"Strange Interludes?": Carnivalesque Inversions and the Humorous Music of the Marx Brothers

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Abstract

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The Marx Brothers are known as iconic comedians, and much of the literature on them focuses on the humorous content of their films. Many scholars describe the Marx Brothers as iconoclasts, aiming negative satire at elite institutions. In nearly all of their films, the Marx Brothers perform musical numbers, but very few scholars have looked at these numbers in detail, or incorporated them into analyses of their comedy. Drawing on the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, Henri Bergson, and Jacques Lacan, this thesis offers an analysis of the films that incorporates their musical numbers as critical elements of their act, and repositions their comedy as positive and carnivalesque, rather than negative and satirical. Connections are drawn between the Marx Brothers' nonmusical humor, including verbal humor, pantomime, and gags, and their musical humor, specifically Chico's piano performances, Harpo's harp performances, and Groucho's songs.

Introduction and Literature Review

In a discussion of the emerging canon in film music studies, Ben Winters cautions against the creation of a class of film music "worthy of discussion" within narrowly defined aesthetic parameters.[1] The music of early sound comedies appears at risk of languishing outside this canon, which favors single-author classical Hollywood film scores. Early talkies drew liberally on forms of entertainment such as vaudeville and revue, from adopting their style focused on variety, music, and spectacle, to enlisting stars from the vaudeville circuits, the Follies, and Broadway into film. These films occupy a liminal space, in which burgeoning studios valued the inclusion of music but had not yet defined its role in narrative film. Despite this uncertainty, music proliferated in these films. Film musicologist Kathryn Kalinak notes, "Ironically, the one constant throughout this period is the persistence of live musical performance in the form of concert prologues, vaudeville acts, and the sing-alongs which would not be expurgated from movie theaters for decades."[2] Studios attempted to incorporate this music diegetically, often leading to incongruous narrative structures.

Within the milieu of early studio film, the Marx Brothers maintained a consistent musical presence that contemporary scholars tend to overlook, despite the enormous body of literature devoted to their comedy and lives. Clearly, critics and scholars have identified them as comedians first and musicians second, third, or hardly at all. This neglect is strange, given that the Marx Brothers began their careers as musicians, rather than comedians, and spent years

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[1] Ben Winters, "Catching Dreams: Editing Film Scores for Publication," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 132, No. 1 (2007): 117.

[2] Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 68.

singing and playing music together on the vaudeville circuits before "bureslqueing" their own act and discovering that it was a much bigger hit that way.[3] Much of their musical obsolescence can likely be attributed to attention from film scholars and biographers, rather than musicologists. Gerald Mast, despite his interest in the Marx Brothers' early films, refers to their harp and piano solos as "obligatory."[4] Another prolific scholar of the Marx Brothers considers their music unnecessary to their routine, "though not without a certain charm."[5] In his engaging study of "anarchistic" comedy as a genre, Henry Jenkins categorizes the musical numbers as mere variety acts, on a level with Eddie Cantor's blackface numbers and W. C. Fields's pool and golf tricks.[6] These characterizations erroneously assume a stark division between the Marx Brothers' humorous content, consisting of gags, pantomime, and wordplay, and their musical content, including Chico's piano numbers, Harpo's harp numbers, and Groucho's songs.

Drawing on the work of Jenkins, Ian Conrich identifies a convincing role for music in this type of entertainment, describing it as "a moment of energy and escapism (that) is easily accommodated within the anarchistic and irrational approach of the Marx Brothers films."[7] This moment of escapism is more than a variety act, however. The Marx Brothers' musical interludes reveal a larger relationship with their comedy as a whole, and from a historical standpoint are inextricable from their role as star "vehicles" for the early Hollywood studio system. Music in the films represents a uniting space, where audiences can come together to appreciate subversive humor, gimmickry, and virtuosity in a carnivalesque atmosphere. In one sense, the brothers'

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[3] Chico Marx, "Time Marches on for the Marxes," *New York Times*, September 18, 1938.

[4] Gerald Mast, *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), 286.

[5] Wes D. Gehring, *Leo McCarey: From Marx to McCarthy* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2005), 97.

[6] Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 145.

[7] Ian Conrich, "Merry Melodies: The Marx Brothers' Musical Moments," in *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond*, ed. Bill Marshall and Robynn Jeananne Stilwell (Portland, OR: Intellect, 2000), 48.

music allows for the ultimate subversion of hierarchical strictures, transcending boundaries of language and its accompanying hegemony and censorship, and offering representations of sexuality, violence, parody, and renewal.

These representations hearken to historic forms of folk humor described by Mikhail Bakhtin in his seminal work, *Rabelais and His World*.[8] Bakhtin speaks harshly of philosophical conceptions of laughter that demean it as trivial fluff, arguing that humor can offer more profound insights into existence than many forms of expression. In *Rabelais*, he outlines different elements of folk humor, arguing that Renaissance writers such as Rabelais, and to a lesser degree Cervantes, embraced a cultural paradigm in which laughter was profoundly insightful and renewing, and revered as part of a greater liberating culture of carnival and festivities. He describes Medieval and Renaissance carnival as a time of festive laughter, in which traditional hierarchies are subverted and the vulgar culture of the marketplace displaces high culture. Within this paradigm, he elaborates on specific tropes and imagery used in literature to signify the "carnivalesque" – a textual, rather than historical rendering of folk carnival humor. Above all, the carnivalesque denotes a system of equalizing subversions: low and high culture exist on the same plane, laughter is non-targeted and universal in spirit, and the "bodily lower stratum" is glorified as a place of fertility and renewal.

Carnival offered a release from everyday norms and structures, and in this way served as a mode of social control. The Church sanctioned carnival as a necessary mode of release for the masses, which allowed them to maintain control in official spheres, a situation which Bakhtin refers to as a "two-world condition."[9] Conversely, 1930s America saw greater restrictions on

[8] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

[9] Ibid., 6.

forms of release and entertainment, through increasing censorship in media.[10] Despite restrictions, mass media such as film comedy functioned as a release valve for the working and middle classes. Comedians sought to evade censorship through masked forms of subversive humor. These masked forms indicate the presence of a marketplace culture in mainstream media, but one forced underground.

The Marx Brothers were situated on the border of this censorship, releasing five films prior to the enforcement of the censoring Hays Code in 1934, and eight after. Their collected work, both pre- and post-code, partakes in this culture of masked subversive humor. This humor contains distant but unignorable parallels with Bakhtin's descriptions of the carnivalesque. Moreover, the brothers' films display these parallels in both their musical and nonmusical components. This study will examine the relationship between music and comedy in the Marx Brothers' films, and will posit that this musical humor is ultimately positive rather than negative, embracing rather than alienating, when viewed through a carnivalesque lens. The goal is not to fit the Marx Brothers into a theoretical box – a feat that would surely defy all efforts – but rather to reframe their music as an integral component of their comedy, and to offer new ways of understanding this type of musical humor.

Comparisons between the brothers' form of comedy and the carnivalesque are not without precedent. In a discussion on the Marx Brothers' vaudevillean roots, Richard Niland observes: "Vaudeville had acted as a sanitized space for the staging of lunacy, a performative embodying of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the Carnivalesque, in which otherwise subordinate voices and figures momentarily dominate in an inversion of both the discourse and physicality of madness

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[10] Thomas Patrick Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

and sanity."[11] Jenkins, too, addresses parallels, but cautions that the comparison should not be extended too far, as Bakhtin was speaking of a specific historical phenomenon.[12] Although Bakhtin spoke specifically of Medieval and Renaissance culture, his observations on the meaning of humor and its place in human activity transcend these restrictions. The following section will examine Bakhtin's theories in relation to existing literature on the Marx Brothers.

Film scholars have understood one component of the carnivalesque – hierarchical restructuring – as a key element of the Marx Brothers' humor for decades. Many have discussed the "anarchistic" nature of the brothers' comedy, beginning with Antonin Artaud, who describes the concluding scenes of *Monkey Business* as "a hymn to anarchy and total rebellion."[13] Others have perpetuated this notion for decades, characterizing the brothers as zany revolutionaries bent on social upheaval and the dismantling of institutions. Mast describes the Marx Brothers and several of their contemporaries as "pure destroyers. They wreck the idol that society and men have built to, for, and of themselves, and they fail to build anything in its place."[14]

Some have criticized these theories, which are somewhat reductive in their relation to historical context. Jenkins, for example, observes that the Marx Brothers were not rebelling from any particular system or structure. He suggests a reinterpretation of the anarchistic label, connecting it to the chaos of the early studio system, and comparing the Marx Brothers' absurdist comedy to disparate Hollywood trends: "If a dominant tendency of classical narrative is its push

[11] Richard Niland, "'Say, Who Are You Anyway?': Clowns, Childhood, and Madness in the Character of Harpo Marx," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45, No. 4 (August 2012): 838.

[12] Jenkins, *Pistachio*, 222-223.

[13] Antonin Artaud, "The Marx Brothers," in *Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag and Helen Weaver (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 241.

[14] Mast, *The Comic Mind*, 338.

to unify its materials into a coherent story, the tendency of anarchistic comedy is toward heterogeneity, even at the risk of disunity and incoherence."[15]

Mast's conceptual approach and Jenkins's historical one both contain ties to Bakhtin's carnivalesque. While the brothers may not have been specifically rebelling from any particular system, their films invariably depict their characters disrupting elite and powerful institutions through comic escapades and dissolution of semiotic meaning. As such, it is not "anarchy" that the films portray, but rather an inversion of power structures. While this could, of course, be seen as somewhat anarchistic, an anarchistic label suggests a purely negative form of comedy, particularly potent in Mast's understanding of the Marx Brothers as "destroyers." The inversion of power takes on a more positive association when viewed through a carnivalesque lens, in which this inversion serves as an equalizer. Jenkins's added layer of analysis, in which comic variety disrupts the more respectable narrative form, bolsters this interpretation. The interspersion of variety correlates with a carnivalesque release from day-to-day norms; in the words of Bakhtin, "one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions."[16]

Bakhtin grounds his discussion of suspension of hierarchical rank in a populist ethos. Writing in Kazakhstan in internal exile from the Soviet Union, he embraced a worldview that glorified a certain understanding of folk culture. In his prologue to the 1984 edition of *Rabelais*, Michael Holquist remarks "*Rabelais and His World* is a hymn to the common man." He goes on to observe that "the folk" of Bakhtin's world "are blasphemous rather than adoring, cunning rather than intelligent; they are coarse, dirty, and rampantly physical, reveling in oceans of strong

[15] Jenkins, *Pistachio*, 22.

[16] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 10.

drink, poods of sausage, and endless coupling of bodies."[17] Watered down manifestations of these themes appear in the Marx Brothers' films, whether in Chico's skill for cunning manipulation or Harpo's unquenchable sexual appetite.

Another feature of Bakhtin's folk culture is its boundlessness and variety. He argues that the Romantic era saw a solidification of narrow conceptions of folk culture, which excluded "the culture of the marketplace and folk laughter with all its wealth of manifestations."[18] He describes a culture of folk humor as "a boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations."[19] Similarly, Wes Gehring speaks of the boundless variety of the Marx Brothers' comedy: "It is a complex, multilayered use of satire and parody that invariably draws one in, even if not every jab connects. The viewer is simply mesmerized by the amount and the diversity of the comedy."[20] Conrich describes their vaudevillian humor as "infinite diversity in infinite combinations."[21]

Within the films of the Marx Brothers, musical interludes reinforce the heterogeneity and subversion of norms discussed above. The musical numbers subvert the norms of classic narrative by interpolating "irrelevant" material into the plot. They thus reaffirm the prevalence of "heterogeneity at the risk of disunity" found in anarchistic comedy.[22] The numbers also glorify heterogeneity on a smaller scale, often combining musical styles from such genres as jazz, operetta, Tin Pan Alley, American folk, and spirituals. In *Duck Soup*, "The Country's Going to War" exemplifies this heterogeneity. Thomas Doherty remarks on this number: "Crossing the

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[17] Michael Holquist, prologue to *Rabelais and His World*, by Mikhail Bakhtin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), xviii-xix.

[18] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 4.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Wes D. Gehring, *Personality Comedians as Genre* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 83.

[21] Conrich, "Merry Melodies," 47.

[22] Jenkins, *Pistachio*, 22.

martial zeal of George M. Cohan and the plantation sentimentality of Stephen Foster ('They got guns / We got guns / All God's children got guns'), the musical extravaganza 'We're Going to War' features cast and chorus celebrating the hostilities in a manner queasily reminiscent of the blithe jingoism of Great War propaganda."[23] The song is both a firm denial of musical cohesion, and a commentary on nationalism. Within this paradigm, the Marx Brothers' music often flouts established musical standards of "quality;" many of Groucho's numbers, such as those written by Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby, defy formal analysis through their utter lack of form.[24]

The variety and the anarchistic nature of the Marx Brothers' humor was not born from inherent comic genius, but can be traced to historic underpinnings in the populist ethos. While anecdotes of their childhoods and histories differ from source to source, one thing is clear: the Marx Brothers, like all the best vaudevillians and comedians, developed and carefully honed their act over years of gauging audience reactions. This tactic was so essential to their comedy that when they began their tenure with MGM in 1935, legendary producer Irving Thalberg sent them on the road with their writers in order to refine their material to *A Night at the Opera*. This strategy revitalized their comedy after they had exhausted much of their old vaudeville routine in their first five films with Paramount, and it speaks to an important feature of these films – they were written with the aid, approval, and sometimes participation of their audience, representing on some level not only an entertainment for, but also by the masses.

The element of audience inclusion that marked the Marx Brothers' vaudeville routines designates it as its own brand of spectacle – what Jenkins terms "affective immediacy."[25] The

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[23] Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 194.

[24] Examples include "The Laws of my Administration" in *Duck Soup* and "I'm Against It" in *Horse Feathers*.

[25] Jenkins, *Pistachio*, 61.

vaudevillian's goal of eliciting an immediate and tangible response from their audience broke down boundaries between the viewer and the viewed: "By cutting out everything – every line, gesture, movement – to which the audience does not react and by improvising new things, he establishes unusual unity between the audience and himself."[26] This reciprocal spectatorship aligns with the spectacle of Bakhtin's carnival, which "does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators."[27] While it would be far too extreme to say that the brothers' comedy knew no distinction between actor and spectator, certainly the audience's role in reacting to and thereby assisting in crafting their material blurs this line more than much traditional performance. Although the film audience does not participate in the same way as a vaudeville audience, the Marx Brothers carried much of their vaudeville material into their films, thus maintaining an element of audience "authorship."

Just as music is an integral part of the brothers' heterogeneity and subversion of norms, it is also an integral part of the spectacle. In an article on the brothers' 1924 Broadway revue, *I'll Say She Is!*, Margaret Farrell identifies comedy, music, and spectacle as the three ingredients of Ziegfeld's entertainment formula utilized in revues. Of the three, she observes that music was the weakest component in the brothers' revue.[28] Yet these three ingredients are not entirely separate components – they are interdependent elements within the greater structure of variety entertainment. In particular, music seeps into both comedy and spectacle, rarely appearing on its own in this genre. Large production numbers of the era exemplify this, wherein dance, costumery, and acrobatics superimpose themselves over a very necessary background of music.

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[26] Vadim Urenoff, "Commedia Dell'Arte and American Vaudeville," *Theater Arts Magazine* 7, No. 1 (1923): 326.

[27] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 7.

[28] Margaret Farrell, "'I'll Say She Is!' (1924): The 'laugh-a-minute revue' that made the Marx Brothers," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 7, No. 1 (2013): 35.

Vaudeville and revue regularly skirted distinctions between these ingredients. David Savran writes, "In vaudeville proper, orchestras routinely theatricalized jazz performance and undermined the distinction between music and theatre by surrounding 'the orchestra with expensive cycloramas and sets' and incorporating 'in the act a song, story, scenic exploitation, costume bit, singing numbers, dances, or other unusual features to put the act across.'"[29] Within the Marx Brothers' model of variety entertainment, music was not seen as a separate component, but as inherent to the form. Heavy distinctions between music, spectacle, and comedy fail to note their reliance on one another within this genre of entertainment.

In the music of the Marx Brothers, elements of spectacle emerge in nearly all of the larger chorus numbers, and elements of comedy in many of the smaller arrangements. In their early films, costumed chorus girls dance to truly irrelevant songs revealing their connection to vaudeville and revue. Farrell refers to these types of interludes as "musical curtains," separating the modular acts. However, the brothers' own musical numbers distinguish themselves from these interludes, each exhibiting a completely unique style. Groucho and Chico incorporate both spectacle and comedy into their numbers. The only musical element devoid of outright spectacle or comedy is Harpo's serious harp number. The unusual qualities of Harpo's numbers, however, render the lack of comedy and spectacle irrelevant, situating them out of the realm of the mundane – a red-wigged clown in a trench coat performing an ornamental harp arrangement of an Irving Berlin tune can hardly be considered ordinary.

[29] David Savran, "The Search for America's Soul: Theatre in the Jazz Age," *Theatre Journal* 58, No. 3 (Oct., 2006): 462. Carl Cunningham, "How's the Business with the Dance Orchestra Boys?" *Metrenome* (December 1953), reprinted in *Koenig: Jazz in Print (1856-1929)*, 265-266.

In fact, Harpo's bizarre persona is not ordinary in the least. Doherty describes the brothers as "grotesques, not really humans."[30] In isolating their alterity, Doherty alludes to a particular characteristic of their brand of clowning – one that has been explored by several scholars in relation to their Jewishness. This line of thinking proposes that immigrant comedians in the early twentieth century performed intentionally as "others," either taking on different ethnic stereotypes than their own – such as Chico's Italian accent – or exaggerating their own ethnicity – such as Groucho's Jewish persona.[31] It is not clear that Doherty has the Bakhtinian grotesque in mind, but there is no denying that the brothers, particularly Harpo, are often guided by the material realm and the bodily lower stratum – both key elements of Bakhtin's grotesque.[32] Jenkins is more explicit on this subject, describing Groucho as the grotesque clown, the "incomplete" body with an emphasis on apertures, as opposed to his counterpart, Margaret Dumont, and her "carefully controlled and tightly closed body."[33] Considering the brothers as grotesque others in their quest for disruption ties into Bakhtin's notion of marginalized voices inverting power hierarchies in humorous and parodic expression.

On the subject of parody, Bakhtin takes pains to distinguish between negative satire and ambivalent parody, arguing that the latter is found in the carnivalesque. He observes that ambivalent parody simultaneously derides and revels in its subject matter, rather than taking a purely superior stance to it. On his contemporaries' understanding of humor, he notes, "The present-day analysis of laughter explains it either as purely negative satire (and Rabelais is described as a pure satirist), or else as gay, fanciful, recreational drollery deprived of philosophic

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[30] Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 193.

[31] Daniel Lieberfield and Judith Sanders, "Here Under False Pretenses: The Marx Brothers Crash the Gates," *The American Scholar* 64, No. 1 (Winter, 1995): 103-108.

[32] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 18-19.

[33] Jenkins, *Pistachio*, 223

content. The important point made previously, that folk humor is ambivalent, is usually ignored."[34] This comic ambivalence is an important component of the festive inclusivity of carnival, in which laughter "is also directed at those who laugh."[35]

Like Rabelais, the Marx Brothers are often viewed as negative satirists. Adorno saw *A Night at the Opera* as an allegory for the commodification of classical music in capitalist culture, and the subsequent dumbing down of the listener leading to "the decay of operatic form."[36] Conrich, following those who would view the brothers' comedy as destructive and anarchic, sees the film as an attack on opera, itself. In the final scene of the film, the brothers destroy the set of Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, while making a farce of the performance, in general; Groucho sells peanuts in the aisles, and Harpo and Chico replace the musicians' scores with parts to "Take Me Out to the Ballgame." According to Conrich, they are unseating opera from its elitist pedestal, exposing it as a sham.[37]

This conception not only ignores Jenkins's relevant observation that the brothers were not actively rebelling from any structure, and were, in fact, profiting greatly from the entertainment industry, but it also ignores some of the intricacies of their depicted relationship with elite art forms. No film displays this relationship better than *A Night at the Opera*. Several musicologists have discussed this film, and their writings reveal an interesting synthesis of some of the ideas already discussed herein, as well as the role of ambivalent parody, though none use this particular term, themselves.

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[34] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 12.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Theodor W. Adorno, "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," *Essays on Music: Theodor W. Adorno*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 314.

[37] Conrich, "Merry Melodies," 53.

In his discussion of *A Night at the Opera*, Lawrence Kramer elaborates on an analysis by Stanley Cavell. Cavell observes that the happy ending of the film inverts the meaning of Verdi's *Il Trovatore* by setting a triumphant filmic victory over the tragic finale of the opera.[38] Kramer takes this argument a step further, arguing that the film attains this inversion through two means: first, through what he terms "the logic of carnival," and second, through the symbolic castration of an "evil" tenor and the consequent bestowing of phallic power on the film's hero. Kramer's discussion of the carnival emphasizes the inversion of power, "in which the dominated masses renew their vital energies by celebrating the material, bodily basis of life and by ritually flouting official culture, defying its rules and degrading its representatives."[39] Kramer attributes a particularly carnivalesque nature to the most musical scene, in which the romantic lead, as well as Chico and Harpo, perform solo numbers – a scene which will be revisited later in an analysis of Chico's piano playing.

Michal Grover-Friedlander discusses *A Night at the Opera*, devoting a chapter to the film in her book *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera*. Grover-Friedlander is primarily concerned with representations of opera in film, and the shifting audio-visual focus displayed within the genres. Her discussion of the Marx Brothers zooms in on very particular moments – Harpo opening his mouth wide to belt an aria and no sound coming out – but also addresses the shared extravagance of film and opera.[40] Although Grover-Friedlander does not explicitly draw the connection, this extravagance contains parallels with the decadence and

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[38] Stanley Cavell, "Nothing Goes Without Saying," *London Review of Books* Vol. 16, No. 1 (January 1994):3-5, accessed June 7, 2015, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v16/n01/stanley-cavell/nothing-goes-without-saying.

[39] Lawrence Kramer, "The Singing Salami: Unsystematic Reflections on the Marx Brothers," in *A Night in at the Opera*, ed. Jeremy Tamblin (London: Libbey, 1994), 261.

[40] Michal Grover-Friedlander, "Brothers at the Opera," *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

material concern of carnival. Another element of the carnivalesque – death of the old, and birth of the new – can be seen in Grover-Friedlander's basic assumption that film is the inheritor to opera: that opera, in essence, died, and film was born in its place. This relationship becomes particularly potent when taken in conjunction with Cavell's and Kramer's arguments of operatic inversion – certainly some element of Verdi's work "dies" when Harpo destroys the opera's set and the tragic love duet makes way for a happy ending. A purely negative reading of this death would fail to take into account its regenerative nature, represented in the birth of film.

Charles Garrett addresses the film as part of a larger article examining the interplay between musical humor and high culture in the United States. Garrett observes that the musical satire enacted in the film is "simultaneously aiming low and aiming high," appealing not only to those who would scorn the elite nature of opera, but to opera lovers themselves, the most likely audience to understand the film's inside jokes.[41] This widespread appeal speaks to a certain comic ambivalence, in which the brothers simultaneously deride and revel in opera. Biographical literature on the brothers supports this observation, revealing that they all held a deep respect for music, both popular and classical.[42] Parody of this nature, that both roasts and toasts its subject, is at the heart of much of the Marx Brothers' musical parody. It extends down to their comic roots, considering that their first comedic routine was a parody of their own musical act.[43] This comic ambivalence – comedy that both "asserts and denies"[44] – is a critical component of

[41] Charles Hiroshi Garrett, "'Shooting the Keys': Musical Horseplay and High Culture," in *The Oxford Handbook of the New Cultural History of Music*, ed. Jane Fulcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 248-250.

[42] For biographical sources that address the Marx Brothers' musicality, see Arthur Marx, *Life With Groucho* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954); Harpo Marx and Rowland Barber, *Harpo Speaks!* (Pompton Plains, NJ: Limelight Editions, 1962); Maxine Marx, *Growing up with Chico* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980).

[43] Chico Marx, "Time Marches on for the Marxes."

[44] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 11-12.

Bakhtin's theories on carnival humor, and it is more alive in the musical components of the Marx Brothers' humor than anywhere else in their work.

These are some of the broader ways in which the films and their music relate to a carnivalesque understanding. This understanding casts the humor of the films in a positive light, situating laughter as an inclusive and equalizing force. Individual musical numbers further this interpretation. The following sections will examine three musical performances from the films – one by each of the three primary brothers. Although Groucho was the ringleader in their shows, I will begin with Chico, whose music held the greatest appeal for his audience. I will then discuss Groucho, and finally Harpo, as the most unusual of the three, both musically and comedically. Each number exhibits its own distinctive form of carnivalesque subversion and inclusivity and reveals a larger relationship with the Marx Brothers' comedic work as a whole.

Chico and the Universal Laughter of Parody

Of all of the Marx Brothers, audiences found the greatest musical delight in Chico. Groucho's son, Arthur Marx, speaks to the popularity of the musical numbers, remarking, "It's an odd thing about Chico's playing. He may not be a Rubinstein, but no one else has ever been able to master his one big forte – shooting the keys with his forefinger – and audiences eat it up. I've seen him play encores for a whole hour, and still the audiences clapped for more."[45] A review in *Variety* magazine says of Chico, "Leonard Marx is seen as an Italian character, and his specialty at the piano, in which he does comic things with his hands and fingers, is one of the best features."[46] Part of the box-office failure of *Duck Soup* was attributed to the absence of musical performances by Chico and Harpo, with one angry reviewer stating, "And as for music, Harpo

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[45] Arthur Marx, *Life With Groucho*, 24.

[46] Maxine Marx, *Growing up with Chico*, 29.

don't harp and Chico don't tickle the ivories."[47] The immense popularity of Chico's music places its value within the realm of mass culture – a status that Bakhtin celebrated, rather than reviled.[48]

Many scholars have noted the distinctive qualities of Chico's bizarre tricks and gimmicks; some have outright ignored his music, as it does not easily fit into any cohesive analysis of the films. But Chico's unique performance style reveals a deeper relationship with the Marx Brothers' comedic style. His parodic and subtly subversive arrangements of popular and classical tunes fit within the broader scope of parody exhibited in the films. From an historical standpoint, his piano routine is inextricable from his comic persona, as audiences and critics alike identified him as much with his music as with his fake Italian accent, dark curly hair, and Tyrolean hat. Chico's piano performance in *A Night at the Opera* exemplifies his style of parody – a parody that invokes an ambivalent and universal laughter.

The scene opens with a feast. Chico, Harpo, and the romantic lead, Ricardo, stumble into a large room in steerage on the ocean liner that they are taking from Europe to America. In the room, a party of Italian immigrants dines on pasta. They welcome the newcomers, who in turn, gorge themselves on Italian food. The process of feasting to the point of gluttony within a communal environment is endemic to carnival imagery. The feast of carnival, according to Bakhtin, "is no commonplace, privately consumed food and drink, partaken of by individuals. This is a popular feast, a 'banquet for all the world.' The mighty aspiration to abundance and to a universal spirit is evident in each of these images."[49] Within the film, the feast establishes a communal setting, paving the way for the inclusive laughter exhibited in Chico's number.

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[47] "What This Picture Did For Me" *Motion Picture Herald*, December 23, 1933, 62, quoted in Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 195.

[48] Holquist, prologue to *Rabelais*, xviii-xix.

[49] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 278.

This setting of inclusivity continues as the festivities turn to music. Ricardo unites the group in a dance number, "Cosi-Cosa" by Arthur Freed and Nacio Herb Brown, the film's primary songwriters. The song exudes a folk culture ambiance. The lyrics tell of an Italian vernacular expression: "There's an old Italian phrase /It's an old Italian craze/ Every little bambina / learns it the very first day." While Ricardo sings, the Italian peasants dance. In operetta style, the song "mediates between folk music and operatic art music."[50] This mediation furthers the hierarchical subversion of the scene, which, in turn, reinforces the communal spirit established at the opening.

As the number ends, Chico sits at the piano and plays an introductory riff, gathering a crowd. Chico always performs for an audience in the films, breaking down boundaries between the audience within the film and the audience viewing the film. This arises, in part, due to the film-viewing audience's identification with the audience within the film, but Chico complicates this relationship further. At times he breaks the fourth wall, looking directly into the camera in an acknowledgement of the film-viewer.[51] At other times, as in this instance, it is more indirect – his vaudevillian charisma transcends the confines of the camera shot and his interactions with his own audience create an atmosphere of inclusivity and reciprocal spectatorship.

This inclusion differs somewhat from Groucho's and Chico's usual comedy – while Groucho occasionally acknowledges the film viewer, the medium of wordplay is inherently more exclusionary, relying on a shared language and an understanding of nuance within that language. While music certainly employs its own set of restrictions, it is ultimately more universal, speaking across nationalistic and cultural boundaries. When Harpo traveled to Russia to perform his act in the 1930s, he said of the experience that even his wordless pantomime was

[50] Kramer, "Singing Salami," 262-263.

[51] For one example, see his performance in *The Cocoanuts*.

misunderstood, but that his music cut across cultural and linguistic barriers and received the greatest amount of appreciation.[52] The Marx Brothers' popular music interludes were capable of speaking to an immigrant audience composed of different ethnicities in a way that verbal comedy could not. This element of inclusivity specific to their music is worth noting, considering that a large percentage of their audience were working class immigrants, particularly in their touring days.[53]

Once Chico has engaged the audience, he performs "All I Do Is Dream of You," also by Freed and Brown. Although well known for its appearance in *Singin' in the Rain* over a decade later, Freed and Brown originally composed the number for the 1934 movie musical *Sadie McKee*, starring Joan Crawford. The film is a rags to riches story, typical for Crawford at the time, and the song features prevalently within it. Gene Raymond performs it several times, always within the context of wooing Crawford. Numerous recordings throughout the song's history apply a serious and sentimental interpretation to the tune, as well, including Judy Garland's 1940 recording, and a Gene Kelly recording made for "Singin' in the Rain" that was ultimately not used in the film but was later released as an outtake. Chico's interpretation subverts the original meaning, transforming it from a sentimental crooner number into a humorous showpiece. This parody opens up space for a shared laughter that simultaneously renews and negates.

Chico's subversion of the song is both textual and performative. On the downbeat of the third bar he shifts the pitch down a tritone, from F to B, creating a disjunct melody and disrupting the voice leading (See Figs. 1 and 2). He also places heavy accents on each downbeat, with a light staccato on the second beat, gently mocking the song's foxtrot rhythm. He repeats the

[52] Harpo Marx, *Harpo Speaks!*, 316.

[53] Leiberfield and Sanders, "Here Under False Pretenses," 105.

third and seventh bars rather than sustaining the final notes of the phrases. Contrasting the percussive texture, he adds a fluid ornamental roll to each downbeat. By pushing the melody to the background and bringing the rhythm and ornamentation to the foreground, his rendition minimizes the melody's role in what was once a romantic, lyrical number, while maximizing the song's potential for spectacle and affective immediacy.

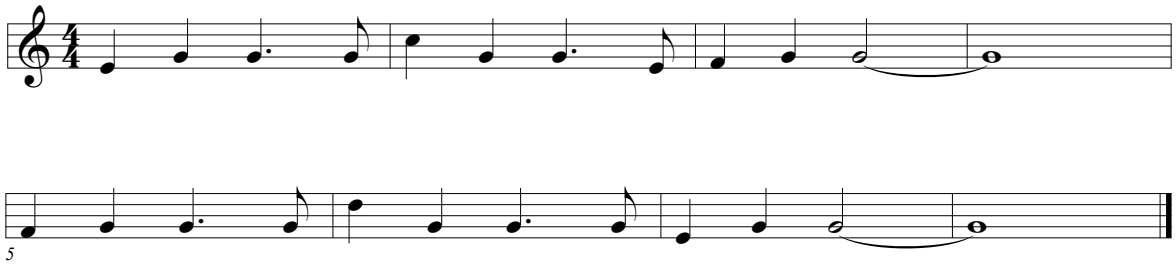

Fig. 1 – Original melody, "All I Do Is Dream of You"

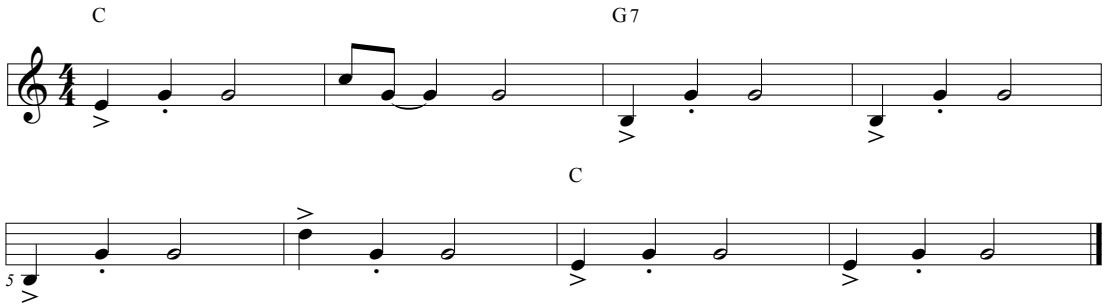

Fig. 2 – Melodic framework of Chico's arrangement

Chico's transformation of the song reveals a facet of his musical humor, one related to French philosopher Henri Bergson's understanding of laughter. Bergson speaks of laughter deriving from the imposition of an overly rigid structure on a previously malleable object. This rigid structure can occur in numerous forms, among them as a mechanical representation, or an excessive officiousness. According to Bergson, laughter draws attention to the ways in which people engage with life mechanically rather than vitally. He relates the human-mechanical construct to the phenomenon of play through comparisons to common children's toys – a jack-in-

the-box and a marionette, for example.[54] Bergson's theories align with Bakhtin's in several respects. Both are concerned with laughter as a deeply meaningful, vital human force. Both view laughter as a social and uniquely human activity. The laughter that Bergson explores, like the laughter of carnival, is not inherently targeted at specific persons or institutions, but rather at a larger component of human society. For Bergson, laughter is a product of intuition, breaking through the spatialized organization of intelligence and reconnecting society to the inherent changeability of life.

In order for something to be comical in Bergson's theory, it must contain both human and mechanical elements. Chico employs both of these in his musical performance. He imposes a humorous, mechanical repetition on the number, reducing it to its harmonic framework and ornamenting, accenting, and sustaining the repetitive downbeats. This mechanization manifests not only in the arrangement of the song, but also in Chico's technique. As he plays the first eight bars, his fingers enact a sort of dance with one finger rising upwards on each downbeat as if pulled by a string. The mechanization in Chico's technique extends the mockery to his own body. He tempers this mechanization with his very human interactions with his audience, composed mostly of children. Within his interactions, laughter travels in all directions: the children laugh at Chico, Chico laughs at himself, and at the children. Chico's innate musicality also displays a very human side. Although his technique is comical, his expressive capabilities are beyond reproach. Underlying the gimmicks, he shapes his phrases with a controlled *legato* and nuanced dynamic contrasts. The resulting performance is as heartfelt as it is comical. This unique tension lends a vitality to the performance – one that would be lacking were it purely mechanical or purely sentimental.

[54] Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, trans. Cloudessley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1911).

Notably, the human-mechanical juxtaposition occurs elsewhere in the Marx Brothers' comedy. A very obvious example appears in *Monkey Business* when Harpo, stumbling into a puppet show, becomes one of the puppets. In another famous but subtler example from *A Night at the Opera*, Chico and Groucho dismantle a contract, ripping out clauses as they go. Each clause of the contract is a variation on the first clause: "The party of the first part shall be known in this contract as the party of the first part." The comedy in this scene derives from a combination of the contract's exaggerated officiousness and Chico's simpleton responses to it. As such, it is not simply a negative condemnation of bureaucracy, but is aiming in multiple directions. Chico's piano performance also aims in multiple directions, while echoing the mechanical repetition in the contract.

In the B section of the piece, a more explicit humor emerges in the form of violence. Chico performs one of his signature techniques, violently and unexpectedly striking the bass register of the piano. This violent outburst enhances Chico's distinctive vaudevillian sprezzatura. It is both clumsy and minutely calculated, and evokes a sense of mechanization through its slapstick connotations. After striking the bass register, Chico displays another symbolically violent act – his signature technique of shooting the keys. On the downbeat of the eleventh bar, he glides up the keyboard with his third and fourth fingernails in a *glissando* and shoots the top key with his index finger. He executes this trick with a practiced smoothness that masks its symbolic violence. He continues to play the melody with just his index finger for the remainder of the next two bars, and in the following bar employs a series of rolled chords. He uses this passage to build suspense, crouching over the piano and playing quiet, staccato notes before suddenly rolling back up the keys in another *glissando*, which seems to surprise even him and imbues his performance with an air of spontaneity. The surprise that Chico exhibits in this

moment again alludes to Bergson, suggesting that for a moment his body was simply a machine no longer controlled by him. In the reprise of the A section, he returns to his earlier droll style, again using accents to mock the repetitive pitches of the melody.

For the final repetition of the tune, Chico plays in double time – a very common ending for him. The double-time ending accomplishes two things. First, it continues with the subtle mockery of the song. In speeding through the melody, he reveals its underlying insignificance. Second, it gives Chico a chance to further highlight his virtuosity and humor as a performer. In this section, he abandons striking the keys violently and focuses instead on shooting them. During the B section, he performs no less than six rapid, targeted *glissandi* ending each one with his index finger key shot. This time, he carries the technique back into the A section, during which he glares comically at a boy standing nearby, as if challenging him to a fight. He ends the piece with several dramatic *glissandi* and a *ritardando*, shooting two keys loudly and pointedly for the final beats. This time he employs a more obvious shooting gesture, holding his hand in the shape of a gun and stabbing the keys more forcefully than in previous sections. As the song ends, everyone laughs and cheers.

Chico's instrumental interludes promote a universal laughter through their wordless evocations of innocence and irreverence, displaying a broader relationship with the ambivalent parody of much of the Marx Brothers' nonmusical humor. Like the folk humor Bakhtin observes, the parody displayed in this number is ambivalent. It does not satirize the song in a purely negative way, but rather engages with it and reinvigorates it, as evidenced through Chico's equal mockery of the song and himself. The film as a whole applies a similar parody to opera. The performance also highlights Chico's playfulness and creates an atmosphere of universal inclusivity. His unusual technique challenges highbrow assumptions of what it means to play the

piano well. As Garrett observes, "Just as the entire family poked fun at the broader conventions of elite musical culture, so too, did Chico's style offer something intentionally incongruous and radically different from classical approaches to playing the piano."[55] Chico's piano playing is that of a man who never grew up – it is play in the truest sense. The humor Chico displays is ultimately positive and delightful, rather than negative or destructive.

Groucho: A Celebration of Otherness and Marginality

If Chico's number relates to the Marx Brothers' comedy at a very broad level, Groucho's sung numbers display a more obvious relationship, incorporating verbal humor and wit, his hallmark as a comedian. His musical numbers often appear to roll organically out of his verbal banter, both replete with double entendre and semiotic obfuscation. These numbers always highlight the inherent absurdity of Groucho's persona. Cast in a leadership role while firmly maintaining his clownish artifice, Groucho represents a fundamental inversion of power dynamics. Within this construct, he further subverts traditional dichotomies through toying with gender roles. His number in *At the Circus*, "Lydia, the Tattooed Lady," highlights these features, while providing his most censorially subversive musical performance of all the films. The song describes a woman covered in tattoos of iconic historical landmarks and figures. The subversion of traditional gender roles and power dynamics displayed in this song exhibits a deeper connection with the carnivalesque subversions of the films' content at large, and with the contradictions inherent in Groucho's own persona.

Released in 1939, *At the Circus* suffered from the same problems that plagued many of the brothers' MGM films: lack of personal interest and development from the studio, writers unsuited to the brothers' comedy, and depictions of racist stereotypes. It suffered from one other issue, as well – prior to this film, the brothers had always been clowns in an environment

[55] Garrett, "Shooting the Keys," 250.

unsuitable for them. They were outsiders, trespassing in universities, opera houses, and government institutions. At a circus, they were "simply another act."[56] The film did contain one positive attribute: the music. "Lydia, the Tattooed Lady," written by Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg, provided Harburg with interesting challenges as a lyricist, and would become one of Groucho's signature songs. In the words of his biographer, Stefan Kanfer, "It adroitly harked back to the African explorer of *Animal Crackers* and the parodic classroom lectures of *Horse Feathers*, slipped double entendres past the censors, included an incongruously Jewish name, and mentioned the New Deal's most popular accomplishment."[57]

As far as double entendres slipping past the censors, they nearly didn't. The song is surprisingly lascivious for 1939, and Groucho's gestures enhance its ribald content. The censors wanted to cut it – a prospect that outraged Harburg:

> 'That song,' Harburg told one of his Ninety-second Street Y audiences, 'was thought to be risqué, and we had a hell of a lot of trouble with it… This was 1939 and censorship was at its full height – no sweaters on the screen, they were too erotic. We were told we would have to cut it out of the picture. Harold and I were mad,' arguing with the Breen office to no avail.[58]

The song's ultimate salvation underscores the focus of censorship on female sexuality. Harburg added a verse to the end that appeased the censors: "She once swept an admiral clear off his feet / The ships on her hips made his heart skip a beat / And now the old boy is in charge of the fleet, for he went and married Lydia." In some ways, this verse is the most graphic of the

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[56] Stefan Kanfer, *Groucho: The Life and Times of Julius Henry Marx* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000): 232.

[57] Ibid., 233.

[58] Edward Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 142.

song, alluding to specific sexual acts rather than just female anatomy. But depriving Lydia of her sexual agency proved to be all the censors needed to deem her no longer a threat to society.

The most obvious examples of subversive humor in the number occur in the lyrics and Groucho's obscene representations of them. Like many of Groucho's numbers, the transition rolls smoothly from verbal humor into musical, highlighting the intrinsic relationship between Groucho's spoken and sung jokes. The scene opens with the three brothers walking through a room of circus performers, and Groucho reminiscing: "My life was wrapped around the circus. Her name was Lydia. We met at the World's Fair in 1900, marked down from 1940. Ah, Lydia." He pulls out a picture, and transitions to song, midsentence: "She was the most glorious creature under the sun." He belts out the word "glorious," and a piano enters on the phrase "under the sun."

This is followed by a melodramatic introduction, signifying and mocking an operatic style, in which he compares Lydia to other stereotypical "goddess" women: "Thais. Dubarry. Garbo. Rolled into one." After the introduction, a whimsical burlesque begins. The juxtaposition of a dramatic introduction with a lighter tune is a very common trope in the Marx Brothers more parodic numbers. Chico regularly begins his piano songs with a solemn cadenza, before launching into a contrasting playful tune. This juxtaposition unites representations of high and lowbrow, and is undoubtedly a carry-over from burlesque and vaudeville. Rossana Dalmonte describes the order of descent from highbrow to lowbrow as a common element of musical humor derived from "expectation stereotypes," in which, "Laughter would break out when the subject found something unexpected and stupefying in the object, that is, when the correspondence between the object that is perceived and the subject's schematic perception and judgment was broken; and this would only happen if the unexpected and surprising result were

of a lower, more modest, less intelligent nature than the waiting had led the subject to expect or than the subject had imagined it would have been."[59] Bakhtin also addresses this element of parody, describing the lowering of subject matter as "a 'coming down to earth,' a contact with the reproductive and generating power of the earth and of the body."[60] On a stylistic level, the transition from operatic to burlesque suggests not only a highbrow/lowbrow juxtaposition, but an Apollonian/Dionysian contrast. Arlen composed a burlesque tune at a time when burlesque had completely transitioned from a mode of variety entertainment, incorporating music, comedy, acrobatics and other circus-like performances, to a firm affiliation with striptease and female nudity. Burlesque shows were banned in New York City by the time the film came out.

The reference to Lydia as a "creature" combined with the goddess comparisons immediately places her on an inhuman pedestal. In this case, however, it is not a simplistic device designed merely to fawn over a beautiful woman, for two reasons. First, and most obviously, the absurdity of Lydia being covered in tattoos contradicts the classic image of a beautiful woman in the 1930s. Second, Lydia's othering is rendered by a group of others, placing it on a parodic level. In addition, this aspect draws attention to a specific facet of Groucho's character: his comic sexuality. Groucho's many expressions of sexual desire are always innately humorous because of the absurdity of his costume, and what Craig Svonkin terms his "fey, Jewish, absurdist persona."[61] Batting his eyelashes and clutching his hands under his chin while wooing Margaret Dumont, Groucho frequently subverts traditional gender roles and eschews masculinity. His seamless transitions into and out of this caricature, however, create a tone that is

[59] Rossana Dalmonte, "Towards a Semiology of Humor in Music," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 26, No. 2 (Dec. 1995): 171.

[60] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 22.

[61] Craig Svonkin, "Manishevitz and Sake, the Kaddish and Sutras: Allen Ginsberg's Spiritual Self-Othering," *College Literature* 37, No. 4 (Fall 2010): 175.

not mocking, but is self-othering. In the tradition of ethnic comedians of this era, Groucho intentionally puts on a stereotyped persona, drawing attention to his otherness. Daniel Lieberfield and Judith Sanders describe his gender subversion as part of his Jewish caricature: "Groucho reinforces the stereotype of the effeminate Jewish male. He underscores his unmasculine appearance with lines like 'Afraid? A man who's licked his weight in wild caterpillars? You bet I'm afraid!'[62] Groucho's intentional manipulation of binary gender constructs, and associated embrace of his own ethnic stereotype speak to the films' larger tendency towards an embrace of marginality.

Groucho's rendition of "Lydia" reveals this facet of his character from the outset. Prancing about and waving his hands, he gestures to his own body to indicate Lydia's various body parts. Shaking his upper body, he sings lines like "When her muscles start relaxin' up the hill comes Andrew Jackson." He frames his own chest with his hands while singing "Over on the west coast we have Treasure Island." The upward slant of his gaze through much of the song evokes images of a stereotyped leading lady staring upwards at her hero, further emphasizing the gender role reversal and the goddess nature of Lydia. Groucho's othering of both Lydia and himself, while surrounded by circus performers, re-emphasizes the inclusivity and hierarchical inversion found in the films. This inversion is, in itself, central to Groucho's character, bestowed with an incongruous authority.

Even the casual contemporary listener should notice the blatant double entendre of most of the bawdy lyrics. However, the meaning of the lyrics extends beyond a surface level. The use of iconic landmarks and historical figures as the subject matter of Lydia's tattoos conflates her body with these images. The chorus refers to "Lydia, oh Lydia, that encyclopaedia," and it is more than a clever rhyming device; Lydia is an encyclopedia on two levels. She is a reference

[62] Lieberfield and Sanders, "Here Under False Pretenses," 106.

point for iconic people, places, and things, but she is also a symbol of carnal knowledge – the embodiment of original sin; in the words of the culminating line of the chorus: "You can learn a lot from Lydia." The references to Lydia's sexuality in these images are grotesque, both in their allusions to "the bodily lower stratum" as a place for renewal through reproduction, and in the incomplete nature of Lydia's body, which is rendered as a series of parts rather than a whole.

The music, itself, also contributes to the song's subversion. A single line evokes a tripartite "lowering of content" through lyrics, melody, and instrumentation. The lyrics, "She has eyes that folks adores so, and a torso even more so," depict a literal lowering from eyes to torso. This lowering is grafted directly onto Lydia's body in an expression of grotesque realism. Text painting and instrumentation supplement the lyrics, with the melody swinging upwards on the first half of the line depicting Lydia's eyes, and downwards on the second, depicting Lydia's torso. Romantic piano and strings accompany initially, but sliding trombones enter on the second half, indicating a lowering from romance to sexuality. It is reinforced as Groucho waves an hourglass figure with his hands. The contrast of prudish Victorian romanticism and risqué imagery combined with Lydia's symbolic original sin position the song as a meeting place for sanctioned and unsanctioned culture. This meeting place is a primary contrast explored through much of the Marx Brothers' comedy, and particularly through Groucho's position as mediator between the two cultures. While Chico and Harpo are understood to be outsiders from the outset, Groucho begins each film with respect from the Institution and stoops to fraternize with the others represented by Chico and Harpo.

The music also suggests an embrace of marginality and a liberation from day-to-day norms, channeling foreignness through exotic instrumentation . Each section of the song is separated by an interlude in which the chorus dances and sings "la la la." In the first of these

interludes, castanets accompany the chorus in an exotic "Spanish"-themed dance. Later, Groucho references his own character from *Animal Crackers*, singing "Here's Captain Spaulding exploring the Amazon," accompanied by a thudding bass drum on the downbeats, evoking primitivism. Were this stereotyping to occur in a more serious context, it would suggest a more deeply held division between a mainstream and an other. Occurring, as it does, however, within the context of the celebratory laughter of others themselves, it suggests an inclusivity. Stark divisions are suspended through the heterogeneity of the number, which evokes too much otherness to alienate one specific other.

Another distinctive musical feature of the song is a swinging and spinning sensation created by the melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic devices, and evoking a sense of altered consciousness and otherworldliness corresponding with the surrealism of the circus. The most obvious example is the song's twirling waltz rhythm, emphasized by the twirling of the dancers. The melody, when paired with the rhythm and instrumentation, creates the sensation of a swinging trapeze – an effect heightened by Harpo swinging from a lamp. Arlen uses the "la la la" sections to modulate – these sections of the song are routinely the most surreal, and the harmonic shift enhances this sensation. In one of these sections, Harpo sits on the shoulders of an extremely short man in order to dance with an extremely tall woman, again highlighting the inclusivity of the atmosphere.

Groucho's rendition of "Lydia" is not only a carnivalesque celebration of others, but a reflection of the hierarchical subversions within the films at large. When viewed through a carnivalesque lens, these subversions are positive and equalizing. In addition to breaking down barriers within its own film, the song's prevalence outside the film speaks to renewal – through representations in different settings and media, references to the song continue to impose new

meanings and traditions upon it. "Lydia the Tattooed Lady" remains one of the Marx Brothers' better-known numbers. Along with "Hooray for Captain Spaulding," Groucho's introductory number from *Animal Crackers*, the song followed him through much of his later career. He performed it frequently during interviews later in life, and it has appeared in numerous pop culture mediums. Two disparate examples include Kermit the Frog performing it in an early episode of *The Muppet Show*, and its appearance in *The Philadelphia Story*, where Tracy Lord's little sister, Dinah, gives a vivacious performance at the piano.

Signifying Mozart: Semiotic Subversion in Harpo's Music and Communication

Just as Groucho's songs expose the layers of his otherness within the films, Harpo's songs reveal an interesting relationship with his clown character. Harpo is fundamentally a grotesque character, but his musical aptitude on the harp complicates this grotesqueness. Like Groucho, he represents an equalizing meeting place of low and high, other and mainstream. He is not the embodiment of a simplistic dichotomy, but travels freely between the two poles. The instability of his character is echoed in his particular brand of humor. Harpo acheives much of his comedy through a sort of visual punnery that relies on confusing and contradictory understandings of words, things, and meanings. His contradcitory status as clown and musician deepens this semiotic confusion, revealing that Harpo himself is a conflicted icon, embodying an Apollonian/Dionysian contrast.

Numerous scholars have noted the complexities of Harpo's character, most notably the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. In his "Seminar VII" near the end of a discussion of *Das Ding*, he says of Harpo:

> It is enough to evoke a face which is familiar to everyone of you, that of the terrible dumb brother of the four Marx brothers, Harpo. Is there anything that poses a question

> which is more nauseating, more calculated to thrust everything that takes place before us into the abyss or void than that face of Harpo Marx, that face with its smile which leaves us unclear as to whether it signifies the most extreme perversity or complete simplicity? This dumb man alone is sufficient to sustain the atmosphere of doubt and of radical annihilation which is the stuff of the Marx brothers' extraordinary farce and the uninterrupted play of 'jokes' that makes their activity so valuable.[63]

The passage is something of an aside, and Lacan does not really clarify his meaning here. Several scholars have attempted to parse it.

Simon Critchley relates Lacan's observation to a larger theory on humor. Critchley's argument identifies Harpo as *Das Ding*, or The Thing, and attempts to situate this identification in a larger theory of comedy. In Lacan's register theory, the human unconscious is goverend through the systems of meaning generated by human languages, laws, norms, and codes, a system that Lacan terms the Symbolic Order.[64] Because of the abstraction of language and symbols, the individual is forever separated from reality itself, or The Real. According to Lacan, *Das Ding* is an entity existing in the material world, outside the Symbolic Order, and is therefore unknowable in its essence. One can only know it through an abstracted and subjective lens. In the words of Lacan, "the Thing only presents itself to the extent that it becomes word, hit's the bull's eye, as they say."[65] That Lacan considers Harpo an unknowable Thing seems evident enough in his quote. Furthermore, he is unknowable in part, by virtue of his muteness. In the second part of his argument, Critchley argues that this muteness makes way for the comic.

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[63] Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis (1959-1960): The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, trans. Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), 55.

[64] Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

[65] Lacan, *Ethics*, 55.

According to his argument, the comic embraces human fallibility, and Harpo's literal and figurative "dumbness" reveals a failing in the Symbolic Order, and therefore in human consciousness. Critchley also links this fallibility to Harpo's slapstick physical comedy, and its focus on "the weakness and vulnerability of the body."[66]

Paul Flaig points out a fundamental flaw in this reading, observing that Harpo is not particularly fallible, but rather superhuman. He argues that it is not Harpo's fallibility that is comical, but his infallibility: "Harpo's body is not excessively weak, but indestructible, consuming everything in a pardoxically perverse simplicity."[67] Flaig attempts to render a Lacanian reading of the Marx Brothers' comedy, in which he situates Harpo at its center. Harpo, he argues, "is an automatic object-machine that converts both the world and himself into a polymorphously perverse source of jouissance."[68] Neither analysis takes Harpo's problematic musicianship into consideration. Both, in fact, draw parts of their interpretation out of the double-meaning of Harpo's dumbness, that he is both unable to speak, and is an idiot. His adept musicianship greatly complicates this understanding of his character, and it is quite convenient to consider it irrelevant to the greater structure of the films. Flaig, however, draws attention to some interesting aspects of Harpo's comedy in relation to Lacan's theories – aspects which can be expanded to incorporate Harpo's musical humor. He also offers several astute observations on Harpo's clown character, which will help to establish its grotesque nature, existing in opposition to his lofty musicianship.

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[66] Simon Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (New York: Verso, 1999): 230.

[67] Paul Flaig, "Lacan's Harpo," *Cinema Journal* 50, No. 4 (2011): 100.

[68] Ibid.

Harpo's clown act reveals many facets of the grotesque, specifically, the bodily lower stratum, abundance of appetite and consumption, and materialism. Concerning the bodily lower stratum, several examples are immediately apparent. First, a voracious sexual appetite often guides Harpo's actions. While many texts simplistically characterize this sexual appetite as "constantly chasing blondes," in reality, Harpo's sex drive is no more limited by a woman's hair color than it is by her gender itself.[69] On the contrary, Harpo's lust extends even beyond women, incorporating men and inanimate objects. Flaig observes, "Though superficially he seems like a woman-obsessed little boy, Harpo also has a proclivity for hugging men (especially Chico) and even humping objects, most hilariously in *The Cocoanuts*, where, tickled by the sound of a cash register, he humps it over and over again to produce the pleasing sound."[70] Incidentally, this humping of the cash register is set to the tune of Verdi's "Anvil Chorus" from *Il Trovatore* – a foreshadowing of the debasing of the opera that would occur in the later film. Flaig also comments on Harpo's gluttonous appetite – another symbol of the grotesque – which, just as his sexual appetite is not limited to women, is not limited to food: "Harpo's own appetite knows no limits: ink, flowers, phones, buttons, handkerchief, coins, wax paper, and even his own finger – almost all of this eaten in his very first film scene in *The Cocoanuts*."[71]

A second manifestation of the bodily lower stratum as a defining element of Harpo's character is his phallic horn. In many of the films, Harpo's iconic honking horn is heard before he is seen. Once Harpo enters the scene, it becomes evident that the horn is sticking out of his pants, and that he is prone to honk it upon seeing an object of desire. In this way, the horn becomes a

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[69] For some examples of Harpo described this way, see Maurice Charney, *The Comic World of the Marx Brothers' Movies* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007); Alan Wheelock, "A Harpist in Spite of Himself," *The American Harp Journal* 16, No. 4 (1998): 29-32.

[70] Flaig, “Lacan’s Harpo,” 107.

[71] Ibid., 106.

visual and audible symbol of Harpo's adolescent lust. As a sexual symbol it represents increase and abundance in its reproductive connotations, but it also represents an expansion of Harpo's communicative palette, creating a greater abundance of noises, images, and quirks associated with the character. Harpo's horn reveals that he is more than a mute – that he expands beyond this basic defining characteristic, and that he is capable of sound, just not speech.

Harpo's materialism, like his phallic horn-honking, is an integral part of his communicative persona. This materialism manifests in his trench coat, where he hoards an abundant, seemingly infinite number of objects. He uses these objects as a primary mode of communication. Flaig identifies several types of humor deriving from Harpo's visual communication, first noting his literalisms. In *Horse Feathers*, Harpo must gain entrance to a speakeasy where the password is "swordfish." He communicates the password by skewering a fish on a sword, both of which he pulls from his coat.

Harpo also uses visual signifiers to disrupt the chain of signification. Flaig ties this disruption to the distance between signifier and signified. He observes that in Lacan's theory, the signifier creates a gap between the real thing, and the language used to represent it, with the signifier existing in the Symbolic Order and the thing itself existing in The Real. As a result, the meaning of a signifier hinges on its relationship with other signifiers. Beause the signifier can never truly represent the essence of the real, we can only understand it as part of a system of language, or as part of a "signifying chain." Flaig notes that Harpo routinely undermines this signifying chain through various humorous means:

> In order to induce polysemy or to cut out a gap in a signifying chain, Harpo must be effectively armed with *all the signifiers* that could potentially be in play. His comedy is thus dependent on always providing untimely signifiers. This is represented by Harpo's

raincoat, which has a magical ability to contain everything, including a sword, a fish, or a blowtorch. In *Horse Feathers*, a cop reveals his badge in order to make Harpo follow his commands, but Harpo opens his coat to reveal dozens of badges; in the repetitive excess of badges, the badge itself becomes meaningless, just like the symbolic authority it is intended to metonymically suggest.[72]

In other words, Harpo's humor exploits the gaps between symbols and their various meanings as understood by society.

In another article on Harpo's signs, Matthew Turner argues that Harpo's use of visual symbols to communicate creates a series of visual puns, functioning on a similar level as Groucho's wordplay.[73] Turner's analysis of the Marx Brothers' semiotic obfuscation aligns with the Bakhtinian inversion of order discussed elsewhere. Turner observes that "comedy challenges existing codes and expands their descriptive abilities."[74] He also observes that this challenging of codes appears to undermine the system of language, and its implicit hierarchies. Like their undermining of hierarchical structures on a larger scale, the Marx Brothers undermine privileged modes of discourse through their continuous onslaught of its assumptions of meaning.

Harpo's use of signs to dissolve expectations and create rifts in discourse is not limited to his communication via objects. In his later musical numbers, he uses musical signs to defy expectation stereotypes and create parody, most evident in his most humorous number performed in *The Big Store*. This parody not only toys with signs, but with the understood privileges of musical discourse. Like the humor discussed in Groucho's number, the mode of Harpo's musical

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[72] Ibid., 105.

[73] Matthew Turner, "Signs, Slapstick and Silence: The Transformation of Semiotic Meaning in the Comedy of Harpo Marx," *A Century of the Marx Brothers*, ed. Joseph Mills (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007), 98-101.

[74] Turner, "Signs, Slapstick and Silence," 91.

hmor travels from high to low. But while Groucho's numbers display a near seamless transition into and out of spoken and sung wordplay, Harpo must undergo a more substantial transformation within the context of the film when he plays music, going from speechlessness to complex aural expression. In order to achieve this transition, Harpo himself must travel from low to high, transforming symbolically from a grotesque clown into a fully formed musician. A defining characteristic of his harp performances – solitude – reinforces this transportation. While Chico thrives on audience interactions, Harpo almost always plays alone in the films.[75] He often does so in a way that suggests a transfer from real to imaginary. Stumbling onto harps in solitary rooms and cluttered attics, his performances suggest an escape into the recesses of the mind. In *The Big Store*, this suggestion is made manifest through the framing of the scene as a fantasy.

Harpo travels from the grotesque body to the bounded and complete body through two gazes – the gaze of the film viewer, and the gaze of Harpo, himself. At the opening of the scene, he enters a deserted section of a department store. A music box plays, and next to it stands a mannequin in a powdered wig and ruffled waistcoat, and a harp framed by three mirrors. After a dissolve, Harpo wears the mannequin's costume, and the mannequin wears Harpo's costume. In the eyes of the film viewer, this sartorial transformation takes him symbolically from rags to riches. In shedding his typical costume, he leaves behind many of the grotesque symbols associated with him, including his phallic horn and his cavernous trench coat, while adopting symbols associated with the elite.

Through his own gaze, he undergoes a transformation similar to that found in the Lacanian "mirror stage," in which the subject sees himself in the mirror for the first time, establishing an acknowledgement of the other. This is not the cultural other explored in

[75] *A Night at the Opera* and *A Day at the Races* are two exceptions to this. In these films, the studio grouped Harpo and Chico in with a larger musical interlude segment in the middle of the films.

Groucho's song, but Lacan's idea of the "Ideal-I." On seeing oneself in the mirror, the subject establishes a break between the perception of the body, chaotic and fractured, and the complete image, whole and contained. The complete image in the mirror becomes an ideal that the subject continues to strive for, or the Ideal-I. This recognition ultimately makes way for an acknowledgement of the "big Other" embodied in the Symbolic Order.[76] After donning the mannequin's refined costume, Harpo dismisses the mannequin's shabby attire, previously his own, and looks admiringly at himself in the mirror, where he appears whole, contained, and "ideal." Aside from tying in to psychoanalytic theories, the prevalence of the mirrors in the ensuing scene bring to mind the much more famous "mirror scene" in *Duck Soup*, in which Harpo and Groucho, in identical costumery, imitate one another suspiciously over a broken mirror.

After taking a whiff of snuff and sneezing, Harpo sits at the harp and begins to play. He performs a well-known classical number – Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 16 in C major – and takes it through a series of transformations. These transformations follow the opposite path of his own transformation, traveling from high to low and revealing that even within Harpo-the-musician, Harpo-the-clown is not far away. He opens by presenting the piece in its original form, adhering to the text for the first seven bars, before imposing a preemptive cadence in the eighth bar. He then repeats the opening, keeping only the melody intact, and implanting it in a delicate accompaniment in the highest register of the harp, reminiscent of the music box that played at the opening of the scene (See Fig. 4). The preemptive cadence combined with the music-box representation indicates that Harpo is not actually playing Mozart, but is signifying Mozart, and the elite culture that Mozart represents. Just as his visual humor exploits a gap between the

[76] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006): 75-81.

signifier and signified, Harpo exploits a similar gap in this piece, one between the music itself and the iconic nature and social significance of the music. Harpo, himself now a sign of high culture, appears cherubic in this section, his face framed by the camera in an angelic smile as he plucks the strings and gazes upward.

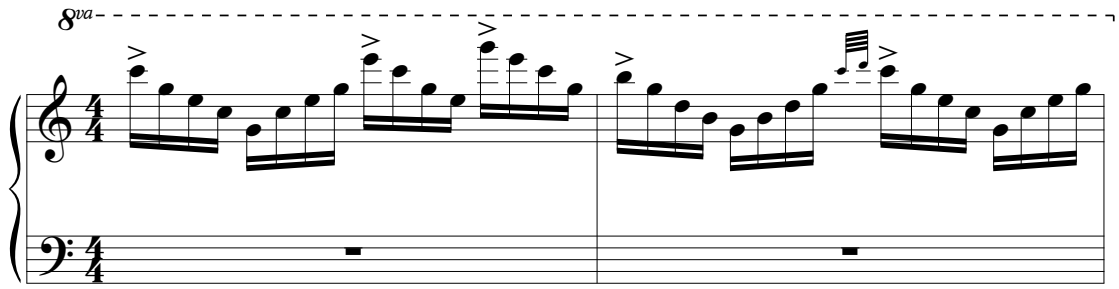

Fig. 4 – Excerpt of Harpo's "Music Box" variation on Mozart's Sonata in C.

Harpo closes the section with a dreamy *ritardando*, and plucks a harmonic. A *glissando* sounds, and he plucks another harmonic, still seemingly lost in reverie. Another *glissando* sounds, and this time he looks puzzled, realizing that he is not playing the *glissandi*. He looks around worriedly, plucks another harmonic, and then jumps, mouth agape, as a final, loud *glissando* sounds from somewhere nearby. Looking unnerved, Harpo transitions into another famous classical piece – Beethoven's Minuet in G. Although still playing a well-known classical tune, he alters it from the beginning, setting the melody to a whimsical accompaniment that strongly resembles the "Spanish dance" section of harpist Carlos Salzedo's *Chanson dans la nuit*, published in 1927.[77] The other significant difference in this section is that he is no longer alone, accompanied now by his own reflections in the mirrors around him. The emphasis in this section veers away from the music momentarily, as he discovers this fact by looking over his shoulder and noticing that his reflection does not look back. He whistles, his reflection turns and nods,

[77] While it's impossible to say with certainty whether this was an actual influence, Harpo was certainly familiar with the composer, and this was one of his most famous pieces.

they both smile and continue playing. With this interaction, the performance takes on a more parodic slant. Throughout the rest of the Beethoven section, the mirror Harpos switch to different instruments, with one picking up a cello, and the other a violin.

After the Beethoven section, the true "lowering" of the piece occurs, with the violinist launching into a transitional fiddle tune, taking the number from a classical aesthetic to a folk number. Harpo then returns to the original Mozart tune, but swings the rhythm and adds a walking bass line and chromatic ornamentation, signifying a transition to a jazz idiom. Finally, the violinist takes over the melody, again playing it as a fiddle piece, before handing it over to an accompanying orchestra as Harpo plays *glissandi* – his typical song-ending device. As Harpo plays the concluding phrase of the piece, he is suddenly duplicated in row after row of Harpos in the mirror behind him. In the excess of notes in the *glissandi* and the excess of Harpos in the mirror, Harpo is no longer a bounded individual, an "Ideal-I," performing an elite musical work, but returns to his Dionysian chaos. Another dissolve takes the viewer back to the opening of the scene, where Harpo stands next to the mannequin, still in his own trench coat with the music box playing next to him, indicating that the entire event was a fantasy.

At the close of the scene, we are still left with Lacan's initial question regarding whether Harpo represents "the most extreme perversity or complete simplicity." Harpo destabilizes meaning and produces humor through his visual puns and through his intrusions in the signifying chain. He does this not only in his visual pantomime and his musical humor, but also within his own character, itself dependent on his musical persona. The central incongruity between the dumb clown and the refined musician, both iconic, plays symbolically with modes of discourse.

In addition, the uses of multiple musical idioms across multiple pieces, as well as the increasing number of Harpos throughout the piece, signify heterogeneity and the abundance of

renewal. Through "debasing" the piece by shifting its place in the traditional cultural hierarchy, Harpo ultimately renews an old, fetishized classic, representing it through different voices. This debasement aligns with the Bakhtinian concept of the grotesque as a place for renewal: "The essence of the grotesque is precisely to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life. Negation and destruction (death of the old) are included as an essential phase, inseparable from affirmation, from the birth of something new and better. This principle is victorious, for the final result is always abundance, increase."[78] This is not to say that Harpo's rendition is "better" than the original Mozart piece – rather, that by reinterpreting it within several different musical styles, he has revivified the tune through an abundance of voices. This heterogeneity reflects the greater heterogeneity of the films, themselves.

Conclusion

While the Marx Brothers' musical numbers may seem irrelevant, they are actually humorous interludes that contain deep ties to the nature of the rest of the comedy on both a large and small scale. Both their music and their humor employ an inversion of norms and hierarchies – a phenomenon that some have labeled "anarchistic." This inversion begins, broadly, at the genre level of early sound comedy, and its incorporation of diegetic music. Gags and songs are said to disrupt narrative flow, and yet, the greater scope of the genre reveals a complete inversion of values. It is actually the gags and songs that are valuable, and the narrative is simply a thin façade stapled onto the variety acts. Within this larger genre of inversion, the Marx Brothers present their own inversions of power. As comedians, their foils are usually wealthy and powerful socialites, and the Marx Brothers tend to compromise these socialites' institutions as a defining feature of their act.

[78] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 62.

On a smaller scale, the acting out of these inversions occurs through a series of smaller inversions. Sometimes the inversions are parodic. The Marx Brothers' dismantling of Verdi turns a serious and weighty tragedy into comedy; Chico's farcical reinterpretations of popular and classical music turn traditional musical and performance values on their head. Sometimes they are character-based. Groucho's character plays a leader while presenting a complete inversion of the image of a leader. Harpo's character presents a bizarre incongruity between his muteness and his musicianship. The inversions extend even to a linguistic level, with Groucho's verbal and Harpo's visual puns splintering presumptions of meaning. These inversions routinely carry over between musical and nonmusical segments. Far from occurring in isolation, the Marx Brothers' musical numbers are a vital comedic force displaying a comparable panoply of incongruencies and inversions, oppositions and intricacies. These numbers are integral to the films' heterogeneity – a high value within this genre.

Many previous analyses of the Marx Brothers have not only ignored their music, but have read their comedy as negative and anarchistic. Incorporating music equally into an understanding of their comedy and viewing the whole as a carnivalesque expression allows for a positive reading of the Marx Brothers' music and humor. Just as the films and gags rely on inversions and oppositions, the Marx Brothers' musical humor is simultaneously derisive and delightful. Musical expression in the films often opens up a communal setting, one in which hierarchical disparities are freely explored and dispensed with. Rather than mere destruction, this communal dispelling of hierarchies is an equalizing and regenerative force. The regenerative nature extends beyond details in the numbers themselves and into the broader regenerative nature of musical comedy as a vital release.

From an historical standpoint, music is critical to the Marx Brothers' act. They performed as musicians for years before they became comedians, and they did not continue to include music in the act for sentimental reasons. They continued to include it because their audiences found something entertaining in it. Any analysis of historical entertainment should consider audience response, and to ignore the Marx Brothers' music is to ignore a critical component of their popularity and success. While film studios used these types of musical interludes to appeal to audiences, they did not force the Marx Brothers to incorporate music – music was already a large part of the act. Furthermore, in their early years in vaudeville, they began spinning comedy out of their musical routine, not the other way around. This genesis suggests a fundamental relationship between their approaches to musical and nonmusical humor.

Finally, expanding scholarship of musical humor beyond traditional targets, such as humor in art music, *opéra comique*, and satirists like P.D.Q. Bach, has the potential to open many new doors of study. Although the Marx Brothers have been historically defined as comedians rather than musicians, their music is worthy of study for its relationship with its historical audience and the deeper relationships it reveals between music and comedy. Seeking out uses of music in humor, rather than the other way around, allows for much more scholarship of the entertainment industry at large and the human response to musical laughter.

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