheer about - a fact which we very much regret having to record here, the Marxes being among our favourite comics, Duck Soup did not amuse us greatly. We thought most of it absurd without being funny and only a little up to the high Marxian standard for mad and successful nonsense' (Enss & Kazanjian, p.78), with a New York Sun analysis agreeing, saying it was, 'Below their [Marxes] standard' (Gehring, p.66).

FILM SUMMARY

Duck Soup is set in the fictional country of Freedonia. After learning about the failing economy, Gloria Teasdale (*Margaret Dumont*) agrees to loan another \$20 million to the government on the condition that Rufus T. Firefly (*Groucho Marx*) is appointed as the new president of the country. Upon gaining said power, Firefly continues to drive the county into ruin. Ambassador of the neighbouring country, Sylvania, Trentino (*Louis Calhern*) senses the vulnerability of Freedonia and sends in two spies, Chicolini and Pinky (*Chico and Harpo Marx respectively*) to keep an eye on Firefly and help prepare for a revolution. As the movie progresses, more chaos ensues and a war erupts between the two countries and after a climactic battle scene, the movie, and war, end abruptly.

Whilst the fictional countries are seemingly based somewhere in Europe, the film shines a light on the politics of America, the absurdity of war and the dangers of authoritarian powers in Europe. Freedonia is a country of exaggeration, and because of it being based in Europe, the critiques the movie makes about American politics don't hit too close to home (One Hundred Years of Cinema). The film comments on the corruption of government officials and pointlessness of war, with Gerald Mast saying the 'target of Duck Soup is democracy and government itself; grandiose political ceremonies, the law courts, and war are reduced to the absurd' (Tueth, p.10).

CORRUPT GOVERNMENT

In 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected as the 32nd president of the United States and was left with the duty of trying to resolve the problems that arose following the Great Depression whilst also being aware of the rise of Hitler and the Nazis in Germany, and so when the American audience initially saw the film, the sarcastic tone shocked them (Gardner, p.18). The brothers were highlighting the corruption found in government at that time, and how one person's greed and power can affect an entire country.

Rufus T. Firefly, newly appointed president of Freedonia, is a 'grotesque parody of the typical authoritarian leader' (One Hundred Years of Cinema), and he embodies the exploitation of power often seen in government. The brothers' characters are typically outsiders and they position themselves on the outskirts of society trying to weasel their way in any way they can, but in *Duck Soup*, the plot centres around them, with Firefly being at the centre of the story (Eyles, Gardner, p.72). His character has moments where his actions mirror both Warren Harding and Woodrow Wilson, as well as other corrupted government officials.

After having his position bought for him as opposed to earning it through winning votes, Mrs. Teasdale asks Firefly how he intends to run the nation, and he responds in a song aptly named, 'The Laws of My Administration'. In this song, he lays out his plans for the country, and you get to truly see his character, he makes no attempt to hide his dictatorship plans, his ideas are domineering and self-serving, which as Allen Eyles says, 'expressed the Marx view that authority means abuse and corruption' (Tueth, p.6).

Firefly's greed and lack of regard for actually running the country is apparent from the very beginning,

*'I will not stand for anything that's crooked or unfair
I'm simply on the up and up, so everyone beware
If anyone's caught taking graft and I don't get my share
We stand him up against the wall and pop goes the weasel'*
(Kalmar, 1933)

These are just a few lines from the song but they indicate how Firefly is only interested in helping himself. As long as he gets a share of the bribery occurring, he is ok with allowing it to continue, but as soon as it no longer serves him positively, he will resort to ending it by hurting someone.

We then see Firefly at his first Cabinet meeting, he puts himself at the head of a T-shaped table with other Cabinet members seated around him (see fig. 7), this demonstrates his power over the

meeting (Gardner, p.73). However, as the camera closes in on him, we can see that he is still the selfish character he was when we were introduced to him. Instead of calling the meeting to order, he continues to procrastinate and play a game of jacks whilst everyone looks on. This is a reflection of Woodrow Wilson and how he conducted his Cabinet meetings (Gardner, p.74). It was said that his meetings were ‘not forums for serious discussion of problems, programs and politics’ (Olson, p.270), with Secretary of War, Lindley Garrison, calling them a ‘waste of time’ (Olson, p.271). When the meeting eventually begins, Firefly does nothing to assist his people or save his country, he proceeds to run circles around the Cabinet members who are actively trying to resolve issues, and when they get Firefly to talk about a topic, he answers in a way that doesn’t help. By the end of this scene, his secretary of war has resigned, leaving Firefly searching for a new one.



Fig. 7 *Duck Soup* (1933) Dir. McCarey

Firefly then meets Chicolini, a peanut stall vendor who also works as a spy for Sylvania, and invites him up to his office to discuss giving him a job, with Firefly’s intentions of wanting to ‘scare the Cabinet’. Chicolini is unqualified in every possible way for a government job, he has

no necessary qualifications, experience or training for a job of this magnitude but that doesn't matter as Firefly's interviewing process is completely meaningless.

Firefly: I've got a swell job for you, but first I'll have to ask you a couple of important questions...Now what is it that has four pair of pants, lives in Philadelphia, and it never rains but it pours?

Chicolini: At'sa good one, I give you three guesses.

[...]

Firefly: I don't know...I give up.

Chicolini: I give up too. Now, I ask you another one...What is it got big blacka mustache, smokes a big black cigar, and he's a big pain in the neck?

Firefly: Now don't tell me...Has a big black mustache...Smokes a big black cigar...And is a big pain in the.. Does he wear glasses?

Chicolini: At's right. You guess it quick!

Firefly: Just for that, you don't get the job I was gonna give you!

Chicolini: What job?

Firefly: Secretary of War.

Chicolini: Alright, I take it!

Firefly: Sold!

Whilst Chicolini clearly has no idea of what his job entails, his quick wit and ability to dodge questions and bend the conversation until it's under his control is what ultimately gets him the position. This scene is a direct remark on a previous president of the U.S, Warren Harding (Gardner, p.76). It was revealed that Hardings associates, known as the 'Ohio Gang', were simply people he had played poker with and he appointed them to positions of great power and even to his Cabinet as well (Klein). They were not competent for the jobs they received and Harding was named as 'an associate of grafters' (Potts, p.644).



Fig. 8 *Duck Soup* (1933) Dir. McCarey

The brothers made no attempt in hiding their making fun of the most powerful person in their country, *Duck Soup* very blatantly attacks the people of the highest level. It shows them for who they truly are, corrupt and foolish, and it puts them on the lowest level by having Groucho's character represent them. The reversal of roles is a part of the carnivalesque, the clown (Firefly) becoming the President flipped the hierarchical system giving the audience a feeling of satisfaction, 'in such a system the king is the clown. He is elected by all the people and is mocked by all the people. He is abused and beaten when the time of his reign is over' (Marx and Sienkiewicz, p.38).

ANTI - WAR COMMENTS

In the 1930's America remained detached from the rest of the world politically. People were wary of the treaties created after World War I and were critical about the extensive power being played with without any regard for their fate (Gardner, p.72). The latter half of *Duck Soup* displays the brothers' opinions on war, that it is a pointless thing to happen, how the people in charge of running the country react to it, and how it is the typical man who suffers the most.

Firefly radiates the spirit of a logical and tranquil leader of his country, but is incredibly paranoid in all his relationships (Gardner, p.80). Whilst this is just a part of his character, it shines a light on diplomatic relations, there is a deep rooted paranoia just beneath the collaboration between nations. Richard Hofstadter says that ‘American politics and diplomacy have the paranoid qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy’ (Gardner, p.81). This is seen when Firefly declares war, for the final time, against Sylvania. What was initially meant to be an opportunity for the two nations to reconcile their differences, results in a war because of Firefly’s paranoia.

Firefly: I’d be only too happy to meet Ambassador Trentino and offer him on behalf of my country the right hand of good fellowship. I feel sure he will accept this gesture in the spirit in which it is offered. But suppose he doesn’t. A fine thing that’ll be. I hold out my hand and he refuses to accept it. That’ll add a lot to my prestige, won’t it? Me, the head of a country, snubbed by a foreign ambassador! Who does he think he is that he can come here and make a sap out of me in front of my people? Think of it. I hold out my hand and that hyena refuses to accept it. Why, the cheap, four flushing swine! He’ll never get away with it, I tell you!

[...]

Firefly: So, you refuse to shake hands with me, eh?

Whilst waiting for Trentino to arrive to have a calm discussion on how to move past the growing friction between the two leaders, Firefly works himself into a panic because of the paranoia and instead of making peace, he enforces a war, the most destructive way to fix the problem.

When Firefly gives Chicolini the job of secretary of war they have a conversation about what kind of army they think is best for the country to have.

Firefly: What kind of an army do you think we oughta have?

Chicolino: We should have a standing army.

Firefly: Why should we have a standing army?

Chicolini: Then we save money on chairs!

Having a standing army adds to the mistrust and apprehension between nations. When one country increases its military arms, the fear of an attack will have neighbouring countries doing

the same thing to prepare for a possible conflict. This paranoid fear flows into the nation's politicians, and whilst they publicly disagree with war, they are privately making sure they are prepared (Gardner, p.81). The eagerness for war is often found in politicians who will benefit if their country goes to war. Firefly is seen to be very eager to go to war himself, as when Trentino says he is willing to do anything he can to prevent going to war, Firefly replies with, 'It's too late. I've already paid a month's rent on the battlefield' (Tueth, p.6).

The climactic battle scene really shows the senselessness of war. According to Hofstadter, war itself is in great part 'a comedy of errors and a museum of incompetence' (Gardner, p.84).

Firefly is the main character to exhibit the ineptitude of the so-called leaders when it comes to situations such as war. The brothers have Firefly shooting a machine gun out a window injuring people, proud of himself he rewards himself with the Firefly medal for military success, it is then Zeppo stops him to tell him he's been shooting his own men and Firefly pays him off to keep it quiet (Gardner, p.84). This scene emphasises the pure idiocy of the people who are meant to lead the country to victory.



Fig. 9 *Duck Soup* (1933) Dir. McCarey

In addition to showing the incompetence of the officers, the brothers also show there is no effective protection against modern warfare. During the final scene, a live shell is shot through the window and passes through the building and out the other window, Firefly doesn't react and simply jumps up to shut the blind of the window (see fig. 9). This plain and illogical action is all he is able to do to prevent more shells from entering, he is completely hopeless against the progression of modern warfare (Gardner, p.84).

CONCLUSION

Whilst *Duck Soup* was initially met with much scepticism, it is now widely regarded as one of the brothers best films, and a classic in cinema history. The attacks on the politicians and reducing them to buffoons portrayed by irresponsible characters demonstrated to the audience that they were simply the same as everyone else, self-serving by any means possible. Switching the roles allowed the audience to laugh, 'by assuming a mask [...] we can commit any sin while remaining innocent: and we are indeed innocent, because we laugh' (Marx and Sienkiewicz, p.27). By making light of the concept of war, the audience felt a sense of relief during the film, for the brief timeframe in the theatre, the potential rising tensions and threat of war is forgotten as the brothers dwindle it down to something outlandish.

Conclusion

Spanning nearly forty-five years, the Marx Brothers entertained and won over the hearts of the American nation, from their early vaudeville days to their final films, they had the audience mesmerised by their routines and in awe of their talents. 'The 'anarchistic' frolics of the Marx Brothers may not presume to transform society but, like the medieval carnival, their enlightened and enlightening laughter does tease productively with alternate ways of thinking about relations between individuals and the social order' (Krutnik, p.106). They gave people sanctuary to laugh at serious issues before returning to their daily lives and social standing. Their caricaturing of prominent people, such as the President or dangerous gangsters, belittled them to the point of them looking like fools and of the lowest social order. In *The Cocoanuts*, they ridiculed the Florida land boom and the madness of the frenzy. With Mr. Hammer becoming nothing more than a sly crook, they represented all of the salespeople who had conned thousands out of their money. In *Monkey Business* they illustrated the immigrant experience, with each brother depicting a different immigrant minority they were able to highlight the struggles of attempting to homogenise into a new country. They also delve into the world of gangsters and mock the prominent gang leaders of that time. This destruction of character for men who were known to be incredibly violent, turned them into simple people who had no idea what was happening and were often the butt of the jokes. *Duck Soup* focused on two of the most important topics, government and war, as they impacted everyone. Their simplifying of the material to its illogical core and displaying that irrationality allowed the audience to feel at ease watching the film. Firefly became the embodiment of all corrupt politicians the public had to deal with in office and became the laughing stock of the audience as he mimicked the bizarre actions of real leaders. The downplay of war to something that is practically just games between two teams emphasises the uselessness of it all, people's lives are played with as if they are meaningless but leaders are rewarded for hurting their own men. The Marx Brothers never set out to revolutionise the world with their work, they wanted to make people laugh over crucial topics. Even today we still face many of the problems the brothers touched on. Corrupt government, the immigration experience and war are all still issues people face daily, but in the brothers films, they are reduced to nothing more than a joke, and because they set everyone in the same social order, the comedy in their films lives on, as even though the times have changed, their films brings us to a safe haven that allow us to laugh freely and without repercussion.

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