

“Allusions to the Franco-Prussian War in Jerry Lewis’ *The Patsy*”
(Notes on a paper to be submitted to Cinema Studies Conference, NYU, 2013)
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That *The Patsy* represents in many ways Lewis at the height of his aesthetic powers is often disputed (see Simone, *Cahiers du Cinema*, “Godard and Giggle Fits,” note 4), but the emotional depths plumbed by Del Moore make further discussion superfluous and gaseous. Too often overlooked is the subtext, that of the Franco-Prussian (German) War of 1870, without which consideration the entire Hans Conreid set piece is merely clamorous.

Comedian Wally Brandford is dead. The cornerstone of their lives—dead. The death of laughter is the death of bourgeois complacency. But how can this be reconciled with a defeated French nation of 1815? Lawrence Sitwell, in his seminal “Doodles Weaver and Danse Macabre,” makes a compelling argument for an association between the late French empire and the Martin-Lewis breakup, with Martin as Danton.

The hero: Prince Leopold, in the guise of Stanley Belt. (That some have seen in Belt an adumbration of Napoleon III, and the French in general, is evidence only of a historical illiteracy laid bare and condemned in Grimes’ “Anachronisms and Counterrevolutionary Cant in *Girls, Girls, Girls*,” *Film Comment*, 1972.) In short, Belt is a subordinate power in whom an unwarranted trust is placed. A mere bellboy and dog walker is to take the place of the late great comic, groomed by invisible powers, coldly calculating, pulling the strings, as it were, as puppets dance and nations fall — a Hohenzollern on the Spanish throne. Bismarck, in the person of Peter Lorre, sets the theater in motion. (Will they split up or fight as a unit?)

“You seem strangely mad about my ice ... It’s just cubes,” says Belt. Could

Lewis and co-screenwriter Richmond have spelled out their intentions more succinctly and coherently? “Ice” is clearly a synecdoche for the Nordic races, unless that’s the wrong word. (That Dellacourt would see a reference to Cubism, and thus the rejection of realism—illustrated by the fantasized dance sequence with Ina Blain — has now been discredited. See Wade’s commentary in disc 2 of *Boeing Boeing: The Director’s Cut*.) “Keep him glued down. Don’t let him out of your sight”—instructions from Everett Sloane regarding the fevered training Belt is to undergo, or merely war propaganda? “I’m either going to be a fighter or a dog,” Stanley replies, no doubt a thinly veiled reference to France’s failed Mexican adventure of 1867.

“Stanley, do we look dishonest?” asks Phil Harris (Chic, heralding sexual ambiguity) disingenuously. But only when Belt sees Ellen (Balin), the feminine, is Belt’s trust engaged. “I like Hailey Mills a lot.” How to mature this man-child into a killer? The transposition of the feminine with George Raft—seen through a looking glass, the mirror image of the feminized Belt—signals the maturing of the German princely fiefdoms into the community of nation-states.

The almost supernaturally quick repairs done to Professor Mulerr’s door (in an act of unprovoked aggression, Belt rips the doorknob off, rendering the Professor’s homeland pregnable) is no doubt a parallel to Germany’s political and military rehabilitation in light of its defeat earlier in the century at the hands of Napoleon I. The rare vases and works of art that Stanley is constantly threatening is the disruption of European culture that a unified German portends. (Belt’s inability to be properly seated in any of the professor’s eccentric chairs is the discomfort Leopold experiences on the Spanish throne—an allusion so blatant as to be laughable in its lack of subtlety. While

some have interpreted this visual trope as a reference to the Chair of Peter threatened by withdrawal of French troops from Rome, Hecker, in his unpublished paper “Kierkegaard’s Teleological Suspension of the Ethical in Lewis’ *The Day the Clown Cried*,” so thoroughly decimates this notion that anyone daring to argue in its favor today is to be dismissed as criminally insane.)

Farce, aiming for the heart and not the head, often misses the mark, resulting in bathos and prostatitis. Belt’s early studio work, “backed up” by three “women” so clearly Belt’s doppelgangers, casts into relief the tripartite alliance of 1914, predicated on a German victory in 1871.

A memo found at Paramount Pictures studio in 1976, in a file marked “craft services,” makes clear that the coffee an extra is seen drinking was brewed in a Krupp coffeemaker. Krupp, as any schoolchild knows, was the manufacturer of the vastly superior steel artillery employed by the Prussians to the despair of the French.

Too obvious to note is Lewis’ propensity for painting on large canvasses—witness the self-reflexive set featured in *The Ladies Man* (whose mise en scene has been masterfully deconstructed in a series of non sequiturs in Ettore Duola’s nine-volume *The Disorderly Orderly: An Exercise in Terror*). The living space in which the ensemble cast interact is clearly a representation of the Prussian strategy that would ultimately regain Alsace.

And who can deny the resemblance between the green carpet and the Rhine frontier? The composition is a work of finely honed manipulation and visual expression—see Kurosawa’s *High and Low* or Visconti’s *Senso*, in which blocking within the frame highlights class distinctions to the point of making them both a bore.

The attempt to generate publicity based on no clear achievement, the manipulation of gossip maven Hedda Hopper (could the umbrella hat be a picture of the Treaty of Westphalia?), and Belt's all-too-clever "It's like making a sow's pig out of a person's ear" are all revealed as mere ploys, diversionary tactics.

Having failed as a singer, Belt tries to make a success of it as a comic. The material he is given is substituted for homespun puerility, his stage fright an unconscious flashback to the Battle of Woerth, which saw the death of 10,500 Germans, which is not always a bad thing. (The imagined military execution is summarized ably by Andre Bazin in reference to the work of Robert Bresson, when he said: "Death is not the preordained end of our final agony, only its conclusion and our deliverance. Who finished the vinaigrette?")

Distinct from the object, the cinematic image is a projection of the kidnapping of Napoleon III, the displacement of power from the Latin to the Teutonic. Garibaldi, contra his fellow Italians' desire to fight with the Germans, joined the French and assumed command of the Army of the Vosges—mere volunteers. Do I see the shadow of Dean Martin's refusal to go gently into that dark night, instead perpetrating those roasts on hapless victims? But to what end?

And so Stanley is set up to fail, abandoned by his allies. Yet what are we to make finally of his success? The siege and bombardment of Paris, resulting in the Treaty of Frankfurt, is captured most poignantly, with just the right psychological coloring, in Sloane/Carol's defense of Ellen (Gambetta's refusal to accept the French surrender?). With the Germans in the ascendancy, the French must recede, forever at the feet of Lewis.

Although I could be reading too much into this.