Historical Contextualization

In 1930, William H. Hays developed the infamous Production Code, a set of guidelines that he hoped would filter immoral content out of the film industry. In 1934, these guidelines were transformed into an official set of laws that essentially legalized censorship and prohibited filmmakers from creating works that would “lower the morality of the audience or ridicule law, natural or human.” *Duck Soup* premiered in 1933, flaunting content that blatantly disobeyed the Production Code’s standards. This satirical film commented powerfully on political ideologies, using sexual innuendoes, witty dialogue, and slapstick humor to demonstrate its mockery of world leaders and warfare. Had the film been released one year later, its subtly risqué content would almost certainly have resulted in its banishment from theaters. As a result, this film proved to be one of the last political satires before the Production Code officially expelled “immoral” content from the industry. This film became a significant work in society because it presented political commentary through humor and satire. Its content became noteworthy to American audiences because it forced them to examine their country’s post-WWI state through a different perspective and question the underlying reasons behind warfare.

Synopsis

The plot of *Duck Soup* centers around Rufus Firefly, the leader of a fictional country named Freedonia, his financial backer, Mrs. Teasdale, and Trentino, the ambassador of Sylvania. After Firefly innocently insults Trentino by slapping him in the face, war is declared and the two countries quickly find themselves ensnared in a ridiculous battle.
Critical Analysis

Through specific costume decisions, *Duck Soup* presents a humorous satire on political warfare, portraying it as a means of flaunting masculinity and strength rather than as a tool used to better a nation; this is significant as it touches upon the differing opinions of war at the time and addresses the conflicts that stirred throughout the world as it embarked on an international power struggle.

Costumes contribute significantly to the film’s overall theme, creating a garish, zany atmosphere by dressing the characters in outfits that have little correlation to their current situations. Mrs. Teasdale’s wardrobe proves particularly effective in demonstrating the presence of male dominance and superiority in the political world. In the opening scene, she is dressed in a heavy fur coat and a billowy, draping dress. This costume choice appears to suffocate her and hinder her mobility, forcing her to walk rigidly and without any kind of liberty. Though she is presented as a figure of power, she lies in the shadow of the men who are free to skip around the room with full energy while she must stand helplessly in her constricting costume.

In addition, she is often adorned with sparkling jewelry, projecting her as a shiny object whose sole purpose is to glitter in the eyes of men. This degradation of women amplifies the masculinity and chauvinistic aspects of combat. Mrs. Teasdale’s wardrobe creates a stark contrast between the more comfortably adorned men, demonstrating their dominance in the world of politics and warfare. This heightens the masculinity of the presented world, drawing attention to Mrs. Teasdale’s trapped nature and Firefly’s excited, spirited movement and ability to do as he pleases because he is a man, while Teasdale’s opinions are ignored or ridiculed.

In addition, Firefly and Trentino’s costumes demonstrate the masculine power play that reoccurs throughout the film. Firefly’s wardrobe consists of a simple, slightly worn down suit, wide spectacles, and a painted moustache, while Trentino sports a debonair tuxedo riddled with medals and sleeked back hair. The contrast between these two men foreshadows the conflict that will quickly ensue. As the film continues, the two men’s costumes become physical representations of their personalities and conflicting ideas of masculinity. Firefly is a scatter-brained, witty, and frantic individual as marked by his slightly disheveled appearance, while Trentino is a rigid, pretentious snob, as indicated by his lofty, ostentatious clothing. As a result, the men quickly
clash. They consequently declare war due to their injured masculinity, pride, and desire to prove themselves stronger and more powerful than the other.

In another scene, two of Trentino’s spies try to infiltrate Mrs. Teasdale’s home and steal the battle plans for the hastily approaching war. Hoping to appear incognito, the two spies dress up as Firefly himself, donning a white nightdress, white sleeping cap, and the classic painted moustache. After Firefly escapes the bathroom, the three “Fireflies” wander the house with their extremely different personalities. By demonstrating the three men scattered frantically around the house, the film comments on the similarities between their inherently disparate characters. Although the men’s loyalties lie with different countries, they represent men in general and the innate desire to succeed at all costs and win the “battle” (in this case, the battle for the secret plans). The costumes add to the absurdity of the situation, creating humor, but also commenting on the ridiculous nature of power play and its role in the declaration of war. The costume choice demonstrates the masculine need to prove one’s power and strength over another as a ridiculous quality common among power-hungry world leaders.

The final scene of the film further demonstrates the importance of masculinity in warfare through frequent costume changes spanning several years of historically important events. Firefly appears in a different kind of war uniform in almost every scene, switching from a Civil War uniform to a French hunter’s garb and even sporting Theodore Roosevelt’s iconic outfit. In addition, Firefly’s two cronies wear clothing that clashes with the time period and the scene at hand. One wears a Napoleonic uniform complete with a wide brimmed, functionless hat and fluff, while the other wears a simple WWI soldier’s uniform with a circular helmet and raggedy shirt and pants. This eclectic collection of different war uniforms comments on the dominance of masculinity and a desire to prove one’s strength and power over another. This scene comments on the fact that this aspect of warfare is not a modern problem, but rather a psychological state that has occurred throughout history over and over again.

When Trentino is finally caught, he is once again wearing an elegant, ostentatious uniform. The contrast between his higher-class clothing and Firefly’s simple cloth outfit demonstrates this struggle for pride and power. In the end, Firefly, who appears more rugged and worn down, wins the masculinity battle over the more elegant, ostentatious Trentino.
Personal Response

My initial impression of this movie was that it was a typical slapstick film without any distinctive elements to keep me entertained. Other Honors students who had also been forced to watch the film surrounded me, and the panel of professors only verified the academic setting. As a result, I anticipated a very stressful viewing that would be spent meticulously analyzing the film for themes and techniques. However, after settling into a very comfortable chair, the massive screen sucked me into the story and immersed me in the world of the Marx brothers.

To my surprise, I actually enjoyed the film and its absurd plot. While contemplating the movie as a whole and its creators’ intentions, I felt that I more fully understood its meaning and purpose. The political commentary suddenly seemed ingenious and unbelievably witty, and I became very interested in the different symbolic interpretations that the film had to offer. The intelligent, humorous dialogue and blatant degradation of women exposed the time period’s social state and forced me to consider the conversations that took place and the full extent of their meanings. After watching this film, I feel like I more fully understand the psychological intentions that are hidden beneath the surface of our world wars. The film encouraged me to examine political decisions more carefully and to analyze whether or not world leaders have selfish, power-hungry intentions or if they really do believe that their decisions are beneficial to their country.