Duck Soup: Not Quite Accepted

By: Victor Jimenez
Transition affects everyone; moving on from what is considered normal to something unexpected, but that is bound to occur. Adjustments are made in order to fit in and to continue living in peace. This happens as much in life as it does on the silver screen. When movies first started, everyone was used to hearing the piano playing on the side while watching small clips of everyday life. That then transitioned into longer features with big orchestras playing simultaneously as the audience enjoyed their show. One of the biggest transitions in film history was that of the talkie. *The Jazz Singer*, although being only a part talkie, is one of the films credited with starting the transition into talking movies. During this same period in time, the world went through an incident that made people want to escape the real world; The Great Depression. The incident was handled in multiple ways around the world, but Hollywood and the movie industry remained calm and kept making films, even if that meant that their debt was increasing because of the cost of transitioning into sound on film. There were countless genres that helped the audience forget about what was happening around them, but the one that caused them to laugh was the slapstick comedy. The Marx brothers were experts in their aesthetics and *Duck Soup* was perhaps their masterpiece. The transition to sound definitely helped this film even though they still kept some of the silent era techniques to get some laughs. The themes of the movie, however, caused it to flop at the box office. The film was released in 1933 while the audiences were having financial difficulties and they were absolutely in no mood to watch an uncompromising, exasperating comedy that refused to truckle to their tastes and concerned itself with dictatorships and war (Leydon, 251). It was in later years, once the Marx brothers moved from Paramount to MGM, that this film and their future films received the critical acclaim that they hold to this day. Although this film did not gather the attention of their audience at that time, *Duck Soup* stands tall as one of the films created during the depression that was not afraid
to make fun of the financial and war problems that were on the horizon. A brief examination of *Duck Soup* and its financial and war themes will give us insight into how much the depression affected movie goers as well as how the film was accepted once the effects of the depression were taken care of.

The film starts off with Mrs. Teasdale (Margaret Dumont) addressing the leaders of Freedonia, a small European country dealing with financial issues, much like everyone in the real world. She is asked for a large sum of money to help reduce the tax but instead suggests that a better solution would be for new management, and that is when Mrs. Teasdale selects to appoint Rufus T. Firefly (Groucho Marx) as Freedonias’ leader. We are introduced to Mr. Firefly as he wakes up, late for a gathering that has been arranged in his honor, and arrives to the main room by sliding down a fireman pole located in his room. He meets Mrs. Teasdale and Ambassador Trentino of Sylvania (Louis Calhern) who is immediately insulted by Firefly leading him to leave. Firefly then proceeds to sing his laws that are to be followed now that he is leader of Freedonia at which time he says the rather famous line “the last man nearly ruined this place, he didn't know what to do with it. If you think this country's bad off now, just wait till I get through with it”. After finishing his first musical number, Firefly asks for his car, in order to go to the House of Representatives, which includes Pinky (Harpo Marx) as his driver who leaves Firefly as he drives off and becomes a gag that is performed 3 other times throughout the film. We then find out that Pinky and Chicolini (Chico Marx) are actually spies working for Trentino who is trying to make Freedonia a part of Sylvania. Not only do Pinky and Chicolini end up working as spies for Trentino, but they do so while simultaneously working for Firefly as driver and secretary of war, respectfully, as well as simultaneously operating a peanut stand where they have an encounter with fellow comedian Edgar Kennedy who runs a lemonade stand. We arrive
to two days after Firefly has taken the leadership position and find out that war could be coming because of Firefly disrespecting Trentino at an event held by Mrs. Teasdale. That night Firefly goes to Mrs. Teasdale’s house because he has the plans of war ready, just in case it does come to that. He gives them to her so that she can keep them safe and decides to spend the night there for her protection. After hearing that this transaction has taken place, Trentino gets his two spies to go to Mrs. Teasdales later on that evening to get a hold of the plans of war. While the two spies are attempting to retrieve the paper one of the most used gags is invented. The spies begin to make too much noise and Groucho himself comes downstairs to investigate. Harpo is standing inside the frame of a broken mirror, and tries to avoid detection by pretending to be Groucho's reflection. This leads to a sustained pantomime involving flawless timing, as Groucho tries to catch the reflection in an error, and Harpo matches every move (Ebert, 159). We are taken through the story by one magnificent laugh to another until we arrive at war. Trentino, seeing that Firefly will not give up Freedonia to Sylvania, decides to call for war. After a musical number of We’re Going to War, Firefly along with Pinky, Chicolini, Lt. Bob Roland (Zeppo Marx), and Mrs. Teasdale fight from inside a house while the rest of the army fights off Sylvanias’ forces. The war ends when Trentino tries to get into the house but is instead nailed onto the door and surrenders as food is thrown at him. After hearing Trantinos’ surrender, Mrs. Teasdale begins singing which leads the Marx brother to start throwing the food at her instead which brings on the ending credits.

Something that might have pushed audiences away from watching this film is the difference with the money situation in the film compared with how it was to be handled in reality. In the film, Mrs. Teasdale has the money that her husband left her to change the tax that was being asked from the citizens from Freedonia. Once Firefly gets appointed the new leader,
Mrs. Teasdale puts down the money to help out the citizens and things stabilize until they have to go to war, while in the real world there is no easy answer for the stock market crash and the depression that followed. In the real world, nobody was safe from the depression. The rich were affected along with the poor and there was nobody that had enough wealth to bail everybody out. The United States went for a little more than a decade without getting out of the depression and it was only once they joined in the war that the depression could be said to be over with. In that respect is the only way that the film and reality have some similarity; financial problems lead to an entrance into war.

There were multiple countries that were affected by the depression which originated with the stock market crash on October 29, 1929 in the United States. There is not, however, a precise day that marks the end of the depression. Every nation that was affected by this worldwide catastrophe has its own day of outliving the depression. The United States, for example, did not get out of the depression until the early 1940’s when World War II was already underway. Although the war was in no way a good event, it did lead to some sort of economic stability. The war led to more jobs becoming available and the government began to somewhat ignore the money problems since the war was a more important issue and was affecting more people. The war that really took place differed greatly from the war that took place in *Duck Soup*. Not only was the war in the film resolved in a short period of time but it was not resolved in an at all realistic matter, even for it being part of a film. People, although in need of laughs, did not care for mockery of something that many of their loved ones were going through. Although *Duck Soup* was released about a decade before the war, people could somewhat anticipate what was to come because of the events taking place abroad in Europe. Adding to that, the fact that *Duck Soup* dealt with a war taking place in Europe did not help. Once the war
was over is when this film began to gain a good audience. Knowing that there was no real harm going on anywhere around the world and knowing that all the terrible events that took place in Europe were taken care of allowed for movie goers to relax and accept all of the jokes made in the movie. The reason why it became so popular and stands as a classic slapstick comedy today is because of all the positive attitudes that the characters have towards political, financial, and war problems. Realizing that at the end of it all everything would be resolved is what helped the audiences accept the film.

Not all films in Hollywood failed. There were plenty of films that did gain appraisal from the audiences, some of which contained similar themes as this film, but presented themselves in a more delicate fashion. Most films of the depression years were grounded in the social realities of the time. The most realistic films were social problem films—like *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* - "torn from the headlines," usually by Warner Brothers or Columbia Pictures. Yet even the most outrageously extravagant Busby Berkeley musicals - portraying chorus girls as flowers or mechanical windup dolls - were generally set against recognizable depression backdrops (Mintz). The main thing that set *Duck Soup* apart was that the film was straightforward and tried to get the audience to completely forget what was happening around them, but that did not go so well. Once it did get the recognition from its audience, there is one word that can describe what they were watching; originality.

The best part of the humor was that it was original. Although there were two writers that contributed on the film’s script, the characters were made by the four Marx brothers and had become personas in themselves. The characters had been used in 4 films before this one and the audience already knew what they were in for. Groucho Marx was indeed the central character and it was a title that was rightly deserved and earned. The timing that his character had was, for
lack of a better word, perfect. This of course came from no mistake. Groucho wrote every bit of
dialogue that he had and there was no way that any other actor had the skills to perform them as
he did. A performance that sticks out a little bit in *Duck Soup* is that of Harpo Marx. Although
films had already transitioned to full sound, he used his pantomime skills and gave an
unforgettable performance, especially when he and Groucho did the mirror gag. His character
was the most lighthearted of all the characters and could be said to be the example of what the
Marx brothers wanted for and from the audience. Surrounded by chaos, one needs to find
relaxation and enjoy every bit of life as possible, and that is exactly what Harpo’s character was
doing. Although Chico and Zeppo also had good parts in the film, they do not stick out as the
other two members of the quartet.

Although there was a catastrophe that covered multiple parts of the planet, everything
was resolved with time and people were able to relax and enjoy themselves once again, and
going to the cinema was a great way to do so. Remembering to laugh in dire times is very
necessary and that is what this film was trying to get across, but unfortunately it did not do so
while those events were happening in the real world. The financial and war themes presented in
the film *Duck Soup* caused it to bomb at the box office at the time that it was released but it
gained great appraisal once the clouds of the storm cleared from the air.


