

Women in Comedy: The Construction of Gender in Depression Era Marx Brothers Films

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Introduction

Comedy is a genre that has long been both popular and successful among many artistic mediums, and film is no exception. The argument could possibly be made that film has become the most successful medium for comedy, as comedies are by far the most popular style of films consumed by viewers. With the massive popularity of comedic films, it is somewhat striking that both these films and comedy in general have not garnered more attention amongst feminist film critics. Feminist film theory, which came into focus during the 1970s, has more or less ignored comedies, much to its own detriment. Perhaps more serious, dramatic movies were believed to warrant more significant scrutiny because the tone that is generally incorporated into these films lends itself to more analysis, but this is an unfortunate miscalculation of the power of comedy on film audiences, which is the most sought-after genre of film for personal viewing.¹ Given comedic film's vast dissemination, the impact of any socially constructive representations of women would be large and would greatly affect the massive audience that partakes in the viewing of such films.

Comedic elements have been used in film since the late 1890s and by the 1920s, when sound had been successfully incorporated into "talkies", comedic films had become a major source of revenue for production companies and actors such as Charlie Chaplin and the Marx Brothers. During the Great Depression, with nine films released in the 1930s, the Marx Brothers especially were prolific. Due to the Marx Brothers' popularity, and the sheer volume of their

¹ Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant, "Responding to Comedy: The Sense and Nonsense of Humor," in *Responding to the Screen: Reception and Reaction Processes*, ed. Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991), 262.

work, an analysis of their films from a feminist perspective is warranted, as the insight that would be gained could encourage a greater understanding of the power of comedy in the construction of social institutions, such as gender and gender roles. These films were wide reaching and are still considered some of the greatest comedies of all time, which suggests the incredible cultural significance that they have.²

While the Marx Brothers created films both before and after the Great Depression, restricting an analysis to five of the nine films created during this era will allow for roughly the same societal background in which the films would have been viewed. The Great Depression created a massive amount of stress and hardship for the vast majority of Americans, and the societal unrest during this time serves as a base level for each of the films that will be analyzed. By allowing for the films to have been viewed in roughly the same time period, external societal issues of interpretation are limited, which allows for more confidence in the analysis. Regardless of the confidence of the analysis for the time period, however, it will still hold up for today's viewing of the films.

The five films that were viewed and analyzed were *Animal Crackers* (1930), *Monkey Business* (1931), *Duck Soup* (1933), *A Night at the Opera* (1935), and *A Day at the Races* (1937). Each film was viewed with particular attention paid to instances of derogatory jokes made about women, scenes created around the image of women, negatively created women characters, and women as objects of sexual desire. The approximate time of each instance of the above criteria was recorded along with a short description of the event, creating a list of the ways in which each film was overtly working to construct definitions of women and femininity. While the lists are neither entirely comprehensive nor exhaustive, they do serve as usable measures to

² American Film Institute, "America's Funniest Movies" (2002). Accessed March 6, 2013. www.afi.com/Docs/100years/laughs100.pdf

allow for discussion of the role that these films have played in the construction of a dominant gender norm that subordinates women, which enables the beginnings of a feminist critique to take place. While feminist film theory has no single discipline or ideological framework, the overarching theme has been to examine films in a different way than traditional audiences. A discussion of the differing theoretical frameworks of feminist film theory will enable the placement of this particular analysis inside of certain frameworks and will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the analysis.

Feminist Film Theory

Feminist film theory covers a wide range of interdisciplinary topics and foci, and as with any wide ranging idea, there are inevitably views that are at odds with one another.³ The different views offer a vast array of interpretations of certain aspects of film and cinema, and it is through the examination of these theoretical constructs that insight can be gained about the effect of films on audiences. A complete and comprehensive overview of the different styles and theoretical leanings of feminist film theory is far beyond the scope of this paper, but a short discussion of two of the most prevalent theoretical groundings of it will suffice, if only to create a more sound grounding for the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the Marx Brothers' films. Psychoanalytic and Marxist theories both advanced the scholarship of film theory, and though they differ entirely in their conclusions and methods, they both help to illuminate certain discussions and issues in film analysis from a feminist perspective. For the nature of this paper, psychoanalytic theory will not be as useful as a Marxist reading of the films, but a short overview of the implications that psychoanalytic theory brings out in films is warranted,

³ Judith Mayne, "Feminist Film Theory and Criticism," *Signs* 11:1 (1985): 85.

especially given the overly sexual nature of a number of the jokes frequently used by the Marx Brothers.

Psychoanalytic Theories

Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory have become the widely accepted theoretical groundings for feminist film theory, especially after the publication of Laura Mulvey's pivotal 1975 article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."⁴ The central ideas postulated by Mulvey revolve around the phallogentric nature of both the narrative and production of the film. According to Mulvey, film is created predominantly by men for an audience of men, so depictions of women are going to serve as a fetishistic, scopophilic view or an oppressive view due to the fear of castration.⁵ The male gaze is dominated by the active/male and passive/female dichotomy, which has been used to describe how films are seen and meant to be seen by audiences in a patriarchal society.⁶ Each of these ideas signifies a movement towards using a method of analysis that had previously been underutilized in film studies.

Psychoanalysis was not traditionally used in film studies, but by using this style of analysis, the theorists were able to define both film consumption and production in terms of the subconscious mind of men. This postulation is understandably desirable to feminist theorists, as it works to fundamentally examine the reasons why films are created in certain ways and why

⁴ Mayne, "Feminist Film Theory and Criticism," 85; Jane Gaines, "Women and Representation," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 76; Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 6-8.

⁵ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornman (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 58-61.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

women have been almost universally depicted in a negative or objectifying way. From the consumption side of cinema, psychoanalytic theory allows for an understanding of why the audience would readily and willingly partake in the viewing of films that work to subvert half of the population. This understanding, however, comes at the price of renouncing all agency that women viewers have and offers a solely pessimistic approach to film theory with no viable positive outcome from viewing any mainstream Hollywood movie.⁷ It is because of this lack of agency that other theoretical groundings for feminist film theory have taken root, in particular theories with their theoretical base in Marxist ideologies. By allowing for processes of change and creating an understanding of film through the lens of conflict theory these Marxist theories can stand in stark contrast to those of the psychoanalytic discipline.

Marxist Theories

Marxist interpretations of film are not constructed in the same way as psychoanalytic readings of film are. For Marxists, the interpretation of film would largely be based on the ideological leanings of those who created the film, which, in the case of popular Hollywood films of the day, was patriarchal capitalism.⁸ For feminists, this reading of film is part of what helps to perpetuate the disadvantages and discrimination that women face in their daily lives. By increasing their control over forms of entertainment that are viewed and consumed readily by members of lower classes, those in power are able to cement their status as the controllers of culture and greatly influence what goes into the culture that they work to shape. In order to understand and expose these constructions, a different method of viewing film must be adopted,

⁷ Jane Gaines, "Women and Representation," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 77-81; Michelle Citron et. al., "Women and Film," in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornman (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 116-18.

⁸ Judith Mayne, "Feminist Film Theory and Criticism," 85.

which has been termed “reading against the grain.”⁹ By reading the classical narrative of Hollywood films against the way in which they were intended to be read, feminist film theorists are able to deconstruct the implied meanings of films and remove the implicit subjugation of women in society.

The analysis of all aspects of film results in a clearer picture of how the film was made and possible answers to the question of why the film was made. Though the understanding of how and why films were created, it becomes possible to move beyond the generally accepted narrative of most popular films. According to a feminist interpretation, the burgeoning film attempted to create films that do not represent the classical narrative in both execution and interpretation.¹⁰ By examining the dominant way in which films are viewed, it is possible to understand and move away from the accepted narrative and discourse that is put forth by the popular film industry. This understanding of the ways in which gender and gender roles are constructed through film is of paramount importance for feminists because it enables them to analyze and critique films on the basis of their representation of women, which helps to foster a more equal standing for women.

Comedy

Theories of comedy can be used to demonstrate comedy’s mass appeal to audiences and the continued delight that people experience when watching comedies. Humor has been studied and examined by great thinkers all throughout history, and it still has yet to be understood more

⁹ Judith Maybe, “The Female Audience and the Feminist Critic,” in *Women and Film*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 23-25.

¹⁰ Michelle Citron et. al., “Women and Film,” in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornman (New York: New York University Press 1999), 118-21.

or less completely.¹¹ Zillmann and Bryant state that “[Humor] has been found in all recorded human cultures; not in deficient quantity, but in conspicuous abundance.”¹² Humor is all around, and people have built their careers around being funny. While not everyone has the same sense of humor, there are certain types of humor with wide appeal that have stood the test of time, as noted with their continued success. The slapstick style of humor utilized by Harpo Marx and the dry wit of Groucho Marx are two of those styles that are still successful today, as noted by their films’ continued successes. Of course not all of the jokes in the movies will have the same impact when viewed more than seventy years later due to references that would have been more widely understood to the audiences in the 1930s; what the jokes may lack in terms of understanding in a historical context is generally made up for in terms of sheer ridiculousness or absurdity. The anarchic style of comedy that was utilized in the Marx Brothers films, best exemplified by *Duck Soup* (1933), makes use of so many non sequiturs that a lack of comprehension of the context of a joke is often unimportant, as the circumstances of the joke in the film are just as important for its comedic value.

Zillmann’s disposition theory of humor posits that humor is found when one group works to undermine, ridicule, reduce, or humiliate another group, provided that the viewers are empathetic with the first group. When viewers can relate to the group that is making a joke of the other, they will be more likely to find humor in the situation, so long as the joke falls short of truly grievous harm.¹³ This theory fits well with the Marxist readings of films due to the conflicts that arise between groups which are in power and those which are not. Humor allows for the main narrative of the films to be digested with little or no thought; simply working as a benign

¹¹ Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant, “Responding to Comedy: The Sense and Nonsense of Humor,” in *Responding to the Screen: Reception and Reaction Processes*, ed. Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991), 268-70.

¹² *Ibid.*, 268.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 270.

reinforcement of the status quo of society. By basing itself on the disposition of the viewer, this theory of humor allows for alternate experiences of the same joke, which allows for viewers to “read against the grain” when viewing classical films. When coupled with the deconstructive aspect of feminist film theory, disposition theory allows for comedic films to be understood in terms of the mass appeal towards certain jokes and styles of humor, and the viewing of Marx Brothers’ films in regards to these theories allows for an analysis of how these films were constructing gender.

Marx Brothers Films

The Marx Brothers created a number of films, and an in-depth analysis of every movie that they created is a task that is too great for the purposes of this paper. However, an analysis of five of the films that they produced during the Great Depression in the 1930s will allow for a preliminary understanding of the role of comedies in constructing gender. Due to the films’ wide appeal and general critical acclaim, when they were released, they were accessible to a large audience, which increased the films’ ability to mold the conceptions of gender roles held by their audience.¹⁴ The films are largely similar, many jokes and gags are rehashed throughout the subsequent films, and the plots are largely unimportant. Generally, Groucho will be half-heartedly attempting to woo a rich widow, while at the same time partaking in monologues designed around making fun of the woman. Chico and Harpo are almost always paired together, with Harpo literally chasing after random women that he sees throughout the film. Zeppo, when

¹⁴ Mordaunt Hall, “Animal Crackers (1930) The Screen; The Marx Brothers,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 1930, 24; Mordaunt Hall, “Monkey Business (1931) The Screen; Groucho and His Brethren. In a German Film Studio,” *The New York Times*, October 8, 1931, 29; Mordaunt Hall, “Duck Soup (1933) The Four Marx Brothers,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 23, 1933, 24; Andre Sennwald, “A Night at the Opera (1935) Article Two – No Title; Three of the Four Marx Brothers in ‘A Night at the Opera,’ at the Capitol – ‘Miss Pacific Fleet,’” *The New York Times*, (December 7, 1935), 22.

involved in the films, generally plays the straight man in the comedic troupe, and as such he is seldom the cause for laughter. Each of the films will be discussed in some detail in the following sections in which the lists that were created to keep track of instances of the depiction of women as subordinate will be examined, with a final conclusion of the analysis of all of the films following the description of *A Day at the Races*.

Animal Crackers (1930)

In *Animal Crackers*, Groucho plays the role of Captain Spaulding, a famed explorer who has braved the jungles of Africa. For his return to America, the wealthy, socialite widow Mrs. Rittenhouse has put together a party at her mansion where Spaulding can relax and be welcomed and adored by those in attendance. Spaulding's entrance is marked by a song sung by the chorus of partygoers, with one of the lines describing how he wants the women that he is around to be young and fit. From almost the minute that he is on camera he has already begun a comedic bit that is centered on insulting Mrs. Rittenhouse, who is decidedly neither young nor fit.

Harpo's character, the Professor, begins chasing girls at random around fifteen minutes into the film, the first of three instances of this behavior by him in *Animal Crackers*. Shortly after this scene, two women plot to have the unveiling of a painting, highlight of the party, disrupted because they are jealous of Rittenhouse's impending status as the one who threw the social event of the summer. The painting that Rittenhouse will be unveiling is a masterpiece that was bought by Chandler, a massively rich man who knows much about art and desires the hand of Rittenhouse in marriage. Arabella, the daughter of Rittenhouse, is in love with a burgeoning painter, Parker, who does not have much money. Arabella suggests that the two of them live together and when Parker asks how they would afford anything she informs him that she has

charge accounts at all of the stores on Madison Avenue, so they would be able to furnish a new home together, and apparently has no awareness to the issues of debt.

The film continues in more of the same vein, with Spaulding insulting Rittenhouse every time that he and her are in same scene. The Professor chases random women around the house, and Arabella charms Chico's character into doing favors for her. A large number of gags later on in the film involve the explicit objectification of women, including one in which a woman's chest needs to be searched. Overall, the list that was put together during the viewing of the film for this analysis counts twenty-three explicit instances of women being defined through negative comments, jokes, or character development, though the latter is for the most part severely lacking in all Marx Brothers films due to the fact that the films are comedic in nature.

Monkey Business (1931)

Monkey Business begins with the four Marx Brothers hiding aboard a ship heading to America as stowaways. The majority of the first half of the film is spent with the Brothers trying to avoid being captured by the crew of the ship, which is comprised entirely of men. During their attempts to evade detection, Harpo is seen hiding by lying under a woman passenger who seems to be oblivious to the body on which she is laying, and a number of women are shown gossiping about the rumored stowaways. The only noticeable female presence aboard the ship, other than passengers, is the nurse, and Harpo wastes little time before chasing a random girl around the ship. This gag of Harpo's is used very often in this film with at least six different instances of it. Shortly after this first scene of Harpo's a man is shown blatantly staring at and pursuing a girl, only to finally be rewarded for his attempts at engaging her with the two of them talking and walking away together.

Also aboard the ship are two notorious gangsters who are at odds with each other, and the Marx Brothers inevitably get roped into the conflict as both body guards and would-be assassins. Alky, the young up-and-coming gangster, constantly dismisses his wife and bosses her around. Groucho ends up in their room during one of his escapes from the crew and immediately begins to woo Alky's wife, Lucille, with innuendo and backhanded compliments. Joe Helton, the older gangster, is just as dismissive of his daughter as Alky is of his wife. Groucho and Chico end up hiding in his room while they attempt to avoid detection from the crew, and then become pressed into service as Helton's bodyguards. While they are still aboard the ship, the brothers engage in a number of comedic actions to avoid detection, and then after the ship has docked, they need to steal a passport so that they can disembark.

The second half of the film involves the brothers attending a party thrown by Joe Helton, during which Alky kidnaps his daughter. During the party Harpo is seen wearing a costume of the bump of a woman's dress. As he moves his way through the dance floor he attaches himself to the backside of the various women in the room. In the attempt to rescue Helton's daughter, women are not involved, all of the police officers are men and all of the people from Helton's gang are men. Groucho is surrounded by women on a number of occasions in the second half of the film, and he insults and derides them on each occasion. Throughout the entire movie, there were at least twenty-seven instances of overtly constructing women as socially subordinate, and of course, the list that was compiled is neither all-inclusive nor exhaustive. In general, *Monkey Business* is one of the best examples of the construction of dominant gender norms through comedy that the Marx Brothers created, especially through Harpo's repeated gags of literal woman-chasing.

Duck Soup (1933)

In *Duck Soup*, there are significantly less instances of the overt subordination of women, but that is due both in part to the length of the film, only 68 minutes, and the style of it, as it is the Marx Brothers' prime example of anarchic comedy. There is very little need to examine the plot of the film, as it is entirely inconsequential for the film. What little story there is, however, does involve certain issues of gender and gender roles. Mrs. Teasdale is a wealthy widow who will help the nation of Freedonia with its debt if Rufus T. Firefly (Groucho) is appointed as leader of the nation. In the opening scene, when this is explained Teasdale is the only woman in the room filled with Freedonian government officials. Groucho is incredibly inept as a leader and drives Freedonia to war with neighboring Sylvania through a number of exchanges with the Sylvanian ambassador, Trentino. During these exchanges Teasdale is the lone voice wishing for an immediate end to the escalating tension between the two men, who both insist that the other is to blame for the impending conflict.

Trentino employs Chicolini (Chico) and Pinky (Harpo), along with Vera Marcal, as spies to gather information about war plans that Firefly has been making. Marcal makes use of her beauty to try and get Firefly to relax so that she can seize the plans, whereas Chicolini and Pinky are more direct in their approach for obtaining information about Firefly. When Trentino interviews the pair to see what they have found, they are buzzed in by his secretary, who is a woman. While the pair mainly make use of slapstick style comedy in this film, Pinky has a number of instances where he can be seen to be objectifying women, such as when his tattoo of a girl wearing a swimsuit is shown, when he spies on a woman while she is bathing, and when he is shown grabbing Teasdale's rear near the end of the film. Throughout the film, Teasdale is shown as overly emotional and attached to Firefly, who does very little to earn such admiration

from her and only becomes interested in her when her vast wealth is brought up.

The list that was created during the analysis of *Duck Soup* contains only sixteen specific instances of the film explicitly constructing women as subordinate; however, it must be noted that the vast majority of actors in the film are men and that the almost complete absence of women should be considered evidence of the film's reification of dominant gender norms in itself. This film is also extremely non sequitur and many of the gags, such as the mirror scene and the confrontations that Pinky has with the peanut vendor, are entirely built on slapstick and absurdity, and that these are probably the scenes that are most remembered. The plot of *Duck Soup* is largely irrelevant, and much more of the Marx Brothers' effort is spent on creating an absolutely zany and ridiculous film that is meant to be laughed at. The slapstick nature of most of the jokes thus do not lend themselves as readily to gender analysis as Groucho's usual tirade about the rich women that he is attempting to woo and Harpo's harassment of random women.

A Night at the Opera (1935)

A Night at the Opera marks the Marx Brothers move away from the anarchic comedy that their earlier films has done so well. In this film, the plot is central to many of the jokes, and the characters that the brothers play are not entirely devoid of emotion towards others in the film. Otis B. Driftwood, Groucho, is hired by Mrs. Claypool, yet another rich widow, to help her become a member of high society through financing the Metropolitan Opera. The world of opera is controlled by men, and Claypool must enlist the help of a man to break into the operatic scene. While the two of them are in Italy with other members of the operatic high society looking for talent to bring back to America, Rodolfo, a famous singer with reputation, is found and will be chosen over a young singer, Ricardo, who has no reputation. Rosa, the female singer, is being taken along with Rodolfo, even though she and Ricardo are in love. Fiorello (Chico) represents

Ricardo and tricks Driftwood into signing Ricardo for Claypool, but as the members of the opera are about to head back to New York, Ricardo and Fiorello, along with Tomasso (Harpo) are unable to book passage on the ship. So, the three stow away in Driftwood's massive trunk in the hope that they will be able to make a living in New York.

Driftwood continually insults Claypool throughout the film, and once aboard the ship, Tomasso wastes little time before chasing random women in the general Harpo gag. Rodolfo, who is considered to be the greatest singer, believes that because of his talent Rosa should want to be with him, not Ricardo. Rosa is shown being emotional and crying due to Ricardo being left behind, though Ricardo is never seen to show such emotions before he sneaks aboard the ship. Again, the crew of the ship is made up solely of men, and after the ship lands and the police are looking for the three stowaways, the police are also made up solely of men. In the climactic scene during the opera, when Tomasso and Fiorello are trying to give Ricardo a chance on the stage in New York, the women singers in the chorus are thrown around and the clothes are ripped off, resulting in a grin from Tomasso. The final song, sung by Rosa and Ricardo, has Rosa's face and chest as the only areas of the screen that are illuminated, and Ricardo is given most of the credit for the applause that the two of them receive.

In the analysis of *A Night at the Opera*, there were a total of twenty-three instances of the overt construction of women as subordinate that were listed, the majority of which were introduced by Groucho's character when talking about Claypool. While this film brought about a shift in the style of the Marx Brothers' humor, it did not include of a shift in tone that the brothers had when referencing women. Groucho still attempts to elicit the majority of his laughs through repeated derogatory jokes about women, especially the woman that has hired him and who he is attempting to woo. Harpo's character still chases women around and actively strips a

woman of her clothing near the end of the film. *A Night at the Opera* is considered one of the Marx Brothers most successful and best films,¹⁵ and as such, it has had an enormous impact on the way that humor is viewed in regards to women.

A Day at the Races (1937)

A Day at the Races has Groucho playing a veterinarian, Hackenbush, who has duped a rich woman, Mrs. Upjohn, into believing that he is a capable doctor for humans as well; in fact, he has managed to convince her that he is the only one who can adequately treat her. In order to save her failing sanitarium, Judy Standish implores Upjohn to invest and keep the sanitarium in business. Upjohn's agrees on the condition that Hackenbush will become the chief doctor, so that she will be able to receive treatment from him. From the very beginning of the film both female leads are shown as very emotional and eccentric, and all of the doctors in the sanitarium are men and the nurses are all women. Tony, Chico's character, Stuffy, Harpo's character, and Gil Stewart, Standish's lover and straight man, try to help Standish keep the sanitarium in business by keeping Hackenbush from being discovered and by purchasing a race horse. Standish disapproves of Stewart's purchase, and Stewart acts as though Standish simply cannot understand the possibilities that the horse brings. While the horse is a failure in normal racing, it turns out that the horse is an incredible jumper, meaning that Stewart will be able to win money off of it after all.

Stewart, who is a singer, performs at a casino to make some money so he can place bets on the horse races. During the musical number in the casino all of the dancers are women, and every member of the orchestra is a man. Hackenbush makes numerous remarks to Standish during Stewart's performance about how he is surrounded by an all woman chorus, and

¹⁵ American Film Institute, "America's Funniest Movies" (2002).

Standish's jealousy is obvious. Tony and Stuffy spend much of the film trying to help Stewart with his horse, and after it is discovered that the horse would do well in the steeplechase, the other horse owners want to keep it out of the race. Stuffy, who is also the jockey, eventually is able to get the horse on the track and win the race, much to the dismay of the other horse owners, who are all men. Stuffy spends a number of scenes either groping or ripping the clothes off of women, all of which were already in Harpo's repertoire of comedic gags.

In the analysis of *A Day at the Races*, a total number of thirty overt instances of the depiction of women as inferior were observed, the majority again coming from the usual comedic styles of Groucho and Harpo. Again there is a severe lack of women in roles of power, with the exception of Standish as the owner of the sanitarium, with the police and doctors all being men. Harpo's move beyond simply chasing women has again been made to draw more laughs from the crowd, and his character has grown to act more maliciously towards the women that he encounters. Chico, who is largely absent from the way the films frame women, is fawned over by groups of women in this film as a very handsome maestro. This film, which was the longest at 111 minutes, contains a high number of explicit instances of the subordination of women, especially because, while thirty instances may not be much higher than the other films, many of the sequences in which Groucho makes fun of Upjohn contain many overtly sexist and insulting remarks.

Conclusion

The Marx Brothers' films work to reify dominant patriarchal gender norms in a number of ways, such as the lack of women in positions of power, and the overall prevalence of men in all aspects of the films. However, their most influential area in terms of emphasizing the subordinate position of women comes from the use of comedy, especially from the usual jokes

and gags that Groucho and Harpo make. Groucho's repeated dialogues with the women that he is attempting to woo are so loaded with insults and one-liners designed to decimate the woman that it is somewhat astounding that he was able to fit them all in the time allotted for these dialogues. Harpo's repeated chasing, groping, and stripping the clothes off of women work to show how such actions can be seen as funny when done by a seemingly childlike character. As the brothers' style shifted away from anarchic comedy, their appeal increased, and *A Night at the Opera* was a massive box office success.¹⁶ The success of the shift to more empathetic characters reflects the disposition theory of humor discussed above, as audiences were able to more readily relate to the characters that the brothers portrayed, which is troubling because it would follow that the audiences were then more likely to attempt to replicate the jokes that they saw on screen.

This analysis has not meant to paint the Marx Brothers as terrible, sexist monsters; or to shame those who enjoy their films. The Marx Brothers created hilarious films, and they contain some of the funniest scenes in the history of film. It is important, however, to understand what processes are involved in the construction of gender through these comedic films that are, even to this day, so adored by audiences. Much of the Marx Brothers' humor is based on the implied secondary status of women in the world, and many of their jokes can be seen as outright sexist. By analyzing these films, it is possible to begin to understand why certain aspects of culture exist, even if these aspects contain insults that seemingly fly in the face of half of the population. Through the examination of comedies with the lens of feminist film theory it is possible for some of the most loved and viewed films to be understood in terms of what they have done for gender construction and possibly even gender relations.

The five Marx Brothers' films that were examined show how comedy can have a direct influence on gender construction. Overt jokes and insinuations about women and their restricted

¹⁶ Sennwald, "A Night at the Opera (1935)," 22.

roles are rampant throughout the films, and the blatant objectification of women by Harpo is impossible to overlook. While these films are not the sole perpetrators of negatively portraying women and negatively constructing femininity, the role that they played in such matters warrants greater analysis by feminist scholars. Comedy is a genre that is extremely popular, which implies that it has a substantial and wide-ranging audience, and the lack of attention that it has garnered from film theorists in general is somewhat surprising. Analyzing comedy in terms of gender will offer insight into the prevailing culture that has women as secondary citizens, and this analysis of the Marx Brothers.



Marx Brothers, Monkey Business

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Monkey_Business_Barrels.jpg



Marx Brothers, A Night at the Opera

<http://quienmemandaria.files.wordpress.com/2006/09/marx-brothers-a-night-at-the-opera.jpg>



Groucho Marx

http://explore.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/styles/sas_polls_large_film_image/public/image/duck-soup-bfi-00m-kpr.jpg



Harpo and Chico Marx

<http://www.movieactors.com/freezes1/ducksoup209.jpeg>



Duck Soup <http://2.bp.blogspot.com/>-

[EhvUIkYX0OU/TWGiqLPOMSI/AAAAAABgQ/HrSevXrUXf8/s1600/duck-soup_592x299.jpg](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/EhvUIkYX0OU/TWGiqLPOMSI/AAAAAABgQ/HrSevXrUXf8/s1600/duck-soup_592x299.jpg)