

NATALIJA BONIC

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND COMEDY

The (Im)Possibility of Changing the Socio-Symbolic Order

When Freud devised the “talking cure,” he envisaged it as having a therapeutic effect, not only on individuals suffering from neurosis, but also on society as a whole. By enabling patients to talk freely about their repressed (and often socially unacceptable) fears and desires, Freud believed he was contributing to the creation of a more tolerant society. In 1910, in his address at the Second Psychoanalytic Congress in Nuremberg entitled “The Future Prospects of Psycho-Analytic Therapy”, Freud expresses confidence that psychoanalytic therapy will inevitably lead to a “change-over [*Umkehr*] to a more realistic and creditable attitude on the part of society.”¹ By disclosing the hidden mechanisms of neurosis, the psychoanalyst will contribute to “the enlightenment of the community from which we expect to achieve the most radical prophylaxis against neurotic disorders through the indirect path of social authority.” (Future Prospects, 151)

However, Freud’s early optimism soon gave way to frustration as it became clear that the talking cure failed to produce the desired effects. Only three years later, Freud admits “severe disappointment” at discovering that the knowledge obtained during treatment did nothing to improve the patient’s condition. “How could it be that the patient, who now knew about his traumatic experience, nevertheless still behaved as if he knew no more about it than before?”² Freud’s answer, which he would continue to refine in the following years, was that the patient was driven by powerful psychic mechanisms to resist the psychoanalytic cure. Therefore, it was necessary to suspend the initial belief in the therapeutic power of knowledge and concentrate instead of ways to overcome the patient’s resistances.

1. Sigmund Freud, “The Future Prospects of Psycho-Analytic Therapy,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 11, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1950) 139-152 (150).

2. Sigmund Freud, “On Beginning the Treatment: Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol 12, 121-144 (141).

The irrational behavior of Freud's patients was reflected on the social scale. Instead of contributing to the creation of a more open and tolerant society, psychoanalysis was most eagerly embraced by a society that Freud famously described as a "giant mistake". The enthusiastic reception of psychoanalysis in America, its rapid integration into existing clinical circles, its professionalization and popularization (particularly by Hollywood), demonstrated once more that the neurotic condition was capable of sustaining itself — even flourishing — in the midst of public awareness of its causes and symptoms.³ The "secrets of the soul"⁴ that Freud sought to uncover proved strangely indifferent to disclosure. Even when openly displayed, they maintained their hold on the psyche as stubbornly as if they were concealed.

In this paper, we shall try to examine the nature of the difficulty encountered by the early Freud of bringing about individual and social change. Was Freud correct in attributing the apparent therapeutic impotence of knowledge to resistances on the part of the patient rather than perhaps to other factors (e.g., the expectations of the analyst, the therapeutic setting, knowledge itself, etc.)? To what extent did these early difficulties signal the failure of psychoanalysis as a practice? And, if they did — as Freud's increasing therapeutic pessimism suggested — how to explain the disproportionate success of its theory? Today, a century after Freud expressed his disappointment, the question of the therapeutic value of psychoanalysis continues to be debated, as well as the broader issue of its social role and engagement. Most recently, the heated polemic between Slavoj Žižek and Simon Critchley, on the possibility of effectively subverting the capitalist socio-symbolic order, illustrates the extent of disagreement that the issue has generated.⁵

To examine the problem of the (im)possibility of change in the above sense, and more specifically of the disappointing therapeutic effects of knowledge, we shall turn to the latest book by Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, which approaches the problem from the angle of comedy.⁶ By choosing comedy as a framework for discussing the impasses of psychoanalytic treatment, Zupančič goes against the grain of established theory that conceives such impasses on the model of tragedy. Ever since Aristotle, whose theory of tragedy Freud did much to revive (as well

3. In direct contrast to Freud's expectations: "Society will not be in a hurry to grant us authority. It is bound to offer us resistance, for we adopt a critical attitude to it. [S]ociety cannot respond with sympathy to a relentless exposure of its injurious effects and deficiencies." "Future Prospects", 147.

4. Also the title of a 1925 Hollywood film G.W. Pabst, This first "psychoanalytic film" produced with the assistance of Abraham and Sachs (without Freud's approval) indicates the enormous popularity that psychoanalysis had gained in America.

5. Links to the whole debate, sparked by Žižek's review of Critchley's book *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (in the *London Review of Books*, vol. 29, Nov. 2007), can be found at .

6. Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2008).

as to return to its medical roots),⁷ there has been a clear conceptual bias towards tragedy as a paradigm for understanding the predicaments of human existence. Yet Freud was not as insensitive to the hermeneutic potential of comedy as the one-sided development of subsequent psychoanalytic theory would seem to suggest. He might have agreed with Socrates that the dramatists of the psyche have to combine tragedy and comedy to capture the elusive workings of the soul.⁸ Zupančič's study makes an even bolder claim, arguing that comedy offers a more adequate and fundamentally different perspective on the fundamental questions of psychoanalysis.⁹ The problem of genuine psychological, and by implication social, change are not to be understood from the tragic (Oedipal) paradigm but from comedy.

According to Zupančič, comedy and psychoanalysis are closely related practices because they are both engaged in subverting our customary (imaginary/neurotic) beliefs and behavior. As such, they share a number of structural similarities on account of which they are capable of elucidating each other.¹⁰ As Freud already observed in his study on jokes, the joke represents an act of "rebellion against authority, a liberation from its pressure".¹¹ Similarly to psychoanalysis, and by means of common strategies, such as puns, omissions, condensation, etc., the joke provides a space in which it is possible to express all sorts of socially (or psychologically) unacceptable ideas without the usual constraint of authority. It is this "comic space" that Zupančič sets out to explore, as the site in which the "odd ones" — our excluded thoughts, fears, desires — are "in". While Freud largely conceived it as a setting (like the analytic setting) that allows us to accept the "odd ones" and defy the authority that expelled them (ego/society), Zupančič goes a step further to emphasize the illogicality of such a space in which the excluded are included. What makes psychoanalysis comic, and vice versa, is that it effects a "shift of perspective", by which our customary perception of the world and ourselves is *profoundly* (logically) changed. (Zupančič, 14f, 130-131)

7. The crucial concepts of catharsis, peripeteia (Freud's Umkehr) and anagnorisis, were originally used in ancient healing practices and mystery rites, which Aristotle was acquainted with through his father, a practicing physician. In that respect, Freud's clinical interest in tragedy can be seen as a retrieval of its earliest therapeutic significance, already partly obscured by the time of Aristotle. On the therapeutic function of ancient rituals, see Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1987) 112-113.

8. As Plato has him remark at the end of the *Symposium*, in response to the discussion on the therapeutic possibilities of love. Cited in Jonathan Lear, *Therapeutic Action: An Ernest Plea for Irony* (London: Karnac Books, 2003) 211.

9. The difference can be expressed as a matter of tragic narrativisation versus comic (automatic) repetition. In tragedy, the focus is on *why* (or, through identification with the hero, "why me"), while in comedy it is only on *how* something happens. See Zupančič 130-31, 178. 10. *Ibid.* 16f.

11. Freud, "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious" *The Penguin Freud Library*, Vol. 6, trans. by James Strachey, with an introduction by Peter Gay, (New York and London: Penguin and Norton & Norton) 147-51.

The shift of perspective, according to Zupančič, is the proper function and defining feature of both comedy and psychoanalysis. In the absence of such a shift, comedy does not simply *fail*, but becomes *false* comedy.¹² The distinction is crucial for Zupančič and pivotal to her entire study. Indeed, comedy can make us laugh without producing a shift of perspective, in which case we are dealing with something that looks like comedy in all respects, except that it lacks its transformative essential feature. False comedy, and by analogy false psychoanalysis, does not simply fail to effect a change, but serves the opposite purpose, which is to maintain a *status quo*. It is an agent, not of liberation, but of repression, enforcing the existing socio-symbolic order while seeming to subvert it.¹³ False comedy is conservative in that it actively sides with authority, though not by championing it values and norms, but paradoxically, by submitting them to ridicule. For that reason, Zupančič argues, it is important to clearly distinguish these two modes of comedy to prevent them from being mistaken for each other.

It is worth noting that the distinction between false and true comedy, despite or perhaps because of its significance for Zupančič, is itself characteristically comic. One of the most frequent themes in comedy is indeed that of mistaken identities, false doubles, and other forms of misrecognition, which serve to confuse (and amuse) the audience on account of their likeness.¹⁴ For, to be false does not simply mean to be *not* true, but to be *seemingly* true, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to tell the two apart. In that sense, there is a particular meta-comic perspective to Zupančič's study, i.e., a point at which it functions as the subject of its own investigation, which is something worth bearing in mind.

Another reason why Zupančič finds the distinction between false and true comedy important is because it carries particular anthropological implications, which she ultimately wishes to highlight. Namely, the comic genre (in distinction from the tragic, in particular) is not only about amusing its audience, but also about making certain statements – usually unflattering – about human nature. The comic character epitomizes a silly, clumsy, or otherwise flawed human being, who slips on banana peels, etc. The purpose, as Zupančič argues, is not to merely expose the “silly side” of humans, but to propose such silliness as the defining trait of human beings.¹⁵ In that respect, the distinction between true/subversive and false/conserv-

12. The distinction between false and true comedy roughly corresponds to the distinction between conservative and subversive comedy. Zupančič 30.

13. As Žižek succinctly phrases it in response to Critchley: “resistance is surrender”. In Zupančič's words, “it can successfully promote the very ideology whose [...] weaknesses are being exposed”.

14. A favorite topic of Zupančič, to which she devotes two chapters: “The Ego and The Ego” (73-86) and “The Other and the Other” (89-107). While she does not explicitly include the false-true distinction in this context, she is most likely aware of it.

15. See Zupančič's Hegelian interpretation of the banana peel gag. To paraphrase her argument, we do not laugh with a comic character who slips on a banana peel because he is a silly human being, but because as human he is the incarnation of silliness. It is the universal quality, not the particular attribute that we laugh at. (ibid. 29-30)

ative is important, as it entails two seemingly alike, yet fundamentally different, conceptions of human nature, which Zupančič finds necessary to disambiguate. Given the anthropological claims of psychoanalysis this will also be one of the issues at stake in this paper.

An important conceptual clarification, before we begin, is that Zupančič uses the term “comedy” and its derivatives to refer, not so much to comedy as a genre, as to that distinctive quality by which comedy produces a shift of perspective.¹⁶ Its meaning is primarily formal and can therefore be applied to any practice (cultural, political, philosophical) concerned with producing such a shift. Given that psychoanalysis shares that concern, the arguments that Zupančič makes about comedy will also apply to psychoanalysis, even if she does not always formulate this explicitly. An additional conceptual distinction to bear in mind is that between psychoanalysis as a practice and as a theory. Zupančič’s (and Freud’s) claim of a “comic dimension of psychoanalysis” refers to psychoanalytic practice, not theory. While it may be hard to draw the line, or even observe it, the distinction becomes visible through the inverse proportion of their success. As we mentioned, the less the treatment seemed to work, the more popular psychoanalytic theory became. A further reason for keeping them separate is that Zupančič conducts her inquiry into the comic dimension (of psychoanalytic practice) against the background of psychoanalytic (Lacanian) theory. Although this may seem an obvious approach and in many ways unavoidable, it does call for some caution. Besides Lacan, Zupančič uses Hegel’s theory of comedy to underpin her arguments, and Bergson’s essay “On Laughter” to negatively contrast them. Her critique of Bergson is directly, and explicitly, aimed against Deleuze, whom she regards as a big influence, yet fundamentally disagrees with.

Following Zupančič’s distinction between false and true comedy and with a view to our question about the problem of effectively changing the socio-symbolic order, we shall ask whether it is possible to apply the distinction to psychoanalytic practice. If so, to what extent is the analogy helpful in understanding the difficulties encountered by the early Freud? Namely, does “true psychoanalysis” (if such a thing exists) resolve the problem of the apparent therapeutic inefficacy of knowledge? To use the famous joke about the chicken and the grain of corn, which Zupančič discusses in that context, does it provide an exit from the impossible impasse presented by the joke: “I know I am not a grain of corn, but does the chicken?”¹⁷



At the outset of her inquiry, Zupančič identifies several prevalent misconceptions of comedy as representative of what she subsequently calls false/conservative comedy. Her critique can be compressed into three main misconceptions. The first two primarily concern the social function of comedy, while the third brings out its

16. *Ibid.* 9.

17. *Ibid.* 15.

anthropological implications. We shall first introduce Župančić's arguments, and then proceed to transpose them to the practice of psychoanalysis.

1. Comedy is a powerful threat to ideology. As in Eco's *The Name of The Rose*, comic irony and laughter are considered a form of intellectual resistance, feared by those in power for its irreverence, and praised, for the very same reason, by enlightened/rational minds. According to Župančić, such humanist-romantic presentation of comedy misses the truly subversive character of comedy, failing to recognize that laughter and ironic distance are capable of functioning as an internal condition of ideology, rather than as its threat. Citing Mladen Dolar on Eco's novel, she argues that "it is only when we laugh and breathe freely that ideology truly has a hold on us". (Ibid. 4) Namely, it makes us believe we are free to criticize it, by which it eliminates the possibility of genuine opposition and change.

2. Comedy is a form of entertainment and an instance of positive thinking. Comedy is the sole genre exclusively devoted to promoting humor, cheerfulness, and a positive outlook on life. As such, it has an important social function, to help produce happy, successful individuals, capable of transforming whatever ills they may encounter into opportunities for growth and affirmation. Zupančić lashes out very strongly against this conception of comedy, arguing that it contributes to a particularly sinister development in our current ideological climate, namely, the rise of a "new racism" based, not on biological feature, but on moral values such as mentioned above. This new "bio-morality" threatens to divide society along the lines of happy/successful/good and unhappy/loser/bad individuals, and "replace the classical notion of responsibility with the notion of a damaged, corrupt being: the unhappy and the unsuccessful are somehow corrupt already on the level of their bare life". (Ibid. 5) Unlike traditional racism, which tended to socialize biological differences, the new racism, Zupančić argues, naturalizes socio-symbolic differences, making it seem that our current socio-symbolic order is a "natural fact". Together with the previous misconception — which it supports, since "positive thinking" often claims to be free of ideology — it constitutes one of the main features of false, i.e., seemingly subversive, comedy.

3. Comedy helps us acknowledge and accept the limitations and imperfections of human existence. According to this view, comedy is opposed to the tragic/heroic view of human existence by reminding us that we are es-

entially flawed, finite beings. It exposes our imperfections and weaknesses, though not as something to be condemned but affirmed and embraced. It urges us to find beauty in small, humble things (not grand ideals) and to rejoice rather than despair at the fact that we are “only human”. This widespread, though fundamentally Christian, conception is rejected by Zupančič as the “most boring and reductive definition of comedy.” (Ibid., 46) She takes it seriously, though, because it comes (deceptively) close to her own conception of comedy with its emphasis on the materiality and concreteness of existence (the comic effect of banana peels, falls, punches, etc.). In a broader, philosophical context, it appears to share the contemporary efforts to undermine the metaphysics of infinity and transcendence, which Zupančič also supports, yet it perverts those efforts by developing a “metaphysics of finitude”, in which finitude becomes the new master-signifier, i.e., the privileged answer to all questions regarding human existence. (Ibid., 48)

The problem with each of these conceptions of comedy is that they end up enforcing (naively or cynically) the very logic they oppose. In the first case, it is the logic of domination that is allowed to operate freely, not in spite but *because* of efforts to undermine it (the objection that Žižek levels against Critchley, citing the Iraq anti-war demonstrations as an example). In the second case, it is the logic of discrimination that receives support by the claim that we are all “naturally” entitled to a happy, successful life (whether we want to or not).¹⁸ The third conception, similarly, colludes with the logic of subordination by urging us to stop searching for a “higher realm”. By demanding that we relinquish lofty ideals and embrace our finitude, it does not abolish the realm of infinity and transcendence, but merely substitutes it with a new set of master signifiers to which we subordinate.

When comedy is practiced on any of the above premises, it is inevitably false comedy, for it fails to effect a shift of perspective. It may amuse us, make us laugh, even disturb us by disclosing the “truths” of ideology, human existence, etc., yet leave us fundamentally unchanged. The parallels with psychoanalysis in that respect are not hard to discern. Yet, before we begin to draw them, it is important to emphasize once more that the “falseness” of comedy does not primarily lie in its failure to effect such a shift, but in its active role in maintaining a status quo. In other words, *it is false, not through a deficiency (lack of genuineness, incomplete disclosure), but through what is considered its strength*. Though Zupančič does not put it in exactly those terms, she suggests as much when she describes such comedy as the internal

18. This is very efficient, for who dares to raise her voice and say that as a matter of fact she is not happy, and that she can't manage to — or, worse, doesn't even care to, transform all the disappointments of her life into a positive experience to be invested in the future.” (ibid., 5) The “worse” possibility, to which Zupančič briefly refers to but does not elaborate is examined at length by Bataille as the only properly subversive attitude. Similarly to Zupančič, he describes it as a radical refusal to subordinate one's actions and experiences to the future. See Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 2006), 40-43, 167.

condition of ideology. Namely, it is precisely through *opposing* the socio-symbolic order that false comedy sustains it, meaning that the problem does not lie with its opposition being somehow deficient or disingenuous, but with opposition as such. Without opposition (seeming or genuine) the socio-symbolic order would be unable to sustain itself. False comedy is therefore one of its lifelines.

Therefore, in addition to Zupančič's distinction between false/conservative and true/subversive comedy and as a means of clarifying it, we may posit a further distinction between opposition and subversion. To oppose is not to subvert, but as false comedy shows, to enforce the established order of things. Likewise, to subvert is not to oppose but to effect a profound change in the socio-symbolic order. So what kind of change are we dealing with? As Zupančič explains, with the aid of the joke about the chicken and the grain of corn, genuine change requires that "the Other" (i.e., the chicken, the socio-symbolic order) undergo a transformation, from a merely external/transcendent reality, to a concrete individuality. As long as the Other is opposed, it is sustained in its otherness. The practice of comedy, as properly subversive, is therefore to effect a transformation in the Other — *not* to oppose its symbolic status, its universality or transcendence, in favor of concreteness, as comedy is often said to do, but to "short-circuit" these two heterogeneous orders so as to produce a "concrete universality".¹⁹

Zupančič argues this fine philosophical point with the aid of Hegel's metaphysics, according to which comedy represents the transformation of substance into subject, i.e., an absolute, transcendent reality becoming conscious of itself.

[W]hat is at stake is, so to speak, a "consciousness-raising" of the Absolute itself. [...] The question is no longer simply that of how consciousness conceives of or sees the Absolute, but also of how the Absolute sees itself."
(Zupančič 14)

True comedy, therefore, does not simply oppose or ridicule the established order, but causes it to transform "substantially" by bringing it "down to earth". We use the last phrase deliberately, recalling Diderot's definition of comedy as the genre in which the gods descend onto the stage. Zupančič compares, in that respect, the comic procedure to Incarnation, in the properly Christian, or rather Hegelian, sense of spirit become flesh. We shall return to this point later on, as it constitutes one of the most important points that Zupančič wishes to make on comedy (and psychoanalysis). More specifically, it has direct bearings on the anthropological

19. Zupančič 15-17. For a similar "short-circuit", see Judith Butler, "Wittig's Material Practice. Universalizing a Minority Point of View", in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 4 (2007): 519-533. Despite the opposite direction (universalizing instead of concretizing), the aim in both cases is to "de-sublimate" the universal, or as Butler puts it, "to refute the abstract and formal character of universality in favor of an understanding of universality as a point of view". (523). See also Irigaray's notion of mimesis, as yet another attempt to subvert by non-oppositional strategies, in this case "playful repetition". On the close ties between Irigaray's mimesis and psychoanalytic practice, see Margaret Witford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), esp. chapter 3.

significance of comedy, insofar as it deprives the human being of a relation (even if only negative) to a transcendent reality, with interesting consequences for the notion of finitude.



We shall now turn to the practice of psychoanalysis, to examine by analogy its common misconceptions. As for the problem we set out to clarify concerning the therapeutic significance of knowledge, it has already been partly answered. The reason why knowledge is powerless to reverse the patient's condition has less to do with resistances on the part of the patient than with the fact that the object of knowledge — the patient's unconscious fears or desires — remains external. By a characteristic Hegelian (or Žižekian) twist, Zupančič would argue that the object of knowledge needs to transform into knowledge of the object, i.e., the object — in this case the patient's unconscious fears or desires — needs to know itself, to become self-conscious.

The three main misconceptions of psychoanalysis can be formulated as follows:

1. Psychoanalysis is a powerful threat to the unconscious. This common view of psychoanalysis places it in continuity with the tradition of Enlightenment. The psychoanalyst is seen as the flag-bearer of rationality that promises liberation through knowledge. Central to this view is the idea of the unconscious as a repository of dark, disturbing secrets (incessant desires, sexual repressions, childhood traumas), which the psychoanalyst knows how to rescue and bring into the light of consciousness. Unlike the Enlightenment paradigm, however, the darkness that needs to be dispelled is not primarily due to ignorance (as a lack of knowledge), but to active forces of repression operating in the psyche. The aim of analysis is to neutralize these forces by encouraging the patient to express everything that crosses his mind, especially if seems to be insignificant or inappropriate. By doing so, the analyst hopes to “catch” the patient's unconscious at work, as it were, and force it to yield its repressed content.²⁰ As in the case of comedy, what Zupančič objects to this conception of psychoanalysis is the romantic-heroic view of the psychoanalyst as defender of rationality, as well as the fact that the threat he issues may be false. To paraphrase Dolar's remark, it may be that only when the patient is able to express himself freely, that the unconscious truly has a hold on him.²¹

20. This type of analysis has been often criticized for resembling interrogation techniques. The patient is urged to answer honestly with the insinuation that he is hiding something from the analyst/himself (“In our trade the customer is always wrong”, *In Treatment*). As a possible consequence, the patient begins to invent things to please the analyst, or to assume the guilty position that is being suggested to him (e.g. the patients in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*).

21. As in Benjamin's definition of fascism as subjugation of the masses by giving them a chance to express themselves. Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt, *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 234.

More importantly, and prior to the question of whether psychoanalysis is an agent of liberation or repression, Zupančič objects to the basic premise of the unconscious as something of which the patient needs to become conscious.

In psychoanalysis (if it is worthy of its name) the main problem also does not lie simply in the subject becoming conscious of her unconscious, of all that (often painfully) determines her actions and experiences. This is insufficient: the main problem is precisely how to shift and change the very symbolic and imaginary structures in which this unconscious is embedded outside herself, in the manner and rituals of her conduct, speech, relations to others — in certain situations that keep “happening” to her. (Zupančič 16)

The analyst who tries to wrest the unconscious thoughts from his patients, to bring them out into the open, is working in the wrong direction, Zupančič would argue.²² The problem is not how to bring the hidden content of the unconscious out — a point hammered in by Lacan — but to recognize that it is *already out there*, doing all sorts of things in spite of the patient. To threaten the unconscious with exposure is therefore futile, as it was never concealed in the first place, in the usual sense of the word (hidden in the interior of the psyche). Rather, to bring up the analogy with comedy, just as in comedy it is the gods who are on the stage (instead of above, ruling the character’s destiny, as in tragedy), in psychoanalysis it is the patient’s unconscious that is on the coach. The task of psychoanalysis is therefore to effect a transformation, not *of* the unconscious (into the conscious), but *in* the unconscious, so that it alters substantially, “takes on flesh”.²³ One of the ways to do that, according to Zupančič, is to abolish the distinction between inner and outer, unconscious and conscious, repression and liberation, etc., and allow the two sides of the distinction to collapse into a single reality. However, as she takes pains to explain, the “single reality” into which they collapse is nothing other than *the gap that divides them*. It is not a coincidence of opposites, or a return to a mythical (or psychotic) wholeness, but a conjunction of two heterogeneous orders at the very point of their separation.²⁴

22. On “opposite motion”, see 37; “double movement”, 17.

23. The idea of a transformation in the unconscious comes very close to what hypnosis (or even medication) does: to effect a change that is not consciously registered. On Freud’s objections to such methods, in particular to hypnotic suggestion, see Stengers and Chertok, *A Critique of Psychoanalytic Reason: Hypnosis as a Scientific Problem from Lavoisier to Lacan*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

24. Zupančič 17. In Lacanian terms, the gap is the site of the Real. The idea of a gap that simultaneously separates and links two heterogeneous orders comes close to Winnicott’s idea of a transitional space as the place of “separation that is not a separation but a union”. D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, (Hove and New York: Brunner-Routledge), 2002, esp. 95-103.

Another way to explain it is by means of Lacan's Möbius strip, where the two sides are shown to be one and precisely as such unable to ever coincide.²⁵ Therefore, instead of looking for ways to bridge the gap between the unconscious and the conscious (which is like trying to cross to the other side of the Möbius strip), the psychoanalyst should be looking for ways to enter the gap, as the only means of creating a genuine shift of perspective. The shift of perspective, as the Möbius strip example well illustrates, is profoundly disorienting. The disorientation is both spatial (the collapse of interior and exterior, the disappearance of depth, of spatial coordinates such as "behind", "in front of", etc.) and temporal. Namely, according to the usual perspective, the bridge from unconscious to conscious is conceived as a passage from past to future ("before" and "after"), i.e., the patient is asked to look for reasons for his condition in the past, to resurrect childhood memories, look for hidden motives, and so forth. Accordingly, he perceives his present condition as the result of past experiences. The new perspective creates a temporal shift, by which the past and the future collapse into the present. Within these new temporal coordinates, the analyst is no longer concerned with why something happened, or to what effect, but with what is happening in the present (at the moment of analysis).²⁶

2. Psychoanalysis transforms neurotic patients into mature, socially adapted individuals.

According to this conception, psychoanalysis helps its patients to adapt to society and lead relatively normal lives. As Freud tersely put it, it helps them exchange their neurotic misery for common unhappiness. Such a view has been especially favored by so called ego-psychologists, who argue for the need to strengthen the patient's ego, rather than work on his weaknesses. Zupančič, following Lacan, reacts strongly against this view. The function of analysis is not to produce "normal individuals" (not even "normally unhappy" ones) but to show that the idea of normality is an imaginary construct. As is the case with false comedy, to endorse the idea is to promote a particular set of values as a natural fact, the result of which is moral discrimination between adapted/successful and unadapted/failed human beings.

In popular culture, this view of psychoanalysis has encountered both support (as responding to the concrete needs and wishes of the patient)

25. Zupančič 54.

26. The "why" belongs to tragedy. On the shift of perspective as a temporal shift, see *ibid.* 177-181. It would be interesting to read Župančič's claims in the light of Heidegger's concept of temporality. Although she never mentions Heidegger (who incidentally was as influenced by Hegel as Lacan was by Heidegger), her arguments are in many ways phrased in direct opposition to the theory developed in *Being and Time* (being=finitude=possibility=futural temporality). However, given her allegiance to Lacan, who was profoundly influenced by Heidegger, this issue would require some careful disentangling.

and, more frequently, opposition. The opposition has ranged from mild satire (e.g. Woody Allen) to an outright rejection of adaptation as a social and therapeutic ideal (e.g. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*). From within psychoanalytic theory, it has been most vehemently attacked by Lacan, and more recently Žižek, or still, within the Belgian School for Psychoanalysis, by Philippe Van Haute, among others.²⁷ The idea of maturity has been similarly criticized, though perhaps for different reasons. While adaptation concerns the patient's (gradual) adjustment to external circumstances, maturity is a matter of "inner growth", and as such is a more obviously teleological concept. Its most influential critics have been Deleuze and Guattari, as well as earlier figures such as D.H. Lawrence, or more infamously, Otto Gross. Among philosophers, the idea of maturity has been perhaps most strongly attacked by Bataille, who conceives it as a violation of human sovereignty. The sovereign individual is not the adult, but the child — or more precisely, the adult who refuses to be mature. Similarly to Deleuze and Guattari, as well as to Župančić, he describes the sovereign position as a temporal shift in which the present is no longer subordinated to the future.²⁸

Župančić, however, would not fully agree. Although she rejects the notions of adaptation and maturity (comic characters are notoriously immature), she does not believe in the possibility of stepping outside of what Lacan calls the symbolic order (which is not to say of subverting it — the two are not the same). The subject is essentially a "split subject", at odds with himself, and therefore as incapable of adaptation as of returning to a pre-symbolic condition. To renounce the symbolic in the name of a childlike freedom (lacking nothing, expecting nothing) would be a sign, not of sovereignty, but of self-delusion.²⁹ More importantly, it cannot amount to a genuine subversion of the socio-symbolic order, but as with all opposition, serves only to enforce it.³⁰

27. Philippe Van Haute, *Against Adaptation: Lacan's "Subversion" of the Subject* (New York: Other Press, 2002).

28. I.e., the present is not perceived as the result of past actions, or the actualization of future possibilities. It is the present of "poetic participation", which (similarly to Župančić) entails a synthesis between the unchangeable (universal/Other) and the perishable (concrete/self). *Literature and Evil* 40-44.

29. According to Bollas, refusal to assume the adult position is one of the chief symptoms of hysteria. Someone like Bataille would be a "male hysteric" (or "vagina man"), who "seeks affiliation with the maternal order in opposition to the paternal order". See Christopher Bollas, *Hysteria*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) 84.

30. Bataille, however, would not have a problem with Župančić's argument. His point is exactly that the sovereign individual refuses to oppose the adult (for to do so would make him an adult in turn), and that it is this very refusal which is most subversive. *Literature and Evil* 43, 155-160. Hence his position cannot be subsumed under Bollas' definition of hysteria, since Bollas, like Župančić, emphasizes that the hysteric's (overt or covert) opposition serves to sustain paternal authority (as *le "non" du père*). Bollas 164.

3. Psychoanalysis invites us to accept the “human condition” as the defining structure of human beings. This conception is closely related to the previous one, except that it specifically concerns the anthropological claims of psychoanalysis. From the beginning, Freud’s theory was not only devoted to the study of neurosis, but contained a quite definite philosophical anthropology.³¹ The neurotic condition was conceived as a paradigm of the human condition. Initially, as we showed, Freud believed in the possibility of alleviating the symptoms of neurosis through analysis, but gradually abandoned this view when clinical results suggested otherwise. Eventually, he was led to believe that the neurotic/human condition is incurable, and that psychoanalysis is therefore “an impossible profession”. Although Freud’s disillusionment was not shared by all of his disciples (notably Ferenczi),³² it left an indelible mark on psychoanalytic theory, and was adopted in various forms by most subsequent psychoanalysts, including Lacan. The word “patient” gradually gave way to “analysand”,³³ and the term “talking cure” faded from use. Psychoanalysis grew progressively more theoretical, rivaling philosophy in the proliferation of highly conceptual discourses, as if to cover up for the clinical impasses it encountered.

The disrepute into which the idea of a cure has fallen is well reflected in Žižek’s bold statement that “the psychoanalytic theory is ultimately the theory of why its clinical practice is doomed to fail”.³⁴ However, despite appearances, the statement does not so much condemn psychoanalytic practice to failure, as, paradoxically enough, present its failure as a mark of its success. An analyst who believes in the possibility of successful therapy as the early Freud conceived it (no longer than three years, patient cured, etc.) is pursuing a “phantasm” and misleading his patients. On the contrary, if he can make his patients renounce the possibility of a cure, he has succeeded in his task.

However, as Zupančič points out, to renounce the possibility of a cure can mean two things, which may appear alike, yet rest on fundamentally different conceptions of human nature. Firstly, it can mean to *accept* that the neurotic condition is incurable, not on account of any particular failure on the part of the patient or analyst, but simply on account of being human. As human beings we are fundamentally at odds with ourselves, full of contradictions, insecurities, and weaknesses, which makes us inevitably suffer.

31. See Tomas Geyskens, *Our Original Scenes*, (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005) 8-10.

32. Freud describes him disappointingly as possessed by a “furor sanandi”. (Stengers and Chertok 68).

33. After 1924, Freud stated that he was “no longer treating patients but only analytic candidates”, as cited in (Stengers and Chertok, p.75) According to the online International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis, the term “analysand” was coined by British psychoanalysts and first recorded in 1925 in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*.

34. Žižek, *The Four Discourses of Jacques Lacan*. www.lacan.com

Psychoanalysis teaches us to stop looking for a cure and embrace our condition, not as a pathology, but as a sign of our essential humanity. This view, which Zupančič considers to be in principle false (as a metaphysics of finitude), seems nevertheless to be but a lighter version of Lacan's theory of the subject (as the "site of a wound", irrevocably split, defined by a lack). Yet nothing could be less the case, she argues. If properly read, Lacan's theory does *not* claim that we are essentially finite, nor that we ought to accept our condition. (Zupančič 51-54) If it renounces the possibility of a cure, it renounces it not as cure but *as possibility*, as a presumed goal or effect of analysis. That is to say, it rejects it on *logical and temporal grounds*, not on account of its (un)attainability. The problem is not whether analysis will end with a cure or not, but whether its alleged cure is an end, logically speaking. In other words, it is a question of the rudimentary spatio-temporal coordinates of the cure (its direction, location, time) and Lacan's original attempt to change them.³⁵

When the idea of a cure is rejected on logical grounds, the idea of finitude and the metaphysics built around it also fall. Finitude is logically grounded in possibility (not in necessity or actuality, as one may think).³⁶ It is the "ultimate possibility" of human existence, both in the trivial sense of death and as a metaphysical ideal. Therefore, Zupančič explains, it is not the case that we are essentially finite beings, any more than that we are infinite. If finitude is taken as a sign of the human condition, there is something "in us" that is *not human*, something indestructible, that refuses to be subordinated to the logic of possibility (yet is not for that reason infinite/immortal, which is simply the "other side" of finitude).³⁷ Following Deleuze, Zupančič conceives this inhuman feature as neither human nor divine but machine-like, automatic, and as such profoundly detached from human needs.³⁸ This *impossible* trait, in the full sense of the word (infuriating, uncontrollable, but also impossible to either oppose or accept), which is our essential feature, is not located at either end of the specter of possibility, but at the point where these ends "short-circuit" so as to reveal the gap that

35. See Jacques Lacan, "The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of its Power," *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002).

36. See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarrie and Robinson, (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), §51. The human being, according to Heidegger, can never fully coincide with itself because as *Da-sein* it is essentially ahead-of-itself, anticipating its end/death as its innermost, "out-standing" possibility of existence. (§53)

37. Comic characters are indestructible and as such exemplify this inhuman-human trait. The concept of inhuman is but one of the many Deleuzian concepts that Zupančič seeks to integrate in her (Lacanian) analysis.

38. From the (tragic) logic of means-ends, demand-satisfaction. One of the significant traits of comedy is that it reverses the relation demand-satisfaction: "Comedy switches the supposedly natural sequence, in which we start with the demand and end up with more or less inadequate satisfaction." (Zupančič 131-132)

both joins and divides them. The im/possibility of a cure is situated within this gap.

The above three conceptions capture the main features of what, according to Zupančič, would constitute false psychoanalysis. The first two, on the unconscious and on adaptation, can be subsumed under the third, which formally precedes them, so that by removing the third, the other two inevitably follow. Both the idea of the unconscious as that which once was or will be conscious, and the ideas of adaptation and maturity, are ruled by the logic of possibility, or what Zupančič calls the metaphysics of finitude. To key to subverting the rule of possibility and the socio-symbolic order that represents it, is to find a way of entering “the gap”, which in ordinary circumstances is hidden from view. In other words, it is about shifting the patient’s perspective, or changing the direction of knowledge, so that he sees what was previously invisible. Yet, to phrase the problem in this way seems to bring us back to the discredited paradigm of knowledge as a passage from unconscious/hidden to conscious/visible. The shift of perspective cannot consist in rendering visible something that was previously invisible (hidden in the depths of the psyche, behind the screen of false memories, etc.), for it entails a fundamentally different kind of orientation. For knowledge to succeed in reversing the patient’s condition it needs to change direction, not merely from back to front, before to after, or inside to outside, but from within, i.e., to reconfigure, so to speak, from a knowledge of possibility to a knowledge of impossibility.

To clarify what that means, we would have to enter a lengthy digression on the concept of possibility, which as Heidegger rightly recognized has served as the proper foundation of Western metaphysics since Aristotle. To extricate knowledge from the grip of possibility is to transpose it to the order of the sacred and the miraculous.³⁹ In other words, it is to produce another “short-circuit” between the traditionally separate domains of knowledge and faith (or revelation) and create receptivity in the subject for that which by nature eludes representation. To call it a “knowledge of impossibility” is to suggest, on the one hand, that such knowledge is not determined by possibility (by what can, will, or ought to be) and is therefore neither possible nor not possible, but impossible. The two negations are to be strictly distinguished, as belonging to fundamentally different logical orders.⁴⁰ In a narrower sense, it is to suggest that the object of knowledge, i.e., that which is known or perceived in such a shift of perspective, is impossible in the precise sense

39. In the Bataillian sense. On the “realm of the impossible” as a fusion of mutually exclusive domains, see *Literature and Evil* 44, 45, 94.

40. The former being the familiar Aristotelian logic, based on the principle of non-contradiction. The latter is a Deleuzian “logic of sense”, in which negation functions (if at all) to subvert Aristotelian logic. See Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (London: The Athlone Press, 1990) 5-6, 18-19, 105.

of unforeseeable, unpredictable.⁴¹ That brings us to another highly significant feature of the shift, namely, that it is essentially *surprising*.

Zupančič devotes much attention to the element of surprise as a comic practice. (Ibid. 181f) Surprise is the medium through which comedy produces a shift of perspective. The reason we laugh is because we are surprised by something, an “odd” element that suddenly appears (often a double, or in some ways illogical). We are not surprised because we see something new (nor even see with new eyes, as the cliché goes). Surprise has nothing to do with novelty, as Zupančič convincingly argues, nor with seeing in the strict sense.⁴² Although it is a shift of *perspective*, the view it offers is not something that can be seen, whether in a “prior projection” or in an actual encounter. What is “seen” is by all common standards — with which Zupančič for once agrees — nothing. It is nothing, for the surprise is not about something we perceive, however mysterious or “odd”. It is simply a gap in meaning, a sudden short-circuit that makes no sense in the order of possibility. If it is registered (as laughter suggests it is), then certainly not consciously, but at a visceral, physical level.⁴³



By way of conclusion, one of the things one might want to object to Zupančič is that she does not question the validity of the distinction on which she builds her arguments, i.e., between false and true comedy. Yet that would be to underestimate her strategy and arguments. She is well aware of the objection leveled against this distinction, not only by Lacan, but especially by Deleuze (whom she emulates yet fundamentally disagrees with). As Deleuze argued convincingly, the false and the true are of the same order (Platonic, hierarchical), which can only be subverted by that which it excludes, namely, the simulacra. Yet, as we pointed out in the beginning, there is a distinctly comical aspect to the true and the false as comic doubles, which would make Zupančič’s approach a comic strategy itself. In that case, what she calls true/subversive comedy would be only the other side of false/conservative comedy, not an independent alternative. This is not meant as a critique suggesting a failure or oversight, but as a warning against misreading her theory. True comedy, and by analogy true psychoanalysis, does not serve to bring about a shift of perspective, in the sense of a profound transformation of how we perceive the world. It is rather part of a comic practice that functions through endless repetition and doubling, the aim of which is to allow two mutually exclusive (and under ordinary circumstances only alternately visible) realities appear side by side, so as to reveal the gap that unites and separates them. The shift of perspective consists in a sud-

41. As Zupančič remarks, the point of Lacan’s identification of the Real with the impossible is not to suggest that the Real is “some Thing that cannot possibly happen”, but precisely that the “*impossible happens*” (i.e., without our having anticipated it). Zupančič, 51.

42. Surprise is not generated by novelty (which is of the order of possibility) but by repetition. (Ibid. 149f)

43. Thus, instead of a “metaphysics of the finite” it belongs to a “physics of the infinite”, the domain of “true materialism”. (Ibid. 50)

den, surprising glimpse of this gap. For psychoanalytic practice, that means that the possibility of a cure resides in what is usually considered its failure, i.e., the endless repetition of the same problems.⁴⁴ The repetition, however unpleasant, is not a sign of disease, but of incurable –for reasons of imperishable – (inhuman) life.

A more fundamental objection to Zupančič would concern her attempts to “deleuzify” Lacan. By offering a Deleuzian reading of Lacan (perhaps as another “short-circuit”), she renders Lacan less conservative than he actually was, and thus “redeems” him from Deleuze’s powerful critique of negativity. At the same time, she weakens Deleuze’s theory by appropriating his concepts to defend a Lacanian position.⁴⁵ Her attack on the culture of “positive thinking” is a (not so) veiled attempt to strike at Deleuze, suggesting that the former is but a popular variant of Deleuzian affirmation. Both this suggestion and her (capitalist) strategy of appropriation are highly questionable. An interesting way to highlight this inner conflict would be to examine Zupančič’s reasons for rejecting the joke as a model for understanding comedy, with its strong conceptual links with revelation. According to Zupančič, “revelation is not the business of comedy” (Zupančič 180) although Deleuze (and many others, in particular Bataille) would most certainly disagree. For Bataille, both comedy and tragedy are the continuation of ancient sacrificial practices that served to induce a profound change in their participants through an experience of “the sacred”.⁴⁶ The revelatory nature of such experiences had less to do with what was revealed to the participants than with the manner in which the revelation occurred, namely, by a temporary lifting of logical (spatio-temporal) boundaries accompanied by a sudden reversal.⁴⁷ The reversal, according to Walter Burkert, consisted in a “peripety from catastrophe to salvation”, or as Bataille puts it, from a condition of intense suffering (through temporary “identification” with the victim) to overwhelming joy.⁴⁸ Yet the “salvation” did not take the form of deliverance from

44. *The Odd One In* 18. In Deleuze’s words: “If repetition makes us ill, it also heals us; if it unchains and destroys us, it also frees us, testifying in both cases to its ‘demonic’ power”. Cited in Leen De Bolle (ed.), *Deleuze and Psychoanalysis: Philosophical Essays on Deleuze’s Debate with Psychoanalysis* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010) 30.

45. See Peter Hallward, “You Can’t Have it Both Ways: Deleuze or Lacan”, De Bolle 33-48.

46. See *Literature and Evil* 69; also, Bataille, “Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice”, in *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990): 9-28. The latter text provides a most insightful perspective on Zupančič’s discussion on Hegel and negativity. It articulates clearly the decisive difference between a Hegelian (Lacanian) and Bataillian (Deleuzian) concept of negativity. On this point, see also Zupančič 154 ff.

47. By “participants”, Bataille means sacrificial victim, sacrificer, and witnesses alike, since the boundaries that separate them were temporarily lifted. See “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice”, *ibid.* 19. On the sacred experience as an “amazing event of *sympatheia*”, see Burkert 114.

48. See Burkert 75, 99-101. On “gay anguish” and “anguished gaiety”, see Bataille, “Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice” 25. The direction of the reversal (from bad to good, death to life, misery to joy) is characteristically comic, not tragic. However, Aristotle mentions that early tragedies predominantly involved a peripety from bad to good (Euripides was blamed for giving his tragedies an unhappy ending), but that such a reversal is inferior on grounds

suffering but was rather its direct and shocking result. In other words, the joyful ending of the rites (preserved in the structure of the joke) followed in sequence from an experience that logically excludes it. This “magical performance”, which Bataille describes as still haunting our tragedies and comedies, had a profound therapeutic impact, effectively lifting the suffering of the participants, not by going against it, but by removing the limit that separates it from joy.⁴⁹

Understood in this way, the joke appears less “conservative” on account of its finality than Zupančič argues, for its “end” is not a limit, but quite the contrary, a lifting of limits. Perhaps that is indeed why the ancient rites did not develop into a fixed doctrine, or inspire their participants to organize into communities (despite the intrinsically collective nature of the experience).⁵⁰ In that case, the comic movement need not be an endless repetition of catastrophes, as Zupančič suggests, in order to be subversive.⁵¹ It may even be allowed to reclaim its trivialized “happy ending” as a sign, not of complicity, but of sovereign destruction of the symbolic order.

of “improbability” and “to be avoided”. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. I. Bywater, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), § 13, 1452b31-1452a38.

49. Speaking of the “sacred horror” of sacrifice, Bataille describes it as “the richest and the most agonizing experience, which does not limit itself to dismemberment [i.e., the tearing apart of the sacrificial victim on the model of Dionysus] but which, on the contrary, opens itself, like a theatre curtain, onto a realm beyond this world, where the rising light of day transfigures all things and destroys their limited meaning”. “Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice” 21. Similarly to Deleuze, the only thing destroyed in the reversal is limitation/negation itself. Regarding the therapeutic nature of ancient sacrificial rites, the link bears witness in etymology as well: Gr. *therapeutes*, “worshipper” (see Burkert 39.), *therapon*, “attendant, servant” (online Etymology Dictionary). See fn. 8 above.

50. See Burkert 43.

51. Zupančič 136f.