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T h e R i s e a n d F a l l o f A n a r c h i s t i c C o m e d y

The late 1920's and early 1930's marked the era of a popular comedic film theme known as anarchistic comedy. With its vaudeville roots, this popular comedic style flourished throughout the early depression. A number of film comedians helped to give rise to this tradition's popularity including such comic figures as The Marx Brothers, Wheeler and Woolsey, and Eddie Cantor. The purpose of this essay is to examine the rise and decline of the anarchistic comedy style in relation to social factors and key comedians of the genre. Through the analysis of films, film sequences, comic actors and social issues of the time, this essay seeks to reveal the important elements that contributed to the rise and decline of the anarchistic comedy style.

It is important to understand the mechanics of the anarchistic comedy style and how it originated before examining its decline. The vaudeville tradition of the early 1900's was a style of live stage comedy that had a significant influence on the style of anarchistic comedy we later see in the 1930's. This traditionally physical, grotesque, comedian-centered performance style, whose elements are commonly referred to as the vaudeville aesthetic, slowly diminished with the coming of the motion picture. Many of the vaudeville comedians went in the direction of a more legitimate theater performance while others made their way to film with limited success (Jenkins 158-161). With the coming of sound in the late 1920's and early 1930's there was a great need for stage-trained voices so Hollywood began its famous "talent raids" to seek out and sign popular Broadway performers (Jenkins 159). At this point we start to see a substantial presence of vaudeville trained comedians making their way to the comedic film circuit. The former Broadway stars brought with them elements of their vaudeville performances that would

make their way into scripts and onto movie screens.

The comedian centered comedy is a defining factor of the anarchistic comedy style in that it often consumes the loosely tied narrative. Comedians adopting this style of performance often dilute the narrative to a point that it becomes clear that the narrative is simply a vehicle for their gags. The peace conference scene from *Diplomaniacs* (1933) is a prime example of plot abandonment in an effort to focus on a particular comedic act. The comic team of Bert Wheeler and Robert Woolsey simply break into song and perform acrobatic acts in front of a room full of delegates in an apparent effort to seal a peacekeeping deal. However, upon the completion of the act, one may realize that the verses sung in the song and the comedic actions that had taken place had little if anything to do with the progression of the narrative; this scene was constructed as a vehicle for the duo's act.

Wheeler and Woolsey were one of the comedic duos that emerged from the Hollywood talent raid of the late 1920's. Woolsey, a jockey turned comedian, began his career in comedy by writing plays and touring with groups in the US and in the British Empire. Wheeler also appeared in a number of vaudeville acts, in one of which he met his first wife. The two were first paired-up in Ziegfeld's *Rio Rita* (1927) where they started their famous career together.

The anarchistic style of Wheeler and Woolsey retained a number of elements apparent from their experience on the vaudeville stage. Again, drawing on *Diplomaniacs* as an example, we see a number of instances that are characteristic of the Wheeler and Woolsey's style of anarchistic comedy. According to Jenkins "Any given scene's duration is determined less by the amount of plot information it provides than by the amount of

funny lines and comic business that can be exploited” (Jenkins 194). This is particularly evident in the promenade scene. The scene exists purely to showcase a comedic resistance between the two characters and for Wheeler to showcase his apparent singing ability that, in the end, does not contribute to the overall development of the narrative.

Another instance of plot diversion could be the drunken captain who, while intoxicated, inadvertently makes the ship travel in circles for ninety days. The screen flashes with images of a circling ship and newspapers with headlines denoting a ship lost at sea; however these events end up having nothing to do with the rest of the film. The question as to why it was important that the ship took ninety days to cross the ocean does not get addressed in the film.

The Marx Brothers, another comedic team loyal to vaudeville traditions, also adhered to the anarchistic comedy style popular at the time. The comic team of Groucho, Harpo, Chico, Zeppo and Gummo appeared in films together from 1921 to 1949, and separately until 1968. Teaming up with Paramount studios in 1929 with *The Coconuts*, the Marx Brothers made their Hollywood debut. This film was not by any means their defining picture nor did it define them in the world of comic film actors but it did get their foot in the door. The growing popularity of the anarchistic comedy style prompted the production of one film per year for the Marx Brothers leading up to their last film with Paramount studios in 1933: *Duck Soup*.

Duck Soup exemplified some of the defining characteristics of the anarchist style of comedy for which the Marx Brothers were known. The film is widely considered their finest; it is the only one of their films that is part of the American Film Institutes “100 years...100 movies” list. *Duck Soup* is a satire of blundering dictatorial leaders, Fascism

and authoritarian government. The film was produced by Herman Mankiewicz and some of its gags and routines were taken from Groucho's and Chico's early 1930's radio show *Flywheel, Shyster & Flywheel*. Again, the centrality of the comedian works to mark this film as an anarchistic comedy. As Vadim Uraneff wrote, "The actor is always in the foreground... for it is the actor that counts" (Jenkins 68). This was particularly true in vaudeville and on Broadway, but the Marx Brothers brought this element with them to the big screen.

Groucho often uses the narrative as a means to draw the audience into a space in which he will deliver a gag. Consider the following conversation between Rufus T.

Firefly, played by Groucho Marx, and Mrs. Teasdale, played by Margaret Dumont:

MRS. TEASDALE. Oh, your Excellency. We've been expecting you. As chairwoman of the reception committee, I extend the wishes of every man, woman, and child of Freedonia.

FIREFLY. Never mind that stuff. Take a card.

MRS. TEASDALE. Card? What will I do with the card?

FIREFLY. You can keep it. I've got fifty-one left. Now what were you saying?

MRS. TEASDALE. As chairwoman of the reception committee, I welcome you with open arms.

FIREFLY. Is that so? How late do you stay open?

MRS. TEASDALE. I've sponsored your appointment because I feel you are the most able statesman in all Freedonia.

FIREFLY. Well, that covers a lot of ground. Say! You cover a lot of ground yourself. You'd better beat it. I hear they're gonna tear you down and put up an office building where you're standing. You can leave in a taxi. If you can't get a taxi, you can leave in a huff. If that's too soon, you can leave in a minute and a *huff*. You know, you haven't stopped talking since I came here. You must have been vaccinated with a phonograph needle.

Mrs. Teasdale attempts to engage Rufus T. Firefly in a welcoming conversation but he repeatedly deviates from the subject with humorous remarks and quick, witty quips. It is possible to think of Mrs. Teasdale and Rufus T. Firefly as the two different dimensions of the film: narrative and gag. Mrs. Teasdale would be considered the narrative since she is

conveying meaningful information in an attempt at plot progression while Rufus T. Firefly would be considered the gag element in that he uses the narrative as a loose structure for his gag. In this case we see Rufus T. Firefly pushing aside the elements of the narrative structure to make room for his witty remarks; this pattern can be seen in other scenes in the film as well. Another way to see the independence of the two elements is in the realization that Mrs. Teasdale's monologue could have effectively gone straight through the scene without the input of Rufus T. Firefly. Since he offers nothing that alters the scene's condition his input is superfluous and serves only the purpose of comic relief.

As mentioned previously, Hollywood's transition to sound in the early 1930's sparked a need for stage trained voices as many silent film actors were not ready to take on speaking roles. The result of this movement was many former vaudevillians appearing in pictures and bringing with them the elements of their former acts. Comedians such as Wheeler and Woolsey and The Marx Brothers emerged from this movement and became popular film figures. The acclaim of vaudeville-rooted comedians such as these gave rise to the style of anarchistic comedy in the early 1930's.

T h e D e c l i n e

Sir Isaac Newton made a very astute observation about objects on earth when he said that what goes up must also come down. This idea can also be applied to the popularity of the anarchistic comic style of the 1930's. After enjoying a healthy run of comedic success the anarchistic comedy began to decline. There are a number of factors that contributed to the decline, including a changing social acceptance and the omission of representative comedians of the style at the time.

Eddie Cantor was another key actor representative of the anarchistic style of

comedy in the 1930's. Cantor's early films often revolved around plays on ethnicity and regional stereotypes. *Whoopie*, his popular 1930 film, exemplified this phenomenon with a plot of denied marriage. Sally Morgan (Eleanor Hunt) is set to marry Sheriff Bob Wells (Jack Rutherford) but is in love with another man Wanenis (Paul Gregory). Sally's father forbids her to marry Wenessis because he is partially Indian. Sally enlists the help of Henry Williams (Eddie Cantor) and as the plot progresses Sally is eventually allowed to marry Wanenis because he turns out to be white therefore lifting the social constraints of marriage.

Cantor's play on ethnicity in *Whoopie* divides appreciation of his humor regionally; Jenkins refers to this phenomenon as regional resistance. At this point in history there were regions of the country more heavily populated by a certain ethnicity, much like it is today (Musser 30). The comedy of Eddie Cantor, like that of *Whoopie*, mainly appeals to a specific ethnic group. In the case of *Whoopie*, the film appealed to New York Jewish-Americans: "Spectators could find assimilationist tendencies in *Whoopie*, but the film also affirmed New York's Jewish-American culture and expressed anger as a society that subjects Jews (like Indians) to discriminatory restrictions"(Musser 30).

Cantor's films following *Whoopie* began a trend of de-semitization. "After *Whoopie*, Cantor's vehicles explore the prospect of a "normal" person being transplanted from an "everyday" world to a more exotic realm" (Jenkins 179). His films diverted attention from Cantor's ethnicity by placing him in relation to a different ethnic group. For example, in the Cantor's 1934 film, *Kid Millions*, Cantor's character Edward is part of an Irish family. Some of Cantor's later films such as *Strike Me Pink* cast him opposite an

idiosyncratic ethnic character, providing for dialectal comedy dependent on the heterogeneity of their ethnicity.

By taking the focus off of his own ethnicity Cantor broadened his appeal to audiences outside of New York's Jewish-Americans. This widened appeal prompted regionally positive reviews from areas not previously responsive to Cantor's films. The *Providence Journal* review said "A new screen star was brought in with *Palmy Days*. True, he has been with us, photographically, several times in the past. This is the first time, however, that he has been funny" (Cohen 5). This pattern of success in regions where Cantor's previous films had not done so well continued nationwide. However, acclaim of his films in large cities fell short of the marks set by *Whoopie*, as evident in a 1931 *Variety* review of the film *Palmy Days*: "Its not a continuous laugh for the steady theater goer but most of the gags will find the laughs they are after from those who pay to be entertained" (Sime 14).

Cantor's subsequent films followed the same pattern with above average returns in rural America and below average returns in large cities with concentrations of particular ethnicities. His de-semitization trend also continued in his later films, however, Cantor's attempts to appeal to a wider variety of audience lead to problems with plot structure: "...the demand for a heterogeneous address to a heterogeneous audience led to an increasingly fragmented and often incoherent narrative construction" (Jenkins 184). Cantor's attempts to appeal to a variable audience therefore proved to distance himself equally far from each of them. The decline of Eddie Cantor's popularity in the late 1930's can partly be associated with the overall quality of his films due to the "fragmented" and "incoherent" story-lines.

As a side note it should be recognized that Eddie Cantor's career started its decline just before the US entered the second World War. Peter Bergson, an activist of the 1930's, recruited Eddie Cantor because of his Jewish ethnicity to speak out against Hitler and Facism (Wyman). Due to the fact that Cantor's denouncement of Hitler predated the US entry into the second World War he lost the support of many of his sponsors because they wanted to appear politically neutral. However, Eddie Cantor was not the only comedian to have a falling out in the mid-to-late 1930's.

The anarchistic tradition of the Marx Brothers started to decline in the mid 1930's. Following the release of *Duck Soup*, Zeppo announced he would no longer be in any films as part of the Marx Brothers, citing the fact that he was tired of playing the straight romantic lead role. The remaining brothers left Paramount Studios and made the jump to MGM under the advisement of Irving Thalberg. Their first film with MGM, *A Night at the Opera*, has a distinctly different narrative than their previous films. MGM's push of gentility into the Marx Brother's films changes an important element of their performance: the romantic couple. Critics argue that this combination of gentility and vaudeville comedy worked to plague the narratives of the Marx Brothers MGM films (Mast 285). This, combined with Irving Thalberg's strain on the brothers' creativity and the formation of the Motion Picture Production Code, which further limited their creativity, lead the to the decline of the anarchistic style of the Marx Brothers.

Wheeler and Woolsey suffered a fate similar to that of the Marx Brothers and Eddie Cantor. Starting in 1935, Wheeler and Woolsey were affected by changes taking place within the film industry. In 1934, after years of pressure from groups such as The Legion of Decency, the Motion Picture Production Code was established to regulate its

product. By 1935 Wheeler and Woolsey were second to Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers as Radio-Keith-Orpheum's (R.K.O.) most consistently popular actors. Wheeler and Woolsey's films became less important to R.K.O. and were now turned out as second features, no longer receiving the care that they had once been given. William Drew assessed the team's last five films as weak:

“While they contain a number of amusing scenes, most of these later works are slow-paced and uninspired compared to their previous films. Like Laurel and Hardy and Marx Brothers in their later films, Wheeler and Woolsey's characterizations are much less vivid and sympathetic in the majority of their last efforts”. (Drew 27)

In addition to the restrictions being placed on their films, Bob Woolsey was suffering from kidney disease during the shooting of their last films. He would eventually die from the disease in 1938.

C o n c l u s i o n

Beginnings in the early 1930's there was a resurgence of the vaudeville aesthetic, and therefore anarchistic comedy, coinciding with the coming of sound. The Marx Brothers, Eddie Cantor and Wheeler and Woolsey were some of the key comedians representative of this renewed style. Their “stage trained voices” made them ready for speaking roles when many silent film actors were not ready to make the move; Charlie Chaplin's first sound film was *The Dictator* in 1940. The popularity of anarchistic comedy lasted until the mid 1930's at which time we start to see a decline in the popularity of key representative comedians of the style. The formation of the Motion Picture Production Code weighed heavily on Wheeler and Woolsey as well as the Marx Brothers while the tastes of small town audiences were what lead to the decline of Eddie Cantor's ethnic centered comedies. Also, as William Drew points out, “the New Deal

began to take effect in the mid-30s resulting in a more hopeful and confident outlook in the nation's mood. Hollywood began to make films that stressed traditional virtues, designed for the American family” (Drew 27). Most of the anarchistic comics of the time made an attempt to mold their individual styles with this new “mood” but few were successful. It was the combination of changing social factors and the phasing out of key representative comedians of the style that ultimately lead to the decline of anarchistic comedy. However, the beauty of film is that the work of these comedians will be forever documented, leaving proof of their profound influence... and research paper topics for Film and Video 366 students for years to come.

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Favorite quote from class: “Well I’ve had a wonderful evening. But this wasn’t it”