

**Textes et contextes**

ISSN : 1961-991X

: Université Bourgogne Europe

13-1 | 2018

Satire (en) politique - L'expression des sentiments dans la poésie féminine

## Spoofing the Kaiser in silent war comedies: The cinematic downfall of Wilhelm II

*Parodier l'empereur dans les comédies muettes de guerre : la chute  
cinématographique de Guillaume II*

06 December 2018.

**Clémentine Tholas**

 <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=1926>

Licence CC BY 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Clémentine Tholas, « Spoofing the Kaiser in silent war comedies: The cinematic downfall of Wilhelm II », *Textes et contextes* [], 13-1 | 2018, 06 December 2018 and connection on 28 July 2025. Copyright : [Licence CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). URL : <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=1926>

PREO

# Spoofing the Kaiser in silent war comedies: The cinematic downfall of Wilhelm II

*Parodier l'empereur dans les comédies muettes de guerre : la chute cinématographique de Guillaume II*

## **Textes et contextes**

06 December 2018.

13-1 | 2018

Satire (en) politique - L'expression des sentiments dans la poésie féminine

Clémentine Tholas

🔗 <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=1926>

Licence CC BY 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

- 
1. The cinematic Kaiser: a non-threatening German
  2. The ordeals of Kaiser Bill: denied power and masculinity
- 

- 1 The German emperor Wilhelm II (1859-1941) belongs nowadays to popular culture, not to say to international folklore. Chanted on French and Belgian playgrounds for several decades, the nursery rhyme, “*Guillaume le méchant homme qui a tué des millions d’hommes, sa femme l’Impératrice qui est la reine des saucisses*” (William the bad man who killed millions of men, his wife the Empress who is the queen of sausages) illustrates the transformation of the imperial figure into the butt of the joke, a random man who does not inspire awe and fear<sup>1</sup>. With all the celebrations and research activities related to the centennial, the historical accuracy of the German Kaiser has been reestablished, yet we have to consider that his grandiose image was shattered as early as the years of the Great War. Because of his obstinacy and final defeat, Wilhelm II is not often remembered as a respected regal authority. This desecration is exemplified by the various nicknames he received from his childhood to the end of his reign, some of them still being used today: Reise-Kaiser (travelling-Emperor) or Gondola-Billy because of the time he spent on boats,

Wilhelm-der-Plotzliche (William-the-Sudden) because he was very impulsive (Fischer 1909: 95), Alarm Fritz among soldiers (e.g. *Aspen Tribune* 1898), and Kaiser Bill in English-speaking countries. The Kaiser was also the recurrent subject of drawings and caricatures circulating in newspapers and postcards published by the Allied powers, and his comical downfall was accelerated as well by motion pictures, especially American pictures, which vividly partook in anti-German propaganda distributed on both sides of the Atlantic.

- 2 Today, because of the proliferation of the imagery of the Kaiser, we tend to see Wilhelm II more as a visual character than as a real participant in world history. People forget about his personal story as a monarch torn between British and Prussian heritages and who grew up overcoming an inferiority complex linked to the handicap he suffered as a child and the way he was challenged to fit into the aristocratic world despite that disability (Dietrich 1981: 466-467). To understand how cinema offered its own vision of the Emperor, this article will study the devices used by American motion pictures to build the cinematic persona of “Kaiser Bill”. While propaganda films produced in the 1910s overlapped different genres (historical films, melodramas, slapstick comedies), it is important to note that the Kaiser mainly appeared on screen after the United States entered the conflict in April 1917 and seemed to belong primarily to war-related comedies. Our study will therefore use comic material: two short liberty-bond commercials shot during the fourth liberty loan drive, *One Hundred Percent American* (1918) and *The Bond* (1918) and two features filmed and produced at the end of war, *Shoulder Arms* (1918) and *Yankee Doodle in Berlin* (1919). To measure to what extent Wilhelm II was turned into a farcical cinematic archetype, we will first focus on his clownish looks and attire which debunk the myth of the ferocious German and then we will analyze the way he was denied power and authority in American films.

## 1. The cinematic Kaiser: a non-threatening German

- 3 The cinematic image of Kaiser Bill reinvested the traditional imperial paraphernalia lampooned in drawings and caricatures: the *Pickelhaube* or spiked helmet (or a helmet with the imperial eagle), the up-

turned mustache with stiff waxed tips, the immense cumbersome cape, the array of medals and the irritable frown. The emperor's appearance and behavior make him easily identifiable like a sort of clown, a character visually "marked out from everyday members of society" thanks to his clothing and the accessories he uses (Attardo: 2014: 132).

- 4 Because of his sophisticated costume displaying the signs of imperial power, Wilhelm II, who enjoyed being called "The Only", is an outstanding figure embodying fantasized German-ness for American and European cinema audiences. Dressing up as the Kaiser was actually part of Wilhelm II's rituals. Indeed, he was notorious for his passion for military uniforms and ceremonies, as he loved their look but also their meaning. For him, they conveyed a sense of history and illustrated his respect of discipline and royal etiquette (Rohl 2005: 122-123).
- 5 He possessed a very large collection of uniforms from every Prussian regiment, naval forces and also foreign armies, along with the coordinated accessories. Some of his relatives reported that he changed into different uniforms several times a day (Van der Kiste 2013: 67; Tucker 2014: 1665). We may wonder if he was playing the role of the Great Autocrat or if he really or sincerely believed in this display of costumes supposedly representing power. His love of uniforms and parades was well-known among the German population who took a fancy to royal events and galas that became popular mass entertainments and German subjects even started collecting pictures of the Emperor which were consumed like celebrity collectibles. The lavishness and spectacle associated with the glittering parades and the Kaiser's outfits reminded people of the actor's costumes and a form of theatricality (Gilio 2012: 422-423). It seems that looking at the Emperor was like enjoying an elaborate show rather than admiring an almighty sovereign. Wilhelm II was not so much a monarch but a performer. Early Hollywood plays on this passion for the display of grandeur and attacks his artificiality and incompetence. The Kaiser's costume appears paradoxically as an assertion of the power Wilhelm II would like to represent and as a real hindrance to performing his duties as a political leader. For example, the imposing cape which prevents him from moving freely and the helmet he cannot keep straight on his head discredit him. His clothes and hat are ill-fitting and make him look clumsy and inappropriate. But the Kaiser's sophisticated

uniform can also be interpreted as a means to conceal his own state of insecurity related the various roles he had to perform and his lack of understanding of modern Germany, which was evolving from a feudal society to an industrial country (Dietrich 1981: 475).

- 6 The Kaiser's face itself is a crucial element of his costume, reminding the viewer of a kind of mask with a complicated mustache-do and an emphasized expression of discontent. Reminiscent of the tradition of theatrical masks which distorted certain physical features, it is a form of aesthetic disguise preventing access to the man's identity, feelings and discourse (Attardo 2014: 484). Masks are supposed to illustrate a man's second nature or can be used to cause fright or shock to establish a sense of distance. They may reveal the true-self of some characters, showing what lies behind the façade of so-called normality (Görner 2007: 57).
- 7 Consequently, The Kaiser's mask with its distorted mustache and exaggerated scowl aims at debunking the royal respectability and exposing the tyrannical and shady nature of the man. It is a scary representation of the emperor as the epitome of the German villain with the most despicable instincts, the blood-thirsty Hun who rapes women and kills babies. However, Kaiser Bill is less frightening than he is supposed to be because his facial expression and features borrow from visual elements that are familiar to cinema audiences. Indeed, the threatening whiskers and an angry glare are very similar to those of slapstick rogues, played by Eric Campbell<sup>2</sup> for instance, or unfriendly "keystone kops/cops" known to be incompetent tormenters of poor citizens. Ford Sterling, who played the Kaiser in Mack Sennett's *Yankee Doodle in Berlin*, was famous for his repeated roles as a stupid police officer and he used the same acting style to portray the Kaiser as a "grimacing and gesticulating" character (Erickson 2012: 22).
- 8 The Kaiser is gradually transformed into a customary inadequate representative of power.
- 9 For instance, in the epilogue of *One Hundred Percent American* starring Mary Pickford as Mayme, a young American saving money to support the war effort, the Kaiser (uncredited) is represented as a carnivalesque character belonging to a fairground attraction. He appears as a clumsy tightrope-walker trying to retreat towards Germa-

ny on a beam representing the Hidenburg Line, the intertitle “The Grand March – backwards” stressing the defeat and the cowardice of German forces after American intervention. Wilhelm II is laden with packages representing his many burdens: Atrocities, Militarism, Kultur, Brute Force, Autocracy and Clown Prince (written on a little coffin). The satirical allusion to the inadequacy of the German Crown Prince is a common trope found in other films. Mayme aims at the Kaiser with a baseball representing the liberty bonds and knocks him over. The scene evokes the Aunt Sally game in which people throw a stick at a far off figure. Here the figure is not the traditional old maid with a pipe but the pathetic emperor who is aggressively attacked by virginal Mayme who tries to defeat either otherness or a form of authority considered illegitimate. As the film opened on a scene in Coney Island where the heroine listens to a patriotic speech given by a four-minute man<sup>3</sup>, the final scene can be read as a reminder of the funfair and beating the awkward Kaiser seems as easy and exciting as a game of skill. When he rolls his eyes desperately before falling in the soup, Wilhelm II does not resemble an honorable emperor but a grinning buffoon overthrown by an innocent young American whose power lies in her convictions and patriotism.

- 10 American silent war comedies managed to create a new engaging and unthreatening Kaiser figure, very different from the image of the emperor as a beast or a barbarian. World War One propaganda relied mainly on the idea that Germans were of another kind: criminals, invaders, savages, cannibals, sadists, tyrants, rapists, and/or mentally disturbed (Oehling (<https://muse.jhu.edu/results?section1=author&search1=Richard%20A.%20Oehling>)1973: 5). And all these infamous traits were summed up by the term “Hun” which also coded the Germans as Asians rather than whites to assert their divergence (Latham 2003: 17).
- 11 Actually, Wilhelm II himself introduced the idea of the Germans as “Huns” in a speech given at Bremerhaven in July 1900 when the German troops were embarking for China to help suppress the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) which opposed European expansion and Christian missionary activities in Asia. The Emperor exhorted his troops to be inspired by Attila by showing no mercy and taking no prisoners (Coupe 1980: 18):

Should you encounter the enemy, he will be defeated! No quarter will be given! Prisoners will not be taken! Whoever falls into your hands is forfeited. Just as a thousand years ago the Huns under their King Attila made a name for themselves, one that even today makes them seem mighty in history and legend, may the name German be affirmed by you in such a way in China that no Chinese will ever again dare to look cross-eyed at a German.<sup>4</sup>

- 12 This speech illustrates Wilhelm II's self-assertion of brutality and bloodthirstiness he tried to look terrifying for his the enemies and to justify the building and preservation of an empire through violence. The image of the Hun introduced in 1900 was reactivated in World War One propaganda posters and certain films, especially in the United States, and the emphasis on the dangerous animality applied not only to the Kaiser but to all German soldiers. Animalizing the Kaiser and German soldiers was clearly a strategy of belittlement, and they were compared to undignified animals such as pigs, rats, snakes, apes and spiders to underscore their mediocrity. They were also presented as monsters, beasts or brutes (Latham 2003, 17).
- 13 A famous American army enlistment poster entitled *Destroy this Mad Brute: Enlist*, created by Harry Ryle Hopps in 1917, demonized Germans and in particular the Kaiser by representing him as a gorilla with a pointed helmet labeled "Militarism", a turned-up mustache, and a blood-stained stick on which was written "Kultur". The lustful beast carried the limp half-naked body of a woman who may be seen to represent imperiled American liberty or even referring to the rape of Belgium and German war crimes. The Kaiser's humanity was negated and he was portrayed as a vile creature, only capable of killing and sexually assaulting innocents. Similar views on the violence of the emperor were conveyed in other illustrations such as Charles Dana Gibson's "Civilization Tries to Remove Germany from the World Stage" published in *Life* magazine on March 8, 1917.<sup>5</sup> The cartoon shows Wilhelm II furiously strangling a young woman standing for Belgium, his eyes looking like terrifying black holes and expressing somehow a mechanical killing instinct. He is so absorbed in his dreadful task that he remains unaware of Civilization, embodied by an ancient goddess, trying to stop him with a crook. Representing international affairs as a playhouse, this picture emphasizes the theatrical

dimension of the war and presents the Kaiser as an actor in the costume of merciless cruelty while Uncle Sam and Liberty are just helpless spectators, looking on from their box seats.

- 14 Denunciations of the Kaiser's malevolence, greed and viciousness are also to be found in such American motion pictures as Julian Rupert's melodrama *The Beast of Berlin* (1918) or George Irving's farce *To Hell with the Kaiser* (1918) in which the Kaiser offers his soul to the devil to be granted the power to rule the world<sup>6</sup>. *The Bond*, a liberty loan short commercial, directed by Chaplin, plays with the myth of the nasty German attacking vulnerable women when the Kaiser (Syd Chaplin)<sup>7</sup> is ready to hit Liberty from behind with his sword while she cannot see him. He does not confront his enemy and makes cowardly plots behind her back, but she is rescued by a fearless young American. The comicality is based on Wilhelm's deficient military skills as the Doughboy very easily disarms him, exposing the gaucherie and incompetence of the pseudo-warlord. In the following shot, Chaplin accentuates this lack of talent for battle when he shows the Kaiser alone on screen, standing immobile with his sword, grunting and yelling at an invisible enemy. He does not notice The Tramp and his "Liberty Loan-hammer" coming to knock him down. After The Tramp hits him four times, the Kaiser lies motionless on the floor, completely defeated. The scene with the gigantic mallet reminds the audience of the traditional weapon used by clowns during their acts to challenge their partners and reasserts the Kaiser's farcical dimension.
- 15 Actually, the comedies we are analyzing parted from the unforgiving vision of the Kaiser as a brute because they adopted a more moderate satirical vision, testifying to American mixed feelings towards Germans before the country entered the war. It is necessary to remember that if European allies were deeply estranged from their German foes, the United States counted many German-born immigrants or citizens with German parentage in the cities of the Midwest like Chicago or Milwaukee where they represented a significant proportion of the population. They formed a rather wealthy and well-assimilated community, suffering far less from the attacks of Nativists than Southern and Eastern-European immigrants (Ellis 1997: 183-185). German-Americans shared a strong anti-British sentiment, along with Irish immigrants<sup>8</sup>; they did not want their new country to side with Great Britain and called for US neutrality. Moreover, German

Jews who had come to the United States were influenced by the Wilhemine culture that they had received and their distrust towards Russia because of the numerous pogroms. As a result, the German cause appealed to certain Americans and some regions developed pro-German sentiments (Graham 2010: 25).

- 16 Although German-Americans were considered a threat due to their suspected divided loyalties<sup>9</sup> and were targeted by harsh mob violence and occasionally indicted under the 1917 Espionage Act and 1918 Sedition Act, they still enjoyed a form of respect in a world dominated by Anglo-Saxon culture. We can consider that they inhabited the same mindset as Anglo-Americans because they all supported the same Eurocentric ideologies based on the supremacy of whiteness. During the war, they may have been labelled as deviant enemies in America, but never as inferior beings, contrary to other ethnic groups. Consequently, representing Germans to the American population which was predominantly white and included a significant proportion of people of German descent was problematic (Latham 2003: 16).
- 17 The United States seemed to be torn between a strong rejection of anything German due to the war and the remnants of cultural connections between the two countries as Americans admired German education, industrial and technological advancement as much as they criticized teutonic aggressiveness and militarism (Oehling (<http://muse.jhu.edu/results?section1=author&search1=Richard%20A.%20Oehling>) 1973: 2). As a result of this strange form of deference, German soldiers and the Kaiser benefited from a caricatural and cheerful tolerance in silent war comedies which showed them to be sausage-eating fools rather than cruel rapists and murderers. Indeed, war comedies rather lampooned the “rigid authoritarianism and the imperial arrogance” associated with the Kaiser and his minions than evoked them as real dangers (Insenberg 1975: 10).
- 18 We can go as far as comparing the fictitious character named “Kaiser Bill” to his pictorial rival, Uncle Sam. Just like Uncle Sam, who stands for the United States and was revived by James Montgomery Flagg in a 1916 illustration<sup>10</sup>, Kaiser Bill is an allegory of his country. Replacing the romantic Germania with her chivalric attire and noble attitude, he is distanced from a true-to-life representation of the geopolitical

situation, even if he looks similar to the German sovereign. We can see him as the non-realistic double of Wilhelm II who, despite his unpleasant characteristics, becomes quite familiar and even endearing to the audience because he does not convey any sense of menace. According to John Mullen, the informal appellation Kaiser Bill is neither quite friendly nor quite hateful, it sounds similar to the name “Fritz” given to German soldiers while the reference to the “Hun” is much more of an insult (Mullen 2015: 170). We are thus tempted to say that the moniker “Kaiser Bill” could be interpreted as a kind of derogatory pet name for the screen duplicate of the emperor, a character Americans loved to hate and mock. Just as in the United Kingdom, he is presented in many American popular songs as an old pitiful opponent, standing alone and abandoned against the hordes of vigorous young men serving Uncle Sam and Miss Liberty with all their heart. In these patriotic songs which frequently prefer to praise the bravery of the United States and its allies or lament the loss of sons, the fight against Germany is portrayed by Yankee boys who are coming to kick the Kaiser’s backside, crystalizing all anti-German sentiments on the emperor instead of fustigating the entire population.<sup>11</sup> If we look at the lyrics of Gale M. Barton’s “Kaiser Bill”, we can see that he is the sole target of the American attacks, and also that he is not portrayed as an appalling enemy but as a friendly foe:

Kaiser Bill is a merry old soul who lives in Germany,  
He thinks America is sound asleep way across the sea.  
But Uncle Sam is wide awake and now we’re over there,  
We’re going to lick him on land and sea, and also in the air  
Chorus:  
When Kaiser Bill goes marching homeward  
Your Uncle Sammy’s boys will be there too  
We’re going to chase him clear thru to Berlin  
And when we get him there this is what we will do  
We’re going to put Brother Wilhelm where he ought to be  
And make this good old world safe for democracy.

- 19 Likewise, in American comedies, even if Kaiser Bill appears as the arch-enemy of America, he does not represent the cold, calculating, sadistic German but a new satirical archetype who embodies stupidity, clumsy trickery and the illusion of holding some power.

## 2. The ordeals of Kaiser Bill: denied power and masculinity

20 In order to disparage Wilhelm II, comic films discredit his desire to appear as a great emperor who wishes to be compared to the greatest historical leaders. Actually, he was a very proud and pompous character who wanted to polish his image of a god-chosen Kaiser. He was one of the very last of the Old divine right monarchs, firmly believing that his crown came to him from God himself. On August 25, 1910, Wilhelm II declared in Königsberg “I look on myself as an instrument of the Almighty and go on my way regardless of transient opinions and views” (quoted in Balfour 1975: 157). He considered that the authority granted by his status could exempt him from ruling with popular consent and his subjects resented him for showing such disrespect. As a result, many caricatures compared him to the French absolutist king Louis XVI and underscored their common lack of judgment (Coupe 1981: 21). If the Kaiser thought of himself as a superior being, he still worried about publicity in the same way as his British relatives, and in particular Queen Victoria, who paid close attention to how she advertised her image. Therefore, the German monarch was obsessed with his portrayals in newspaper headlines, but paradoxically not with his public speeches which often scandalized the German public (Gilio 2012: 407). His life was orchestrated with an intense *esprit de mise en scène* as he wished to stage himself ostentatiously as a very powerful man and was very cautious about the content of his portraits, by deciding on many elements such as the uniforms, the props, the poses which mimicked Louis XIV’s posture (Gilio 2012: 417). Wilhelm II wanted to create a certain image of German power inherited from former Empires; however, it seems that he was never truly considered an “object of veneration” by his German subjects (Gilio 2012: 439). The German population did not perceive the Kaiser the way he wanted to be seen and they even considered him with a great familiarity. They felt close to the monarch due to his visual omnipresence deriving from the huge circulation of photographs and images of Wilhelm II in the country but they experienced no real admiration for him. German people did not worship the Kaiser but regarded him as a kind relative or a figure form of entertainment

(Gilio 2012: 444-445). If he was not revered by his own people, how could Wilhelm II be respected by countries at odds with Germany? American popular culture seems to have adopted the same casual vision of the Kaiser as an amusing monarch struggling to look powerful but unable to achieve his dreams of greatness.

- 21 The cinematic Kaiser Bill is the personification of military inefficiency and cowardice. In *Shoulder Arms*, Chaplin's war feature produced at the very end of the conflict, the Kaiser only appears in the last part of the film. The emperor (Syd Chaplin) visits the German back-lines stationed by an abandoned house. While the German soldiers form a guard of honor to welcome their chief, the Kaiser does not even look at them or salute them because he rushes towards the building for safety. This illustrates his lack of consideration for his men and his egotism. Inside the house, accompanied by two officers, he meets with a young lady prisoner (Edna Purviance) and wonders why she is kept there. He starts asking the girl questions and accuses her of lying, before opening the door of the closet to find The Tramp dressed as a German officer (Charles Chaplin). Of course, the discovery of a man in a closet is reminiscent of the trope of the hidden lover exposed by the deceived husband frequently found in slapstick comedies. In this scene, the Kaiser does not appear as a figure of authority but as a character at a loss because he does not understand what is going on. Later on, thanks to the intertitle, the spectator is presented a moment of "Prompt Action" during which the Kaiser is not active on the battlefield but sitting and studying a map. His moment of glory is the confiscation of a bottle of champagne from an officer and telling him off: "Pay attention to the war!" Yet, paying attention to the war means comfortably looking at it from a distance and doing nothing. The Kaiser thus appears as a passive observer of the conflict and not a man of decisive action or courage. As the emperor is totally disconnected from his military functions, it is very easy for The Tramp and his sidekick – the young peasant girl – to abduct him. He does not even notice he has been taken prisoner before he reaches the nearby American camp. With the intertitle "Bringing home the bacon", the Kaiser is commodified and degraded because he is not more than a piece of meat. The term bacon also refers to the derogatory appellation given to German during the war: pigs. The emperor is not even granted the right to be a prestigious war prisoner. When brought among cheerful

American soldiers, he remains stiff and motionless. The Tramp takes away the medals of the emperor to pin them on the Doughboys, thus depriving the Kaiser of the traditional signs of military distinctions. He becomes a nobody and the only preferential treatment he receives is a kick up the backside; it is the ultimate humiliation as the bottom is the least noble part of the body. This inglorious assault echoes the gestures of clowns' performances as well as the lyrics of patriotic songs in which soldiers dream of teaching the Kaiser a lesson with a well-placed kick.

- 22 In Mack Sennett's *Yankee Doodle in Berlin*, the spectator is also presented with the Kaiser (Ford Sterling) as a dysfunctional military leader. The second intertitle "German headquarters – The Kaiser, the Crown Prince and Von Hindenburg – remnants of autocracy" states right away the abuse of power perpetrated by the imperial family and its court. Apart from being denounced as a despot, the Kaiser is once again ironically accused of being a coward in the next intertitle "Braving the horrors of the battle one thousand miles away from the firing line". He may look concerned and somber, as if he was getting ready for a strategic offensive, but he stands in the garden of his lavish castle, only busy trying to teach his ridiculous Prussian guard how to goose-step. Unfortunately, despite "forty years of training", German soldiers are still unable to march properly and move nonsensically like broken automatons to the greatest despair of the Kaiser who claims in disbelief, "If they are soldiers, I am an acrobat". Once again, the reference to the circus ridicules the performance of the Prussian army which triggers the fury of the emperor as the intertitle shows "You're ruining my reputation! PIGS!" Indeed, the soldiers prove to be complete amateurs with weapons, the sound of the firearms scares them to death and they start running around like madmen before shooting Wilhelm in the bottom. The Kaiser almost loses his helmet and totally loses his dignity. Unable to train his men, he has to deal with incompetent troops who cannot wage a war but he blames them while he is the one unable to perform his duty as chief of the armed forces. In fact, the movie suggests that like Kaiser, like soldiers because the emperor is some kind of aloof armchair commander. Moreover, when presenting his war plans to his generals, he imitates the sound of bombs with his mouth and gesticulates wildly to illustrate the impact of the bombs, like a child playing war games with his

friends. And if his men don't agree with him, he sulks. Because he appears as an immature and capricious child with no knowledge of military strategies, he cannot earn the respect of Von Hindenburg, who refuses to obey his order unless he is bribed with money and compliments. Childishly leading an army of corrupt, insolent and incompetent soldiers, Wilhelm II seems doomed to fail. Retrospectively, the general's insubordination can also be understood as an illustration of the many criticisms against the emperor, addressed by the German military elite and the deputies of the Reichstag because of his military pretensions and delusions of being a great strategist (Dietrich 1981: 466). Moreover, the Kaiser crystallized discontent within his own country because the population was disappointed by the various promises he made regarding establishing social reforms and transforming German diplomacy and that he was unable to keep. He appeared as the image of "disappointed hopes" as he had claimed Germany was destined to great things and never managed to accomplish them. As a result, he was often attacked for his lack of efficiency and his anachronistic vision of power (Coupe 1981: 21-22).

- 23 The second major blemish of the onscreen emperor is his lack of masculine might. *Yankee Doodle in Berlin* portrays the Kaiser as an emasculated king or a potential homosexual, thus denying his manliness and power. It is a way to challenge Wilhelm II's obedience to the rigorous Prussian code of masculine conduct cultivated by German society (Dietrich 1981: 472). The film presents the empress (Eva Thatcher) as the one wearing the pants and she repeatedly beats her husband up when he does not behave the way she wants. She first appears as a heavy beer-drinker and a coarse sausage-eater, swallowing food hungrily and burping like an ill-mannered man and not a lady of high rank. When she realizes her husband is trying to seduce another woman – who is in reality an American spy dressed as a woman –, the infuriated Kaiserine tries to strangle the Kaiser, violently throws the entire crockery at him and breaks a bottle on his head. Later in the movie, when she catches him in an intimate situation with the same alleged woman, she threatens to kill him "I'll knock his royal block off" and starts chasing him through the bedrooms of the castle, beating him up once again. At some point, the Kaiser rebels and punches his wife in the face while their son holds her quiet. Wilhelm defiantly declares "I'll show her who is the boss" but his mutiny falls flat because the empress retaliates and gets the upper hand over him. These

scenes of domestic violence present the emperor as a battered man who dodges the blows and is scared of his brutal spouse who appears as the real man of the house. He is denigrated for being a feeble man of no authority in his home and becomes the victim of a virile woman who looks more frightening than the Allies and their bombs. In the final scene, Kaiser Bill is chased by a gigantic US shell the same way he was chased by his stocky wife. The comparison between the empress and the shell can remind us of the association of female names with dangerous pieces of ordnance, in particular Big Bertha (*Dicke Bertha*), the heavy canon used to bomb Paris and named after the daughter of the manufacturer Krupp (Huyon 2008). The Kaiserine probably proves more dangerous to her husband than his American enemies and, in the film, the bloodiest war takes place at home.

- 24 Dominated by his wife, the Kaiser in Sennett's comedy is also satirized as an unmanly character because of his homosexual inclinations, illustrating a form of inferiority and degeneracy in the society of the 1910s and 1920s. It is crucial to keep in mind that a non-conformist sexual orientation was seen as a threat to traditional male identity and patriarchal domination, especially in the context of the war (Chambers 1999: 288). After, the Harden-Eulenberg scandal in 1907, which unveiled the homosexuality of Prince Philipp Eulenburg, one of the closest confidants of Wilhelm II, the Allies described homosexuality as a "German vice" (Tamagne 2001: 158). It is then no surprise that Kaiser Bill falls for an American aviator, dressed as a sophisticated Mata-Hari-like *femme fatale* to go unnoticed behind German lines. The character of Bob is played by Bothwell Browne, a Danish-born entertainer, extremely famous for his female impersonations. He uses his "faux feminine wiles" to seduce not only the Kaiser but also the Crown Prince and General Von Hindenburg (Erickson 2012: 22). If Bob puts on the costume of a seductive female spy, Marie, a Belgian prisoner, has to dress as a German soldier in order to escape. It is worth mentioning that cross-dressing and gender confusion is also present in *Shoulder Arms* when the young peasant steals the outfit of the Kaiser's driver in order to save her life but also to capture the emperor.
- 25 In *Yankee Doodle in Berlin*, Bob's mystification proves extremely efficient as no German man ever suspects the stratagem and all fall for the charming lady. After beguiling the soldiers, the officers and the Kaiser at the beer garden by making eyes at them and showing his

ankles, “Lady Bob” is invited as a guest of honor to join the smitten Wilhelm for a croquet game in the castle gardens. The emperor meets a major rival in the person of his son who very insistently displays his interest in Bob and the quest for the affection of the American pilot disrupts the hierarchy of the imperial family and the authority of the Kaiser. The Crown Prince’s comment “Every girl I get, Papa takes” also implies that the Kaiser has a history of extra-marital affairs. The comical climax of the film occurs during the typical slapstick chase, after the emperor is discovered in a compromising situation with Bob. The pursuit involves the jealous Von Hinenburg and the empress who team up against the unfaithful Kaiser. When they try to get into the room, Wilhelm tries to hide in the closet where he dresses as a woman wrapped in a shawl and covered with a hat in order to escape his assailants. But the general recognizes the emperor and the chase intensifies around the bed. The only place to hide is under the blankets with Bob which makes the situation even more awkward. Then, to make sure the Kaiserine won’t smack him, the Kaiser climbs on top of the canopy. With her husband perched on the bed, the empress finally decides to run after Bob and violently snatches his fancy hat: the new sweetheart is exposed for the man he truly is. The Kaiser is only rescued from the wrath of his wife and the humiliation of having been fooled when American bombs fall on the castle.

- 26 The film scoffs at the Germans who are hypnotized by the feminine allure of a man in drag whom they should find normally absurd and unattractive, according to the theatrical and screen tradition of drag humor, which deprives men of their male attributes in order to make them non-erotic and laughable (Russo 1981: 10). Here, the weakness and stupidity of the Kaiser and his German compatriots are revealed by their inability to recognize a transvestite because they are blinded by lust. The evocation of the Kaiser’s latent homosexuality is very significant because Americans presented homosexuals during wartime as traitors, guilty of collusion with the enemy (Spencer 1995: 371). In the film, Kaiser Bill is portrayed as the ultimate conspirator against Germany when he decides to show his new feminine conquest – Bob – his secret military plans in order to seduce her. As the audience knows the lady is a man in disguise, the irony is bitter when Wilhelm boasts “If the Allies knew these plans”. Bill does not realize he is

wooing an American soldier and handing him on a plate the information needed to defeat Ludendorff's troops and make the US win the war. The male identity of the Kaiser and his political authority are depreciated because he appears disloyal to his wife, to the norms of heterosexual masculinity, and above all, disloyal to his country. We can compare the lure orchestrated by the pilot pretending to be a coquette with Gibson's cartoon *And the fool, he called her his lady fair* (also known as *Harlot of War*) in which Wilhelm II is depicted as a man who can easily be duped because of his sexual drives and sightlessness.<sup>12</sup> This time, he is not seduced by a man dressed as a woman but by an old emaciated prostitute representing the war. Just as he does not manage to expose Bob as a man, the emperor is unable to see that the hustler is not a companion interested in the pleasure of the flesh, but Death herself. The Kaiser, seemingly ready to sell his country and his soul for favors, is the maker of his own downfall because of his lower instincts and lack of judgment. *Yankee Doodlein Berlin* ends on the abdication of the useless emperor whose last gesture is not one of repentance but the illustration of his unwavering vanity when he proudly smooths his iconic mustache. As Michael T. Insenberg points out, quoting Mack Sennett, the function of comedies was "the discombulation of authority" (Insenberg 1975: 9).

- 27 The American short films and features presented in this article exemplify the onscreen debacle of Kaiser Wilhelm II who appeared to international audiences as a joke of an emperor. This figure of authority received many blows to his pride and dignity for he was portrayed as a grotesque actor in a parody of power, an egotistic and self-conceited king, an incompetent military and political leader and an unsuccessful womanizer. Instead of commanding respect, Kaiser Bill embodied failure at the professional and the personal level, bringing down with him not only the people of Germany but also the rest of the World in a nonsensical war. Parting from more aggressive propaganda trends, cinema gently showed him as a foolish and rather inoffensive villain, serving as a comical scapegoat for people's rejection of authoritarianism and of the murderous conflict. Let's keep in mind that these films were, for the most part, made as swiftly produced propaganda rather than historical documents. These patriotic war comedies illustrated the power of motion pictures as weapons using entertainment and derision to discuss political issues and explain the

incongruities of modern society. They exaggerated and condemned the artificiality and inefficiency of the Kaiser's power by turning him into a pathetic clown – a characterization which continues to cloud our current understanding of the historical emperor. Because he was demoted and deprived of his dangerous identity, American people had no reason to fear Kaiser Bill and were encouraged to think they could easily defeat him. The slapstick comedies were forgiving and generous, turning villains into fools and clods rather than rapists or murderers, thus making the tyrant a failed man and anesthetizing the horrors of the war with laughter. These films boosted the morale of the soldiers and the US population and, just like patriotic songs, they tried to convince them that winning the war against this farcical incarnation of political decline was going to be child's play.

---

1 For detailed discussion, see Morelli (n.d.). The full lyrics of the nursery rhyme are: "Guillaume Le méchant homme, Qui a tué des millions d'hommes. Sa femme, l'impératrice, est la reine des saucisses. Elle mange, Des peaux d'orange, Et des navets à la sauce blanche, Et le dimanche, En robe blanche, Et le samedi, En bigoudis !"

2 British Actor Eric Campbell played the bully in the Chaplin Mutual films shot between 1915 and 1917.

3 The four-minute men were volunteers delivering four-minute long speeches in public places in order to explain the goals of the war and to raise funds to support the war effort.

4 See *Die Reden Kaiser Wilhelms II.* [The Speeches of Kaiser Wilhelm II]: [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=755](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=755) (accessed February 25 2016)

5 The illustration is available on the website of the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art [http://lucasmuseum.org/works/gallery/assetcat\\_id/390](http://lucasmuseum.org/works/gallery/assetcat_id/390) (accessed 7 June 2016).

6 Both films are lost. *The Beast of Berlin* was parodied in 1919 with the two-reeler *The Geezer of Berlin* (lost as well). Details can be found on the American Film Institute catalogue. <http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/Abbreview.aspx?s=&Movie=15216> and <http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/DetailView.aspx?s=&Movie=15105> (accessed 31 May 2016).

7 Syd Chaplin plays the Kaiser in *The Bond* and in *Shoulder Arms*. These films were the first important onscreen collaborations of the Chaplin brothers.

8 The tensions between the Irish and the English were extremely intense after the 1916 Easter Rising for Independence because World War One caused Irish Home Rule to be postponed. Nevertheless, Irish troops served in the British army.

9 German-Americans were presented as Hyphenated Americans who continued to identify with their country of origin and were strongly condemned by former President Theodore Roosevelt in his speech on October 12, 1915, before the Knights of Columbus, known today as the “Americanism speech”.

10 Uncle Sam, whose initials are US was created during the war of 1812, popularized by cartoonist Thomas Nast in the 1860s and 1870s at the same time as another allegorical figure of the US, Brother Jonathan. On the illustration by James Montgomery Flagg, he uses the same iconic gesture as General Kitchener used three years earlier for British propaganda and declares “I want you for the US Army”. Before Uncle Sam, the US was personified by Columbia, a character whose style was inherited from antiquity. Surprisingly, during World War One, the UK retained the antique character of Britannia whose traits are reminiscent of Columbia’s.

11 See musical titles such as “*Und yah, der Kaiser too* (<https://www.loc.gov/item/2009371774/>)” (Copeland/Guiott, 1917), “Kaiser Bill a real-war-song with the punch” (Harrington, 1918), *Onward to Berlin* (Johnson, 1918), “There was a Hohenzollern kid Wilhelm by name was he” (Sheppard / Powell, 1918), “Kaiser Blues” (Cooper/Frank, 1918), “Kaiser William” (Salter/Friedman, 1918), “Marching to Berlin” (Niess/Richdars, 1920), in the Collection of World War I Sheet Music of the Library of Congress <https://www.loc.gov/collections/world-war-i-sheet-music/?sp=3> (accessed 6 June, 2016).

12 Charles Gibson Dana, *And the Fool called her his Fair Lady*, 1917. Cartoon available at <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015651628/> (accessed 8 June 2016).

---

## English

Never was an emperor and a war chief more disparaged and ridiculed than Wilhelm II. World War I multiplied the caricatural images of the Kaiser, more specifically on screen, in films produced during and after the conflict.

They presented a weak, clownish emperor, whose political and sexual power was belittled. Kaiser Bill was the comical double of the emperor and laughter makes the downfall of the character less bleak.

### **Français**

Jamais empereur et chef de guerre n'a été aussi décrié et ridiculisé que Guillaume II. La Première Guerre mondiale a démultiplié des images caricaturales du Kaiser, notamment à l'écran, dans les films produits lors du conflit ou juste après. On y découvre un empereur faible, clownesque, dont le pouvoir politique et sexuel est dénigré. Kaiser Bill est le double comique de l'empereur et le rire rend la chute du personnage moins sordide.

---

### **Mots-clés**

empereur, comédie, propagande cinématographique, burlesque, démystification, rejet de l'autorité

---

### **Clémentine Tholas**

Maître de conférences, CRAN – EA CREW 4399, Université Paris III Sorbonne Nouvelle, 13 rue de Santeuil, 75005 Paris, clementine.tholas[at]sorbonne-nouvelle.fr