

Critical Re-Marx:
Social Criticism in the Marx Brothers and
Bergson's Theory of Laughter

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Benny Hintjens
Bennyhintjens@gmail.com
S2452820
Rijksuniversiteit Groningen
Dr. Julian Hanich
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Faculty of Arts Bachelor thesis Statement, University of Groningen

Name of student: Benny Hintjens

Student number: S2452820

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Name of thesis supervisor: Dr. Julian Hanich

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Introduction

Like Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940) some years later, *Duck Soup* (1933) by the Marx Brothers shone a light on the absurdity of dictatorship in Europe. Set in the fictional country of Freedonia, everything is depicted as absurd from the national anthem to the military uniforms. The film came out the same year that Adolf Hitler was elected German chancellor and its anti-hero Rufus T. Firefly is a parody of the worst kind of leader, appointing his friends randomly to public office and sending innocent people to war. "Join the Army and see the Navy" says a board on the back of Harpo in *Duck Soup*, mocking militaristic values. As a satire of dictatorship and war, *Duck Soup* is generally recognized as the Marx Brothers' most explicitly political film. Yet the film was not as popular at the time as it later became, and was banned in Italy by Mussolini who saw its subversive message. By pointing out the absurdity of what was seen as normal at that time, the film proved uncomfortable for most audiences who felt it was 'too political'. In *Duck Soup*, institutions of state, respect for unworthy leaders and war are all shown as equally absurd. The film implies that most people are easily fooled by those who lead them into ridiculous wars, based on absurd beliefs. Yet it does all this without actually lecturing as in *The Great Dictator*. The style of humour of the Marx Brothers means that though soldiers suffer whilst their leaders enjoy luxury, and though uniforms change from World War I to the US civil war and the French Revolution, all this provokes laughter rather than tears. Military mistreatment of soldiers can happen in any war, in any country, is the message, and all dictators are cynics and fools. The film was the Marx Brothers' own wake up call to cinema publics. Whilst *Horse Feathers* (1932) had mainly mocked academic authority, *Duck Soup* now mocked entire states built on nationalism and led by dictators.

In this thesis I tackle the following question: *How can the humour employed in the early films of the Marx Brothers be seen as a form of social critique?* I will be focusing on their criticisms in regards to the upper class and general expected norms of behaviour, as well as themes that relate to socio-economic positioning in general. I plan to do this through an in-depth content analysis using the laughter-based theoretical framework of French philosopher Henri Bergson. I will be using his theories developed in his essays on laughter.¹

¹ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, (MacMillan & Co., Limited, 1911)

By doing this I intend to make the case that the Marx Brothers films can be seen as not just comic films, but films with noticeable and noteworthy social criticisms.

Social criticism in theatre and film has an incredibly long history. Satire, a particularly critical form of comedy found in many of the films of the Marx Brothers', dates back to as far as ancient Greece, for example in the plays of Aristophanes in the fifth century BC, where satire was used to attack social and political institutions and follies. Satire can be seen as a form of comedy which incorporates numerous techniques such as irony and parody in the effort to mock and/or humorously imitate the behaviour of individuals, institutions and ideologies. In more modern times this still takes place in a plethora of forms: From stand-up comics such as Lenny Bruce and George Carlin to more contemporary comedians like John Stewart and Stephen Colbert. To quote Rubin Quintero, "satirists...rouse us to put out the fire. They encourage our need for the stability of truth by unmasking imposture, exposing fraudulence, shattering deceptive illusion, and shaking us from our complacency and indifference".²

The Marx Brothers themselves were a comedy troupe consisting of brothers Groucho, Harpo, Chico, and Zeppo (real names Leonard, Adolph - later changed to Arthur - Julius, and Herbert). Born to Jewish immigrant parents, they were raised in a working class-immigrant environment and with the exception of Chicho none of the Marx Brothers obtained a full high school education.³ This is noteworthy, because themes of poverty, wealth, and especially class are important motifs found in almost all Marx Brothers films, as are themes of academia and technical prowess. I plan first to address the reasons for my research and the problem I wish to address. After this I will explain the method I have chosen to use with regards to addressing this problem, as well as the theoretical framework of Henri Bergson's theory of Laughter that I will be using. After this I will conduct a content analysis based upon three Marx Brothers movies, before finally summarizing my results and concluding my thesis overall.

² Rubin Quintero, "Introduction: Understanding Satire", in R. Quintero (ed) *A Companion to Satire* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2007), p. 4.

³ Rob Write, *The Marx Brothers : A Comedy Team Far Ahead of their Time* (ReelRundown, 2016)

Among the best overviews of current research on the Marx Brothers films, is the collection edited by Joseph Mills entitled *A Century of the Marx Brothers*.⁴ Other research has been done on the Marx Brothers as social critics, in general⁵, as well as their critical relationship towards class⁶ as well as ethnicity and WASP culture.⁷ Yet none of these four authors use a specific theory of comedy, and I believe that by using Bergson's theory a more robust and potentially more widely applicable framework can be developed. A possible reason that this topic has not so far been discussed more thoroughly could be because of the relative subtlety of the Marx Brothers' style of satirical criticism. They were never overtly critical of specific ideals and institutions in the same kind of way that, for example, Charlie Chaplin was in *The Great Dictator*, or in the explicit way of many contemporary comedians today, such as cast members of *Saturday Night Live* who often deride and satirize specific individuals and institutions explicitly. Yet in the Marx Brothers too, concealed within their humorous behaviours and dialogues, there are definite social criticisms to be found, albeit in more subtle forms, and I plan to highlight these criticisms. While I do believe they were social critical and conscious, I do not agree with Antonin Artaud when he described the climax of *Monkey Business* as being a "...hymn to anarchy and full-scale revolution".⁸ I believe that the Marx Brothers varied in their political views, and were probably not directly or consciously encouraging an anarchic or left-wing political revolution, but I do agree that political and critical themes are prominent in their films, if one knows how to look for them.

Method

I plan to analyse three Marx Brothers movies – two that were released before the Production Code came into force in 1934 (*Animal Crackers*, 1930 and *Duck Soup*, 1933) and one released afterwards (*A Night at the Opera*, 1935). Whilst the Marx Brothers did arguably enjoy more freedom in their topics before the introduction of the code, there are still strong forms of social commentary and criticism to be found in *A Night at The Opera*. The films

⁴ Joseph Mills (ed.) *A Century of the Marx Brothers* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle: 2007).

⁵ Martin Gardner, *The Marx Brothers as Social Critics: Satire and Comic Nihilism in Their Films* (McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2009)

⁶ Christopher Beach, *Class, Language, and American Film Comedy* (Cambridge University Press, 2002)

⁷ Mark Winokur, *Smile Stranger: Aspects of Immigrant Humour in the Marx Brothers* (Literature Film Quarterly, 1985)

⁸ Antonin Artaud, *VERTIGO* (Close-Up Film Center, 1996), 1.

selected, particularly *A Night at The Opera*, will also serve to highlight the important and crucial relationship between Groucho and Margaret Dumont, who portrays the ‘straight’ woman in a total of seven of the Marx Brothers’ films.

To address my topic I will be conducting a content analyses, and this will be done by addressing specific scenes throughout the films thematically. By analyzing specific scenes from the three Marx Brothers films, I will highlight areas where I find various forms of social criticism most apparent. I will be analysing the films mainly in regards to their dialogue, the behaviour of the brothers, and the reactions of the individuals they encounter. I will paying most attention to Groucho, and this is because Groucho Groucho functions as the ‘mouthpiece’ of the brothers. He has the most dialogue and screen time, and it is he who we usually find mingling with the elite that are criticized in their films. He is sharp-witted, and it is he who is always “...pricking the bubble of social pomposity”⁹, which is something that my thesis will be focusing on. I will not be paying particular attention to the plots of the films which, even in their later more ‘plot-oriented’ movies, were fairly weak.

Theoretical framework

I will be using the laughter based theoretical framework of Henri Bergson, as outlined in his essays on laughter. According to Bergson, laughter stems from society’s requirement for individuals to display high levels of adaptability, or as he puts it ‘elasticity’. This ‘elasticity’ is opposite to ‘mechanical inelasticity’. To quote Bergson, “What life and society requires of each of us is a constantly alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation, together with a certain elasticity of mind and body to enable us to adapt ourselves in consequence.”¹⁰ That is to say, an individual is required by society to be flexible, and if they cannot be flexible they become laughable.

According to Bergson, the function of laughter is a social one. Its function is to correct ‘inelasticity’. It does this by creating a feeling of fear in those who are being laughed at. I quote Louise Mathewson: “The social significance of laughter is the central idea of Bergson’s

⁹ Martin Gardner, *The Marx Brothers as Social Critics: Satire and Comic Nihilism in Their Films* (McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2009), 15.

¹⁰ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, (MacMillan & Co., Limited, 1911), 18.

investigation. Every mode of life in its proper nature is ever-moving, never repeating, and whenever we find anything mechanical in human actions or words, we recognize it as non-adaptive and a fit subject of ridicule.”¹¹ I believe that this elasticity is exemplified by The Marx Brothers, and their high levels of elasticity make the rigid and inflexible characters they ridicule seem even more rigid than usual. This is especially true for Groucho, who is almost the epitome of a flexible and unruffled character. Verbally he is rarely caught off guard, and when on occasion he is made inelastic through slapstick, he quickly regains his composure. To quote Mathewson once more, “The comic is often in the very opposite of rigidity”.¹² Here, what is meant by comic is the comedian himself or herself, not whatever we find comical i.e. what we find ridiculous. While I do believe that Bergson’s theory can reveal a lot about the satirical aspects of the late Marx Brothers films, it is not a flawless theory.

For example, whilst Bergson argues that our laughter is the laughter of a group, it is still not entirely impossible to laugh outside of a group. That is to say, an individual can find themselves laughing at something alone, not ‘as a group’. Yet whilst this can be true, I would agree with Bergson that this would be the exception, rather than the rule, with laughter. Another interesting criticism of Bergson’s theory is from John Lippitt who mentions how humour can be used to support and enforce specific values: humour could thus also be used to enforce negative and potentially prejudiced values, such as ethnic and gender-based stereotypes, rather than to mock authority, for example.¹³ With regards to the Marx Brothers, I find this to be a noteworthy criticism, especially in regards to Chico, who is arguably an Italian immigrant stereotype. However, I am not claiming that Bergson’s theory is morally unambiguous, nor am I claiming that the Marx Brothers were all faultless characters. Rather, I am arguing that they were social critics. Whether or not I agree with their social criticisms is a different matter.

The Fifth Marx Brother

¹¹ Louise Mathewson, *Bergson’s Theory of the Comic in the Light of English Comedy*, (University of Nebraska Studies in Language, Literature and Criticism, 1920), 6.

¹² *Bergson’s Theory of the Comic in the Light of English Comedy*, 7.

¹³ John Lippitt, *Philosophical perspectives on humour and laughter*, Durham theses, Durham University., 1991), 130.

The actress Margaret Dumont plays the ‘straight woman’ in all but five of the Marx Brothers films, and she essentially functions as Groucho’s ‘foil’, as well as his passage into high society. She does this by consistently vouching for him and fervently expressing her adoration towards Groucho’s characters to the elite and high-class individuals around her. This provides Groucho, and as a result the other brothers, with two main benefits. The first benefit this grants them is access to high society, what Bergson refers to as: “...the stuff and starched formality of any ceremonial suggests to us an image of this kind”.¹⁴ By this Bergson means that within these high society events, where ceremony and routine are at the forefront, there are numerous cases of mechanistic and inelastic behaviour for the brothers to highlight and satirize. Groucho and Chico generally do this through language, whereas Harpo generally does this through physical comedy, including through: “...the art of mime [which] makes people laugh by the gestures of slapstick, frequently the bawdy together with verbal mockery and mimicry of social types”.¹⁵ In various ways, the Marx Brothers mock the “stuffed and starched formality” of these highly routine situations, which, as Bergson says, displays powerfully the mechanical and the inelastic qualities of power and authority.

Equally important, the admiration expression by Dumont towards Groucho allows him to mock and satirize the behaviours of those around him without immediately being disregarded as a scallywag and/or possibly assaulted. It grants him an inherent elevated platform and a level of undeserved prestige from which he can criticize and subvert the norms around him without immediately being ostracized. Dumont’s character is usually in love, or at the very least very much admires Groucho’s characters, and Groucho without exception always views her as his ‘meal-ticket’. This relationship is necessary if the three brothers (with Harpo and Chico on Groucho’s coat-tails, as it were) are to enter and satirise high society.

What is most important and noteworthy about Dumont’s character is that she essentially embodies all the quintessential characteristics that Bergson’s defines as ‘comic’. To quote Bergson, “What life and society requires (sic) of each of us is a constantly alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation, together with a certain elasticity of mind and

¹⁴ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on The Meaning of The Comic*, MacMillan & Co., Limited, 1911), 45.

¹⁵ Betty Margaret Guy. *Aristophanes to Fo: Conventions of Political Satire in Western Theatre*, Masters Dissertation (Queensland University of Technology, 2007), p.9.

body to enable us to adapt ourselves in consequence.”¹⁶ It is this absolute lack of alert attention and elasticity of mind and body that is exemplified in Dumont’s characters. She is rigid and unchanging. Her behaviour, despite the anarchic behaviour of the brothers around her, is always predictable. Her rigidity and ‘automation’ is only exemplified tenfold by the insane elasticity of the brothers around her, particularly Groucho. To quote Christopher Beach, “the behavior of a Mrs. Teasdale – or that of any of the other characters Dumont plays – are informed by such deeply embedded class dispositions as to be undisturbed by anything Groucho or the other Brothers can do to shake them.”¹⁷ This is exemplified in the still below. Dumont’s character often reacts to Groucho’s often crude and offensive remarks with nothing more than a patronizing or a quizzical expression.



¹⁸ She is the perfect foil to the Marx Brothers, and she is critical in understanding how their humour acts as a form of social criticism.

Class, Cash and Arrogance

¹⁶ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on The Meaning of The Comic*, (MacMillan & Co., Limited, 1911), 18.

¹⁷ Christopher Beach, *Class, Language, and American Film Comedy* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 35.

¹⁸ The Marx Brothers, *A Night at the Opera*, (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1935)

The first motif I will be addressing refers to criticisms involving class, wealth, and general upper-class arrogance and pomposity. Money plays an almost ubiquitous role within all the films of the Marx Brothers, and most of the brothers as well as the villains are more often than not motivated by acquisition. In almost all of the Marx Brothers films Groucho is after the money of Dumont's character. Usually Groucho is paired with a socially-higher ranking 'rival', so to speak, who is usually just as sneaky and morally bankrupt as Groucho. In *A Night at the Opera* Herman Gotlieb that is trying to seduce Mrs. Claypool for her money. In *Duck Soup* the culprit is Ambassador Trentino, and in *Animal Crackers* it is Roscoe W. Chandler. This motif is used in order to show that these upper class educated individuals are just as deceptive and deceitful as Groucho, and that their apparent high ranking and stature mean nothing in regards to their morality. What differentiates them from Groucho, as well as what inevitably leads Groucho to beat them, is indeed his flexibility and adaptability.

While in the films of the Marx Brothers Groucho does indeed behave pompous and arrogant, he is none the less well aware of the reality of his social standings. He fluctuates between absolute arrogance as well as a fair amount of self-deprecating humour. Groucho is always aware that he's not actually an 'upper class' individual at all, but someone merely impersonating someone upper class in order to obtain some sort of financial gain. As he quotes to Dumont's character in a later scene in *A Night at the Opera*:

Groucho: I've arranged for you to invest 200,000\$ in the New York Opera Company.

Mrs. Driftwood: I don't understand.

Groucho: Don't you see? You'll be a patron of the opera. You'll get into society. You can marry me, and then they'll kick you out of society...

This attitude of Groucho, that he, and essentially everyone else around him, is a 'schmuck' and a phony, is something worth keeping in mind. Groucho's character is critical of all pretensions of the rich, and though does display elitism, but its is always in a satirically excessive sort of way. He acts overly pompous and arrogant to such an extreme extent that we notice these pompous behaviours and laugh at them when Groucho interacts with other pompous characters who share similar characteristics yet are unaware of them. His arrogance comes across with a feeling of *sprezzatura* and due to this Groucho is able between

effortlessly flattering an individual's ego before stomping on it only a second later. This is a result of his flexibility, and through it we laugh at the inelastic behaviour of the individuals that he encounters. He regards everyone who is authentically arrogant and 'haughty' as fair game, and through his flexibility he always manages to make us laugh at their rigidity. This duality of Groucho's character is highlighted in an early scene in *Duck Soup* where Groucho begins to outline how he plans to perform his duties as the newly appointed head of Freedonia.

Groucho: These are the laws of my administration, no one's allowed to smoke or tell a dirty joke, and whistling is forbidden.

...

Groucho: Whatever form of pleasure are exhibited, report to me and they will be prohibited.

...

Groucho: I will not stand for anything that's crooked or unfair, I'm strictly on the the up and up so everyone beware, if anyone's caught taking graft and I don't get my share, we stand 'em up against the wall and pop goes the weasel.

Here we are given a glimpse into the duality of Groucho's character. Groucho, who frequently smokes, tells dirty jokes, and whistles in the movies, is satirizing the kind of up-tight and authoritarian attitude of the typical statesman. Particularly in the last paragraph regarding anything that is crooked or unfair. This seems to be a direct criticism of the supposed moral superiority of the upper-class and of leaders and politicians. It is this duality of character, on the one hand this superficial haughty and formal attitude, coupled with the authentic street-wise and perceptive Groucho, allows Groucho to function as a sort-of constantly walking criticism of the characters he embodies.





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Groucho's dislike towards flattery and arrogance is highlighted in a scene in *Animal Crackers* where a conversation takes place between Groucho and Roscoe W. Chandler (Played by Louis Sorin), an apparent art collector who turns out to be a Czechoslovakian fishmonger and an imposter. Roscoe is exemplified in a quote by Bergson "A comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself. The comic person is unconscious. As though wearing the ring of Gyges with a reverse effect, he becomes invisible to himself while remaining visible to all the world".²⁰ This is highlighted well in the character of Roscoe. Throughout their dialogue Groucho makes fun of him on frequent occasions and

¹⁹ *Duck Soup*, (Paramount Pictures, 1933). Groucho displaying his moral ambiguity.

²⁰ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on The Meaning of The Comic*, MacMillan & Co., Limited, 1911), 16.

continues to mock him. Roscoe seems ignorant of this, and though he seems at times slightly shocked he does not seem to be aware that he is being mocked. The scene begins with Chandler, just having been pickpocketed by Groucho and Chico, showing up at a table where Groucho's character is sitting:

Groucho: Let me introduce myself. I'm Captain Spaulding.

Roscoe W. Chandler: I am Roscoe W. Chandler.

Groucho: This is a treat, your treat.

Roscoe W. Chandler.: You have heard about me? **appearing flattered**

Groucho: I've heard about you for years, and I'm getting pretty sick of it.

Roscoe W. Chandler: **Seemingly ignorant of Groucho's insult** Quite naturally, I've also heard of the great Captain Spaulding.

Roscoe, blinded by both the flattery of hearing that Groucho has heard of him and the fact that he believes he is sitting in the presence of an authentic great captain, does not understand that he is constantly being made the butt of a joke. He is 'ignorant of himself', and this ignorance stems mainly from his arrogance and huge sense of self-worth. Groucho's character satirizes this, and when Roscoe is juxtaposed with Groucho's character, this serves only to highlight Roscoe's comic absentmindedness even more.

Groucho: I want to talk to you about something. Would you like to finance a scientific expedition?

Roscoe: **excited** Well, that is a question!

Groucho: Yes, that is a question. You certainly know a question when you see it. I congratulate you, Mr. Chandler.

...

Groucho: This is your chance, Mr. Chandler, when I think of what you have done for this country. By the way, what *have* you done for this country?

Roscoe: Oh well... I've always tried to do what I could. Especially in the world of art art.

Groucho: Art? well I don't know how we drifted around to that, but what is your opinion of art?

Roscoe: *very excited* I am very glad you asked me.

Groucho: I withdraw the question. *Groucho looks directly at camera* This fella takes things seriously, it isn't safe to ask him a simple question.

I find this line particularly interesting. "He fella takes things seriously, it isn't safe to ask him a simple question." It's interesting how Groucho addresses the camera and says this. It highlights a few things. Firstly, it highlights Groucho's attitude towards Roscoe and the conversation they are having. Groucho knows that there is no genuine worth in anything that he, or Roscoe, has to say saying. Roscoe is always one step behind Groucho, yet it is only Roscoe who is genuinely involved in the discussion. He is alert and invested in what is being said. This sort of 'genuineness' and his arrogance function, as Bergson would say, as a vice of character, and as such we find this amusing. We laugh at Roscoe's inability to see what is actually happening in the situation. Roscoe's arrogance functions as a ring Gyges, blinding him to the fact that Groucho is in fact mocking him every other sentence.

Wealth and money in general are also topics of criticism within almost all films of the Marx Brothers. In a scene in *A Night at the Opera*, Groucho, incredulous about the fact that Gotlieb is willing to pay an opera singer one thousand dollars a night, quips "Why you can get a phonograph record of Minnie the Moocher for 75 cents. And for a buck and a quarter you can get Minnie." This is a solid example of how Groucho pricks "...the bubble of social pomposity." He always seems to say the 'wrong thing', but not out of stupidity. He simply does not hold the same values as the elite individuals he encounters. We laugh at his outrageousness and the shocked reactions of Gotlieb and Dumont towards this statement, but within it we do find a bit of truth. We realize that although obviously opera and songs like Minnie the Moocher are worlds apart, it does seem ridiculous to spend a thousand dollars a night on an opera singer when you can purchase re-playable music for as little as 75 cent. This was an especially notable point as the film was released during the times of the depression, and this criticism of excess likely resonated both in the Marx Brothers themselves, who all lost almost all of their money during the depression, along with the common cinema audience.

Formality, Language and Loopholes

Formality, both in physical and linguistic forms, are often topics of ridicule and satirization in the films of the Marx Brothers. To quote Christopher Beach “the Marx Brothers’ films offer a cinematic space for the continual contestation of the “the linguistic relation of power“ described by Bourdieu²¹. Groucho, and to a lesser extent Chico, are always circumventing the rules and formalities of language. In one of the early scene in *A Night at the Opera*, Groucho asks the waiter “Have you got any milk fried chicken?” “Yes sir” the waiter replies. “Well squeeze the milk out and why don’t you bring me a glass”. This sort of wordplay and ‘fiddling’ of language is found in almost all of the Marx Brothers films. Their frequent use of wordplay as well as colloquialisms and ‘puns’ is often juxtaposed with the rigid language of the more formal and upper class individuals they come into contact with. A solid example of this comes during a scene in *Duck Soup* where Groucho is arguing with the Freedonian minister of finance:

Minister of finance: Sir, you try my patience.

Groucho: I don’t mind if I do. You must come over and try mine some time.

Minister of finance: That’s the last straw! I resign. I wash my hands of the whole business.

Groucho: That’s a good idea. You can wash your neck too

This is another example of how Groucho uses the elasticity of language to his advantage. He takes the wind out of the seriousness of what the minister of finance is saying and in a way ‘simplifies’ the dialogue, reducing the formality of the idiom ‘you try my patience’ to its simplified and rudimentary meaning, i.e., to try food. This simplification comes again in a late scene in *A Night at the Opera*. Groucho is in an opera box with Mrs. Claypool and he accidentally drops his hat off the edge. “Shorty, will you toss up that kelly” he shouts to one of the opera patrons, and after the man throws Groucho back his hat Groucho flips him a coin saying “Attaboy! Here, get yourself a stogy.”(a stogy is a slang word for a cheaply made

²¹ Christopher Beach, *Class, Language, and American Film Comedy* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 23.

cigar) He then turns to Mrs. Claypool and asks “Who’s ahead?”, as in “Who’s winning the game?”.

Small snippets of dialogue and interactions like this one really provide a good illustration of the attitude the brothers have towards the upper-class in general. It is unlikely that Groucho is entirely naive or aware of the expected standards of behaviour in an opera, rather his intentionally mocking and satirizing these ‘civilized’ norms through his use of language. His use of colloquialisms goes entirely against the formal language utilized by almost every other character Groucho interacts with, save Chico. To quote Christopher Beach, “The comic anti heroes represented by the Marx Brothers do not use and misuse language simply for the purpose of seducing others or ingratiating themselves with society. ... Groucho and the other brothers use language in order to frustrate the normal rules of society and puncture its pretensions.”²². This scene climaxes with a hectic scene in the opera house, as Groucho enters the opera shouting “Get your peanuts, Fresh peanuts!”, and proceeds to throw bags of peanuts at the opera patrons. Chico proceeds to throw a ball at Harpo who smashes it away with a violin. The entire opera is turned upside down and transformed into a sort of anarchic game of baseball. It would not be right to say that the film satirizes the opera as an institution itself, but rather it seems to satirize and poke fun at the haughty sternness and seriousness of the formality the opera encourages.

The Brothers criticise formality not just in through dialogue but also through physical behaviours. Shortly after the first scene in *A Night at the Opera* there is a scene where Groucho introduces Mr. Gottlieb, who is the director of the New York Opera Company, to Dumont’s character. I believe this to be an incredibly important scene, especially in relation to Bergson’s theory and notions of ‘mechanical inelasticity’. The scene goes as follows:

Groucho: *introducing them to one another* Ah Gotlieb allow me, Mrs. Claypool, Mr. Gottlieb, Mr. Gottlieb, Mrs. Claypool ,Mrs. Claypool.. I could go on like this all night but it’s tough on my suspenders. Now where was I? Oh yes, Mrs. Claypool, Mr. Gottlieb, Mr. Gottlieb, Mrs. Claypool.’

²² *Class, Language, and American Film Comedy*, 24.

Whilst he is introducing them to one another both Mr. Gottlieb and Mrs. Claypool as sincerely bowing to one another, as is Groucho, and at the end during the last of the introductions Groucho begins to dance, which functions as a sort of ‘cherry on the cake’ by highlighting just how strange the repetitive formal act of bowing is when performed in excess. I think this is a prime example of Bergson’s theory of mechanical inelasticity. Mrs. Claypool and Mr. Gottlieb continue bowing throughout the entire process, and we laugh not only at their inflexibility and inability to stop bowing, but we laugh at the essential ‘weirdness’ of the behaviour they are expressing. This is only highlighted by Groucho who also continues to bow throughout the scene, even lower than Gottlieb. To quote Bergson, ceremonies “are identified, in our minds, with the serious object with which custom associates them, and when we isolate them in imagination, they forthwith lose their seriousness”.²³ Through the repetition of the bow, the empty ceremony and formal introducing of one person to another is made funny. It is viewed in isolation. It is almost similar to a form of ‘*ostranenie*’, for a moment it almost even seems Dadaist, and due to this weirdness we laugh at it. The act of bowing itself seems to lose reason and become nothing more than a strange spasm of the body. To quote Bergson again, “The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine.”²⁴ This is a prime example of this. The bowing over and over, the rigidity and repetition, it is almost exactly as if for a brief moment both Mr. Gottlieb and Mrs. Claypool were indeed moving machines.

A similar situation same takes place in a later scene in *A Night at the Opera* in a scene where Chico, Harpo, and the conductor are all trying to conduct the opera. Chico strikes a desk with his baton to get attention, then Harpo does, then the conductor does, and so on. This goes on for about 5 seconds as each of the three individuals hits their desks with their batons in order to get the attention of the orchestra. Again, this highlights an interesting point in regards to Bergson’s theory regarding the body reminding us of a machine. Normally, we would not find something like this funny, if carried out once or twice, but when this striking is carried out to excess, and in an isolated incident, it becomes humorous and weird. We laugh at the

²³ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on The Meaning of The Comic*, (MacMillan & Co., Limited, 1911), 45.

²⁴ *Laughter: An Essay on The Meaning of The Comic*, 29.

conductor unable to stop tapping. To quote Bergson “For any ceremony, then, to become comic, it is enough to our attention be fixed on the ceremonial element in it, and that we neglect its matter, as philosophers say, and think only of its form.”²⁵ Here this is exactly what is done. Through isolating the act and forcing us to view it purely as its ‘form’, the repetition and isolation done by Chico and Harpo brings the latent comic element of this strange rigid ceremonial function to the forefront for us as the viewer to laugh at.

This idea of laughing at the ‘form’ is exemplified again in a scene shortly after. The conductor waves his baton at Harpo implying ‘no, don’t begin playing yet’, but Harpo, presumably unfamiliar with the connotations of what this physical movement means, or perhaps simply to mock the conductor's movements, sees this, or pretends to see this, as a duel. He begins to attack the conductor as if they were having a sword fight, and this again makes us look at the form of the conductor's wave. To quote Bergson: “The ceremonial side of social life must [...] always include a latent comic element, which is only waiting for an opportunity to burst into full view.”²⁶ By completely subverting the meaning of the physical action performed by the conductor, the ‘latent comic element’ of the conductor's movement is brought to the forefront, and we in turn laugh at it due to its rigid form.”²⁷

Marriage, Sentimentality and Romance

The third motif I will be addressing is the brothers’ attitude towards marriage, sentimentality and romance. Throughout their films the brothers criticise the often haughty and over the top sentimental situations they find themselves in. The brothers seem to take a much more lax and unconventional approach towards love and relationships, and their behaviours and words often seem to subvert the highly-formal upper class romantic norms that the other characters in their films seem to enforce. This happens not just through the relationship with Dumont’s characters and Groucho, but also with Groucho, Chico and Harpo in relation to other female characters.

²⁵ *Laughter: An Essay on The Meaning of The Comic*, 45.

²⁶ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on The Meaning of The Comic*, (MacMillan & Co., Limited, 1911), 44.

²⁷ Mills, Joseph. “Introduction. The Faces of Twentieth Century Comedy”, pp. 1-13 in J. Mills (ed). *A Century of the Marx Brothers* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle: 2007), p. 8.

I find this criticism is best displayed in the relationship between Groucho's characters and Dumont's characters. Dumont and Groucho share an interesting relationship in the Marx brothers films, and as mentioned earlier, Dumont's character is often in love, or at least very much likes Groucho's character. The reasons for this are never really explained in the films, but somehow, regardless of his behaviour, Dumont's character never seems to realize that Groucho thinks of her purely as a paycheck. Groucho's attitude towards Dumont's character's admiration and sentimentality can be described as aloof, derisive, and even at times bohemian, especially in regards to his stance on marriage, as I will outline later. A good example of how Groucho 'brings up' Dumont's character, only to knock her down once more, is shown below in this scene from *Duck Soup*.





Due to Dumont's apparent inability to realize that Groucho thinks of her as nothing more than a meal ticket, we begin to find her adoration and excessive sentimentality more and more silly and laughable as she continues to allow Groucho to treat her like this. We laugh at her inflexibility and her over sentimentality, which is her vice. We find humour in her rigidity and inability to keep up with Groucho, or at the very least to stop romantically pursuing him. An iconic example of this comes only shortly after the first scene in *A Night at the Opera*:

Mrs Claypool: I'm not your good woman!

Groucho: Don't say that, Mrs. Claypool. I don't care what your past has been. To me, you'll always be my good woman, because I love you. There. I didn't mean to tell you but you dragged it out of me. I love you.

Mrs. Claypool: That's hard to believe when I find you dining with another woman.

Groucho: That woman? Do you know why I sat with her? Because she reminded me of you.

Mrs. Claypool: *flustered and begining to smile* Really?

Groucho: Of course. That's why I'm here with you, because you remind me of you. Your eyes, your throat, your lips... Everything about you reminds me of

²⁸ *Duck Soup*, (Paramount Pictures, 1933)

you... except you. How do you account for that?

This is a fairly standard form of dialogue between Groucho and Dumont's character. There is often a clear pattern in their dialogues, yet Dumont's character, by never learning or becoming more flexible, becomes an object of our laughter. In line with what Bergson refers to as "laughter as punishment", we laugh at her inability to realize that Groucho is taking her for a joke, and we laugh at her excessive sentimentality which, when repeated over and over, seems mechanical to us. In this sense, the behaviour of Groucho towards Dumont's characters can be seen as an overarching criticism of excessive upper-class sentimentality. The sort of quasi-shakespearean overly stylized kind of romanticism and sentimentality that Dumont's character often forces onto Groucho. To Quote Bergson "Laughter punishes certain failings somewhat as disease punishes certain forms of excess, striking down some who are innocent and sparing some who are guilty".²⁹ We laugh at Dumont's characters failings, and as a result our laughter acts as a sort of punishment. Were we to encounter an individual like Dumont's character in real life and then laugh at her, our laughter would act as a corrective towards her excessive sentimentality, and in the future she would likely curb this excessive sentimentality for fear of more ridicule. Groucho appears to take aim towards the 'elite' and stylized romanticism which was pervasive within films of the time, and throughout his films he seems to approach romanticism and romantic norms with a much more a much more working-class 'laissez faire' attitude.

This attitude is especially exemplified in Groucho's stance towards marriage and relationship norms in general. Another example of this comes in a scene in *Duck Soup* where Groucho is outlining his new laws for Freedonia.

Groucho: If any man should come between a husband and his bride, we find out which one she prefers by letting her decide, if she prefers the other man the husband steps outside, we stand them up against the wall and pop goes the weasel"

²⁹ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on The Meaning of The Comic*, (MacMillan & Co., Limited, 1911), 198.

This radical notion goes entirely against the formal Christian notion of marriage, and it comes again in *Animal Crackers* during a dialogue between Groucho, Dumont's character, and Mrs. Whitehead (played by Margaret Irving):

Groucho: What do you say girls? Are we all gonna get married?

White: All of us?

Groucho: All of us.

Whitehead: But that's bigamy

Groucho: Yes and that's bigger me too. It's bigger all of us. Let's be big for a change. I'm sick of these conventional marriages. One woman and one man was good enough for your grandmother, but who wants you marry your grandmother? Nobody. Not even your grandfather. Think! Think of the honey moon. Strictly private. I wouldn't let another woman in on this. Well, maybe one or two. But no men. I may not even go myself

There are quite a few points to be made about Groucho's dialogue here. Groucho himself had three wives throughout his life so it isn't a long shot to assume that he didn't hold the sanctity of marriage in the highest of regards. Firstly his use of language is interesting, by changing bigamy into 'bigger me' he attempts to remove it of its negative connotations and turn it into a digestible joke of sorts. He then performs a sort of 'alley-oop' with his bit on 'who wants you marry your grandmother?'. By the end of the monologue we can't help finding the whole concept a bit more strange. The traditional institution of marriage based on WASP principles is directly mocked in this monologue and, using word play and humour, we can't help but finding the whole rigidity of marriage slightly more amusing through no small effort from Groucho's wit.

Conclusion

Through analysing the behaviour and dialogue in these three Marx Brothers films according to Bergson's theories regarding laughter, I believe to have made a solid attempt at showing the the Marx Brothers as social critics and satirists. While I have only analysed three of their films, I do believe that these findings can be extrapolated to many of their other films,

however possibly not all of them. The critical aspects outlined in this thesis are likely not as noticeably present in some of their later, less well known, and arguably more ‘watered-down’ works, such as *Love Happy* (1949) or *The Big Store* (1941). For example, *Love Happy* doesn’t star Margaret Dumont, so there isn’t any typical Groucho and Dumont rapport which serves to make a lot of the criticism in the films outlined above possible, and this, coupled with Groucho playing a much more reputable and serious character, means that a lot of the social criticisms found in this thesis are not to be found in *Love Happy*. However, I believe *Love Happy* to be the exception, rather than the rule, and if we look at two earlier film such *Horse Feathers* (1932), and *A Day at the Races* (1937), a lot of the social criticisms outlined above can be found.

In regards to formality and language, in the first scene of *Horse Feathers* Groucho is talking to the ex-president of the university:

Ex-president: President Wagstaff, now that you have stepped into my shoes...

Groucho: Oh is that what I stepped in, I wondered what it was. If these are your shoes the least you could do is have them cleaned.

This is the typical sort of pretense-popping word play that Groucho uses in the films I have analysed above. He entirely removes the situation of any sense of properness and uses the idiom ‘stepped into my shoes’ in order to lessen the seriousness of the situation and also ridicule the formality of the ex-president.

Another interesting scene comes in *A Day at the Races*, where Groucho, having just been introduced to Dumont’s characters physicians, begins another excessive round of bowing. Once more the bizarre nature of the overly formalized bow, shown in isolation, is brought to the forefront, and repeated until laughable and machine-like. I believe that here the argument can be made that at the very least there is a recurring motifs within the films of the Marx Brothers with regards to criticizing and parodying the formality of class-based greetings and physical behaviours. I believe that this finding can be extrapolated to many other Marx

Brothers films.



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³⁰ *A Day at the Races*, (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1937)

I believe that a more well-rounded understanding of the Marx Brothers as social critics, particularly as individuals, could be better developed through not just an analysis of their films but through their individual writings and witness accounts. By doing this, a greater understanding of the subjective beliefs of the individual Marx Brothers could potentially be extrapolated, which may lead to an even deeper understanding of their films and beliefs. While my thesis is not all encompassing, I do hope that my findings are interesting enough to potentially encourage future research on the brothers and their function as social critics.

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