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A COMEDY OF HORRORS

*On humor, escapism, despair, the uncanny and comedy's happily horrible hierophany*

One of Hollywood's recent releases titled *This Is The End* stars a group of young American comedians as exaggerated versions of themselves facing an apocalypse of biblical proportions complete with heavenly ascensions and abysses opening straight into the depths of Hell. If this is the first ever entry into the genre of disaster movie spoofs what should surprise us about it most is that it had not come about earlier. Throughout history humor has always thrived on disastrous circumstances. Think about it: have you ever seen a comedy about a stable relationship, a quiet family life or a thriving career? While comedies often tend to start and end in blissful circumstances, what actually makes us laugh in between is the hilarious way it all unravels in the blink of an eye.

But why do comedies make us laugh at catastrophes while the same set of events could bring us to terror or tears if it happened in real life or was presented to us in a more somber tone? Is the equation really as simple as Carol Burnett's famous "comedy is tragedy plus time" quote or Mel Brook's equally notorious comparison between the tragedy of cutting one's own finger and the comedy of someone else walking into an open sewer and dying? Is that really all there is to it or does this dissent between comedic and tragic or horrific attitudes toward catastrophe run deeper than mere dosage of empathic distance? Why, finally, would we find the predicaments of other people funny at all, even if we don't actively empathize with them? Do we secretly enjoy other people's suffering or is it merely a case of relief at being spared ourselves? Or is there something entirely different going on when we actually do laugh at someone walking into an open sewer and dying?

It was Henri Bergson's *Essay on Laughter* published in 1900 that laid the most thorough conceptual ground for a philosophical account of comedy understood as a lack of empathy so an engagement with this famous text promises to provide as with a solid starting point for tackling our dilemma. To put it very concisely, the basic point of Bergson's theory is that a comic character is one that has become absent minded, not full aware of himself and has consequently allowed mechanical processes to take over where plastic, flexible and lively responses would have been called for.<sup>1</sup> From its external vantage point, the audience spots his blunders

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1. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (London, New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1911) 9-12.

and punishes them with a humiliating laughter that in real life supposedly has the aim of reminding the involuntary comedian to regain full consciousness of himself and return to flexibly adapting to the world around him.<sup>2</sup> Thus, if we were to rely on Bergson for the answer to our question regarding comedy and disaster, his explanation would probably go along the lines of our laughing at disaster in order to avoid it. The point of our laughter would be to jerk a comic blunderer from the quagmire of his disastrous decisions and back into a sober, external view of the predicament so he may rationally analyze and escape it.

Concerning the dilemma of the two radically divergent—terrified vs. hilarious—reactions to catastrophe, Bergson states his case plainly by insisting on the negative role of empathy as “laughter’s greatest foe.”<sup>3</sup> Once we understand a character’s predicament from inside his own head and heart, we are presumably, according to Bergson, prevented from laughing at him. Furthermore, were we to follow Bergson all the way, we would have to admit that our laughter at another person’s tragedy is not even really as cruel as it sounds. It is merely there to inform the sufferer of the preference for an external, distanced and rational viewpoint on the problem since it would give its victim a better chance of resolving it. It should thus come as no surprise that Bergson’s book also includes explicit comparisons between the spectator of comedy and the cool, objective attitude of a natural scientist.<sup>4</sup>

While Bergson’s argument is rather convincing in its elegant simplicity it tends to provoke at least two obvious questions. Namely: number one, why are physicists and chemists not perpetually rolling on the floors of their labs in laughter at the hilarity of their scientific insights? And, number two, why does a comedy’s audience not walk out on the show after ten minutes, when it should already have become clear to it that the cast have no intention on paying any heed to its laughing admonitions? As for the first question, Freud promptly provided an answer to it in his 1905 book on *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* by defining laughter as an immediate dispensing of energy saved by a psychologically economical insight.<sup>5</sup> From this and other remarks made by Freud on the relationship between science and comedy as well as between the expression of a joke’s enjoyment in its maker and its audience, we might risk the proposal that serious contemplation binds the energy conserved by its insights by investing it in further investigation. To put it differently, we could understand psychoanalysis as claiming that in comedy, the surplus enjoyment ever implicit in all objective observation is suddenly revealed, expressed and thus truly “enjoyed” for the first time in the proper sense of the word. The energy that is bound and transmitted along the line of scientific progress is, in comedy, spent along the way implying a refreshingly careless attitude of laughter toward asceticism in the name of long-term goals.

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2. Bergson, 18-20.

3. Bergson, 4-5.

4. Bergson, 128

5. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (London, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1960) 180.

What this addition of enjoyment to Bergson's equation changes in his account of laughter is, however, that the spectator of comedy has now ceased to be a mere rational promoter of self-conscious reflection but, when compared to the wisely investing scientist, appears to behave as a foolhardy spendthrift spraying valuably conserved psychic energy all over the place. Presumably, it is precisely the enjoyable nature of this energetic spending spree that not only keeps him from leaving the theater after five minutes but even makes him keep coming back for more from time to time. Furthermore, the inclusion of enjoyment into Bergson's conception also radically changes the nature he proposes for the relationship between comedy's actor and spectator. Abandoning all thought of rational energy handling, the laughing audience has now become very similar to their own comic butt: forgetful of the values of self-reflection and possessed by physiological spasms and jerks. The audience of comedy can now be seen as left willy-nilly at the mercy of comical mechanics whose buttons are being manipulated by agents beyond the viewer's control: the comedy's playwright and his accomplices playing dumb on the stage.

Finally, this overhaul of Bergson's theory gives us a very changed picture of comedy's stance on disaster. Namely, rather than being an instructive demonstration of how things can go wrong if improperly reflected—a demonstration aimed at preventing such disasters in our own lives—, comedy has now begun to take on the image of an underhanded promotion of disaster as something to be enjoyed. And it comes complete with tiny disasters planted in its audience's minds: bursts of laughter momentarily forcing open cracks in their psychic edifices. While comedy really does abhor empathy between the spectator and his comic butt, this strategy apparently lets it achieve something much more radical: the very structural identity of the two.

Before we continue this line of thought, however, let us approach the topic of comedy and disaster from yet another angle. Regrouping our conceptual troops on the comfortable plane of apparently self-evident truths, we would like to continue our investigation by tackling the widely-recorded phenomenon of humorous attitudes flourishing in stably critical situations. Continuously downtrodden and marginalized ethnic groups like the Irish in the UK and Jews all over Europe and the US have historically been known for a superior sense of humor and old Yugoslavia, the country of my birth, was no exception there. The inhabitants of Bosnia, the federation's habitually poorest republic, proved successful not merely as the traditional butts of the best Yugo jokes but also as their most prolific authors. When the Balkan wars started in the early 1990's with Bosnia bearing the brunt of the horrors, the republic's locally produced jokes not only failed to dwindle but multiplied, gaining an even sharper edge by tackling the unlikely comic subjects of murder, famine and life on the front.

Now, it would be tempting to explain this phenomenon via the simple version of comic theory outlined at the beginning of this article: by stating that a humorous attitude towards a terrible situation enables its victims to survive it by transcending the horrible circumstances and isolating the laughing subjects in a lofty realm

beyond their overbearingly real surroundings. The latter is, in a nutshell, the point of Freud's theory of humor proposed in an article written more than twenty years after his monograph on jokes, where the father of psychoanalysis claimed the essence of the humorous attitude to be narcissistic. The argument goes that humor's function is to enable its author to preserve her ego untouched by transposing it into the safe position of a disembodied observer laughing at the predicaments of its infantile remainder still stuck in the material world. According to Freud, in short, humor lets our ego attain the intangible status of an idealized parent privileged to smile benignly at what seem like unsurpassable horrors to the short-sighted half of its own subjectivity still embedded in the struggles of mortal life.<sup>6</sup>

If you think this formulation rings very close to Bergson's comparison between the comedic spectator and the natural scientist above, you are right on the mark, but one has to admit that it the concept is perhaps really better fitted to humor (in Freud's particular sense of the word) than to theatric comedy where it had been applied by Bergson. Humor as Freud understands it is no laughing matter. It is an attitude bent on producing not chuckles or guffaws but a calmly smiling acceptance of one's material life as an unimportant and fleeting comedy that, too, will eventually pass. The smile of humor is the self-contained, unperturbed smile of angels and can rightly be deemed a metaphysical view – on virtue of which, incidentally, Simon Critchley's book *On Humor* praised it far above what he saw as its tactless and sadistic counterpart of loud laughter.<sup>7</sup>

It is probably obsolete to point out that our own sympathies still lie with the latter and not merely because laughter is not necessarily cruel to its butt but may unwittingly be in cahoots with it, as we have partly tried to already demonstrate above. To get back to our current subject of laughter in the face of adversity, however, what needs to be accounted for first is that the Irish, Jewish and Bosnian jokes mentioned above tend to produce not the blissful smiles that had earned Critchley's nod but precisely the loud guffaws of his abhorrence – and this holds true even though the author and the butt of these jokes are by rule entrenched in the same predicament. What my suggestion in explaining this would be is that jokes flourish in catastrophic circumstances for the simple reason that their authors have nothing left to lose. Their world has been stripped down to its very essentials, with the bare bones of paradoxical mechanics exposed that are allowed to remain hidden behind propriety in more stable times.

Now, laughing at humanity reduced to this minimal state is definitely more beneficial to its victims' mental health than being petrified by it. But I believe the psychic relief they gain through these jokes does not stem from their being able to flee from reality into a realm beyond the material but, rather, from a shift in their perspective still planted within the material. And this shift, I would further argue – the shift that makes their circumstances suddenly seem comically absurd rather than hor-

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6. Freud, "Humour," in: *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 9 (1928): 1-6.

7. Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 102-5.

ribly oppressing—is attained by performing the very opposite of an escape into the beyond: a radical eradication of any transcendent realm whatsoever.

To be more concrete, the conception of our circumstances as threateningly horrible still implies beliefs in entities that transcend these circumstances—on one side, our own human dignity, or justice, or a world that makes sense, that are being violated, and, on the other, a demonic, all-powerful villain orchestrating this violation. Once we abandon these transcendent concepts, however, and get a glimpse of ourselves as something other than dignified carriers of elevated humanity and of our torturers as similar fools caught in an impersonal web of mechanical phenomena, well, such a radically absurdist and nihilist view of the world suddenly begins to burst with comic potential. It was Slovenian philosopher Alenka Zupančič who perhaps put it most succinctly when, in a Lacanian re-examination of Hegel's accounts of comedy from *Lectures on Aesthetics* and *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, she claimed that comic characters are immune to castration not because they are so compact as to be invulnerable but because they have always already come to terms with their own inevitable castration. When they encounter disaster they only lose what they had never possessed in the first place.<sup>8</sup> And by laughing at them, to pour my own Bergson overhaul into the mix, we also concede to our own castration being enjoyably cut into us by side-splitting laughter.

This conclusion might seem at first sight like a sad one since it appears to imply the dark joker's loss of what is precious in humanity through complete cynical disillusion, but I would argue things are not necessarily as bad as that. Cynicism is always a lurking possibility in extremely dire circumstances, but it is not an attitude that produces particularly funny jokes. Rather, what happens in extremely dark humor is that the trap of cynicism is precisely avoided by showing that, so to speak, nothing does not really amount to nothing; that nothing is, let's say, *more and less* than nothing at the same time. In dark jokes a literal *creatio ex nihilo* is taking place. All that is transcendental is annihilated, all that is left is pure mechanical interactions between fragments of senseless materiality, but it is as if, out of the seemingly empty gaps between these devastated material fragments unexpected new things start emerging and producing the surplus enjoyment embodied by our laughter.

And, what's best of all, our emptied humanity, stripped of its dignity, seems to find a place for itself precisely at this surplus' origin, in these very vacant places between the shattered fragments of the world. In a way, what we could say is happening in dark, catastrophic humor is that, instead of our subjectivity making a break for it to an imagined beyond where it will no longer have to suffer the indignity of being subjected to a lacking and imperfect world, subjectivity suddenly finds itself becoming passively identified with the very lacks and imperfections in the world—

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8. Alenka Zupančič, *Poetika – Druga knjiga, Ljubljana: Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo*, (2004) 208-11. I cannot, unfortunately, quote the English version of the book here (*The Odd One In*, London, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), because the particular reference to Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* has been left out in the translation.

and it is these lacks and imperfections, these pieces of non-sense, that, in a very Deleuzian way,<sup>9</sup> turn out to be the unconscious, masterless source of all surplus sense and enjoyment in our world. In dark humor, thus, the subject ceases to be the victim of a cruel world, but also fails to turn into its master. Rather, it becomes identical to the creative vacancy that ultimately orders our worlds in a poetically-mechanical, subjectively uncontrollable way.

If all this sounds a bit too abstract, let us consider two darkly humorous examples: one from a catastrophe of socio-political and one of merely personal proportions. We will start with a popular joke from wartime Bosnia that begins with Mujo and Haso (the two eternal Bosnian comic characters starring in these jokes since times immemorial) fighting in the trenches. All of a sudden, Mujo gives out a loud yell. Haso asks him: “What’s the matter, Mujo, why are you yelling?” Mujo answers: “A sniper! He hit me in the leg!” And Haso: “In the leg? And that’s what you’re complaining about? You know, Suljo got hit right in the forehead yesterday and he didn’t let out a peep!”

On the face of it this is a terribly politically incorrect joke that should probably only be allowed to be laughed at by people who have ever found themselves in such a horrifying situation. And that was exactly what happened – the situation and the laughter—all over Bosnia, for several years. It is a joke that taunts death and laughs off a nation’s fear of it by demystifying it through casual mention. But what it also does is to conflate the ideological image of the ideal soldier—a war hero not giving out a peep even in the direst of circumstances—with a dead man, a vacant place in the chain of living that behaves like a hero for purely mechanical reasons of needing an intact brain to do the complaining. The ideal of human dignity imperturbable by any physical lack, and death as the embodiment of the absolute lack have been short circuited into a single figure and the results, at least for people living their daily lives strung out between the two, proved to be hilarious.

My second example is far more banal but also easier to relate to, both for myself and for the readers of this article who probably lead relatively comfortable lives with other worries on their mind rather than getting shot by a sniper. The joke comes from the career of Louis CK, currently the hottest stand up comedian in the US who, however, spent years in virtual anonymity due to his fear of radical experimentation. According to his account, Louie was already pushing thirty and still reciting his repetitive one hour routine to bored Vegas gamblers. Bitterly unsatisfied with his professional achievements he was, to top it off, laden with substantial personal problems since the arrival of a new baby had put additional strain on his marriage. In an interview, Louie recounts sitting alone in his car after a particularly crappy performance listening to a radio interview with his idol, George Carlin, and being dumbfounded at the report that the big man would come up with a whole hour of new material every single year. Louie, in contrast, was desperately

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9. See, particularly, Deleuze’s entire *Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

clinging to an equal running time of half-baked jokes painstakingly accumulated during more than a decade. He made a decision then and there to set himself the Carlin challenge: after all, he figured, he had nothing to lose, this was a make or break situation, and if he could not make any progress, he would sack the standup career altogether.

Louie describes having exhausted all the obvious material fairly quickly and needing to dig deeper and deeper into his own tortured self for additional cannon-fodder. When he finally let go of the reins, his shows slowly but surely began to shock and delight viewers with desperate, disillusioned rants featuring, among others, statements such as the one about his baby being a f\*\*\*\*g asshole because it won't let him f\*\*k its mom anymore. Louie's routines are hard to capture in text because their magic lies more in the attitude than the wording but they are beautifully funny and have resounded with people across the globe in the decade that has passed since Louie's momentous decision in that solitary car session.

The point is, CK became truly, groundbreakingly funny only when he gave up trying to live up to the image of a stable, surefire family provider and risked it all by being brutally, no-holds-barred honest with both himself and his audience. He succeeded, financially and artistically, by throwing away all veils of decency, dignity and propriety and becoming what he ultimately was and what we all are: a nobody, a stain, "a professional asshole," as he himself puts it (a filthy lack, that is, if we take the term at face value), and the resulting vacancy beneath the façade proved an infinitely rich source of surpluses in terms of enjoyment, creativity and finance. And that is, as they say, *quod erat demonstrandum*.

That is, of course, not to say that reducing oneself to a filthy lack is a surefire recipe for success, either artistic or financial. The point is that there are no recipes for success, there is only a recipe for a risk of either spectacular success or failure, and there is surely something logical behind the fact that so many comedians tend to be "sad clowns," often suffering from chronic depression and occasionally even ending their lives at their own hands. Because of its radically disillusioned outlook on life great comedy always balances the slippery slope between dark despair and comfortable, crowd-pacifying jokes that refrain from challenging basic human beliefs. But when comedy does manage to tread that narrow path well, it quite possibly gets closer than any other art form to the core truth of that fascinating plexus of lack and wealth making up human existence.

Since we are already on the topic and to cover all our bases, this might be a good time to say a word or two about the difference between the comic and the uncanny as well. Comedy and horror really do share many common themes and it was Alenka Zupančič who first noted the similarity between Bergson's list of comedic phenomena and Freud's enumeration of uncanny motifs in his own short text on *Das*

*Unheimliche*: the themes of mechanical life, strange coincidences and doppelgangers are shared by both genres but generate very divergent emotional responses.<sup>10</sup>

What is additionally interesting here is that Freud's explanation of both sensations engaged the same concept of infantile pleasure: in his book on jokes comedy is reduced to a revival of infantile pleasure (pleasure in nonsensical word and concept play as well as in egotism, unbridled sexuality, aggression etc) that effectively bypasses our adult censor via smoke screens of sophisticated poetics or similes of logical operations,<sup>11</sup> while his text on the uncanny explains our feelings of horror at witnessing dolls come alive or our selves redoubled in hellish doubles as anxiety at having our own infantile desires suddenly fulfilled in the real with our internal censor still on guard.<sup>12</sup> The difference between the two, then, would lie in comedy succeeding where the uncanny fails: in managing to build infantile pleasure into adult life without the censor punishing us with anxiety. Comedy would thus be a reconciliation of infancy as the source of all pleasure with the adult mechanisms of castration and asceticism that are able to upgrade it into full-scale comic enjoyment, while the uncanny merely taunts our unchallenged adulthood with ghostly visions of infantile pleasure ominously haunting us from beyond the grave. While comedy sees infantile pleasure practically, as innocent mechanics useful for enhancing the experience of adult enjoyment, the uncanny injects the suppressed domain of infantile pleasure with a sinister, grown-up subjectivity; a tempter modeled on the image of the rational ruler of the adult psyche; the devil as God's dark doppelganger.

Thus, another way to approach the problem would be via the difference between funny and oppressive views of war we have already described above. The same motif can switch its atmosphere from funny to frightening as soon as the suspicion arises that there is a sinister puppet-master hidden behind the curtain. A comic coincidence is scary if it is conceived as more than a mere coincidence but not yet an orchestrated ruse by an identifiable trickster (Jerry Palmer here gives a very nice example of how a certain Central African tribe would fail to find comic coincidences in Charlie Chaplin movies amusing since they invariably conceive all coincidence as evidence of witchcraft<sup>13</sup>); a comic double becomes an eerie doppelganger when he is understood as a devilish copy sent to replace the original from some sinister domain; living dolls scare the feces out of us if they are hinted to be possessed by spirits of dead murderers while people acting mechanically stop making us laugh when they give the impression of being controlled by some dark force of unknown origin. All these examples, however, also demonstrate how necessary it is for the uncanny sensation to arise for the sinister force to remain as mysterious

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10. Alenka Zupančič, "Reversals of nothing: the case of the sneezing corpse," *Filozofski vestnik* 26.2(2005): 175.

11. See Freud 1960, e.g. 151-60.

12. Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Books, 2003) 147-51.

13. Jerry Palmer, *The Logic of the Absurd* (London: BFI publishing, 1987) 47.



as possible and not be, for example, simply reduced to a banal old man from Kansas pulling the strings from behind a wizard's mask.

When Mikhail Bakhtin analyzed the difference between essentially funny motifs from medieval carnival and their uncanny resurrection during the Romantic era, he simultaneously stressed two very divergent points about the split: on one hand, the uncanny version is more foreign to the viewer than the homelier comic one ("Our world suddenly becomes a *strange* world") but it is also more endowed with psychology (the strange coincidences conceal the plan of a dark, hidden subjectivity).<sup>14</sup> A good way to turn a scary scene into a funny one is thus to engage the sinister force in conversation where it proves to be just as banal and preoccupied with daily problems as ourselves. This strategy is employed, for instance, in the recent animated feature *Paranorman*, starring a kid who can talk to ghosts who, however, turn out to be not very scary, just slightly more transparent and greenish versions of the living, and they happily chat to Norman on his way to school. Similarly, when Norman inadvertently awakes four zombies in the same film these stop being threatening the moment he talks to them and they explain the whole business of having to get up from the grave to be a great nuisance to them as well. The same logic could be used to analyze the confrontation between Sosie and Mercury masked as his double in Moliere's *Amphitruon*: the scene is saved from being uncanny by Sosie's failure to, as a typically unreflective comic character, recognize his double as such, resulting in Sosie, rather than running away from his ominously approaching spitting image, engaging the doppelganger in conversation and thus demystifying his dark quest into a mere horny escapade ordered by the latter's boss, Jupiter.<sup>15</sup>

In short, the paradox we are dealing with in the difference between the comic and the uncanny is that comedy simultaneously injects its key motifs with more and less personality than a horror film: a coincidence is just a coincidence with no dark subject behind it, but a zombie is a full-fleshed person and not simply a vacantly marching living corpse. I would thus venture the conclusion that the difference between the two lies in the fact that the uncanny still believes in the spirit as an immaterial entity capable of exerting full control over excessively physical matter (horror genres forever swing between glimpses of barely visible but powerful ghastly apparitions and gory details of their victims' blood and guts) while for comedy matter is just matter, relieved even of its ideological *Blut-und-Boden* status (blood holds no fascination for comedy and its characters habitually appear to be made of rubber) while the subjectivity that inevitably animates it usually has to hand over the wheel to the masterless mechanics of headless interaction between material fragments that produces surplus, authorless sense. Incidentally, this theory is also compatible with Alenka Zupančič's comparison between the two concepts from a few years ago where she assigned comedy to the register of drive

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14. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 37-42.

15. Scene quoted but analysed differently in Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 73-7.

and the uncanny to the register of desire.<sup>16</sup> The object of desire is always precisely a ghastly, unattainable and idealized apparition in the name of which every concrete object offered as its fulfillment is rejected as disgustingly insufficient; while drive always achieves its aim by happily orbiting a lack inhabited by a practically and contingently chosen goal. Thus, comedy and drive are both simultaneously indifferent to specific objects which they neither idealize nor demonize but use pragmatically in order to milk enjoyment from their unchanging, circulating distance to the lack-occupying incidental object; while horror movies and desire forever strive to reach a substantial ideal whose all too lacking, all too material approach in the real never fails to give them the heebie-jeebies.

I want to conclude this investigation of comedy and catastrophe by one last referral to a commonly observed phenomenon that has already been listed near the beginning of this essay. Namely, the fact that while most comedies start and end with a stable state of things, their plots are universally made up of that very state's near-catastrophic unraveling. Although the theme can take any form from the downfall of a personal economy through professional failures to troubles among friends it is a format that has been perhaps applied most often to the theme of love. Throughout history comedies have often ended with one or multiple weddings, but the central bulk of their plots has perpetually focused on the frantically mounting troubles the couple or couples have had in finally getting together. Prevented from seeing each other, the lovers hear or mishear information leading to doubts in their partner's fidelity, and even when they do manage to arrange a rendezvous to clear things up, they are usually met there by the wrong person, sometimes of the wrong sex and sometimes in drag. Things are of course by rule cleared up in the end (let us not forget one of the most traditional definitions of comedy is "a story with a happy ending," hence the forever confusing title of Dante's classic epic), but the couple's (re)union is never left untouched by the consequences of the preceding mix-ups.

This holds true for examples from Shakespeare's classic pieces all the way to 2000s sitcoms like the excellent BBC production *Couplings*. If we take an example from the former first, one of the two main subplots of the great bard's *Much Ado About Nothing* revolves around a guy and a girl who initially can't stand each other but are driven to love via a cunning trick of transference by their friends: they tell each that the other has a secret crush on them and is merely trying to hide it behind the dismissive facade. At the end of the play the pair uncovers the ruse but it is already too late: they have fallen in love and no amount of conscious knowledge can undo the results of the preceding psycho-mechanics. Here, again, we are faced with a classic example of how an utterly cynical plot based on disillusioned insights is able to produce purely transcendent effects; how a new and genuine affection can emerge from nothingness obscured by an illusion-producing notting (which is to say *innuendo* in old Shakespearean: the title of the play is a play on the notting-nothing homophony).

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16. Zupančič 2005, 183-6.

If we examine an example from the latter show next, let us take an episode from the final season of *Coupling* entirely focused on a four-way phone conversation between two girlfriends and their eavesdropping boyfriends. The episode starts with Susan phoning up Sally to complain about Steve not finding her attractive anymore since she's been pregnant. Sally tries to console Susan by assuring her that a future mom is still more than desirable but things take an awkward turn when she inadvertently reveals her own unspoken wish for a baby to her boyfriend Patrick listening in on the other line, while he, in turn, shocks her by too eagerly assuring Susan of the sexiness of girls in the blessed state by boasting on having had spent a wild night with "a full blown preggie" during his single years. As the conversation and episode draw to an end, the future parents' relationship is patched up by the sight of the other couple's bickering while the latter's relationship ends the show in much more dire straits.

The plot of this episode succeeds in showing us how the idyllic stability of the latter's relationship was necessarily based on a strategic concealment of certain aspects of their personality. Sally had kept silent about her nesting tendencies while Patrick refrained from flaunting the full extent of his unabashed sexuality, enabling them to meet in the artificially constructed middle ground of compatibly sizzling young lovers. As the shaken up couple returns to bed after the traumatic conference call, all thoughts of continuing the snogging interrupted by it having been abandoned, Sally sighs loudly in desperation: "God, a guy with a pregnancy fetish and a woman who wants to have a baby! How will we ever make it?" Slowly absorbing the full meaning of Sally's exclamation, both lovers simply stare in shock at the bedroom's ceiling as the credits are cued in.

Again, what we had just witnessed was an effective demonstration of how, yes, the fragile stability of a couple is always sustained by certain concealed bits of truth, but how, at the same time, the radical disclosure of the hidden agenda inadvertently makes them perfectly, perhaps even too perfectly, obscenely perfectly compatible on the level of pure, cold logics – and the conclusion leaves them laying there shattered but still not broken up. We could go on endlessly with analysis' of similar examples but let these two suffice as paradigms of comedy's ultimate stance on chaos and mix-ups when it comes to love—and the latter effectively reads as follows. All stability, including the stability of an erotic relationship, is based on fragile illusion that can be inadvertently shattered in the blink of an eye if the right elements are let loose into the equation. There is no such a thing as an utterly compatible, harmonious sexual relationship lacking any jagged edges sticking out here and there at the seams of the partner's connection. But, and this is a big "but," it is precisely these jagged edges and cracks at the core of every erotic union that, if mercilessly uncovered, are liable to break up a couple, that are also the sources of novelty, of Reality with a big R, of surplus enjoyment and of surplus sense, and are thus also in sole possession of the ability to revitalize and spice up that same amorous union.

In short, it is not as if love is only possible if crucial bits of reality are concealed to enable us the illusion of perfect compatibility: that would, in the long run, more likely result in a stale marriage focused on maintaining a pretty façade while suppressed desires and unexpressed doubts bubble dangerously beneath it. Erotic attraction as such is fueled by incompatibility that challenges us to both attack and adore the strangeness in the other, while constantly also struggling to somehow include it into the dynamically stable structure of our coupling. Or, to put it another way: a popular view on love holds that its main two stages consist of 1) an initial enamoration characterized by the illusion of perfect compatibility with an idealized partner and 2) an inevitable facing up to the reality of our partner's failings and our mutual incompatibilities. We believe, however, that a more accurate description would probably follow this scheme: 1) an initial attraction to someone complete with all his or her strangely alluring incompatibilities with us, all presented in the beautiful yet brutally honest (artistic, in other words) display he or she puts on for us during our initial meetings, and 2) the facing up to both of us inevitably failing to maintain this stage-play indefinitely and being pulled down by the gravity of the banal, routine, empty façade of meaning that takes so much less effort to maintain; a facing up that leads to either a breakup or a sort of comfortable truce of routine compatibility in terms of knowing what to respond to certain problematic phrases of the other to keep the boat from rocking.

Rather than seeing love as progression from illusion to reality, then, I think is much more appropriate to present it as a regression from an art motored by the Real to an illusionary view of everything as "banal, finite, dying reality" covered by a blanket of shorthand phrase compatibility; a situation that needs to be continually spiked back into the state of art by kicks from the Real lurking precisely in our incompatibilities. Initially, we are attracted to each other precisely by our defiantly staged differences and they have the sole power to shake up the ensuing banal façade into a more passionate display of affection, even if threatening to crumble the former altogether. As Robert Pfaller puts it in his lovely book *Das Schmutzige Heilige und Die Reine Vernunft (The Dirty Holy and Pure Reason)*, we both fall in love and break up over the same odd, undomesticable characteristics of our beloved; peculiar, unplaceable traits that, much like the tabooed holies of old, acts as the source of both transcendent meaning and peril (particularly for stable social establishments) at the same time.

To sum up, the basic points of this article on comedy and catastrophe would be the following. Firstly, comedy thrives on catastrophe not so much because it would offer it a way to transcend or abolish disaster, but rather because the latter provides it with a medium of generating surplus enjoyment and sense which, in the case of viewed comedy, are transmitted via a back-handed loop from comic character to comic spectator. Secondly, even though comedy usually begins and ends its storyline by steering clear of full scale disasters, this is not a sign of its half-hearted commitment to the chaotic but rather a consequence of its tendency to work with disaster as a productive and not merely destructive force—as a gap yawning in

any given structure that also holds the latter together as an adhesive, intermittently infusing it with surplus sense and meaning. Thirdly, because comedy sees catastrophe as a permanent and necessary rather than occasional and contingent state of the world—one that can only hope to be temporarily covered up with just enough fleeting illusion for a brief period of fragile stability –, it is sufficiently disillusioned to forfeit hopes of permanently stable states projected into an unattainable future, but still idealistic enough to work with catastrophe as a dynamic engine of transformation. Fourthly, the comedic view on catastrophe does not differ from its tragic counterpart merely in a more advanced state of detachment from reality but, rather, in a more complete acceptance of reality's status of fragmented materiality crisscrossed by productively-shattering gaps, while rejecting any loftier realm to escape to beyond it.

Fifthly, comedy also differs from the uncanny's take on disaster in its conception of both structural cracks in any given situation and the contingent emergence of surplus objects emerging from them not as ominous omens from a spectral beyond but as purely superficial, non-mystical generation of miraculously banal sources of transcendence from pure and simple lacks. While the uncanny sees the material world as a gory victim of forces from a world of otherworldly enjoyment, comedy knows that the material plane is the only one there is and that all its surplus sense and enjoyment stem from its own internal, empty, essentially bloodless lacks. The difference is similar to that between the romantic and the structuralist view of the unconscious: while romanticism saw the latter as a deep, unfathomable dark ground bubbling below the thin surface of cultured life, structuralism, and comedy with it, understand the unconscious as a source of sense and enjoyment that is always already there, in the gaps and double meanings between the signifiers making up the cultured world.

In the atmosphere of amorous relationships, to link up that final theme to our theory as well, this is expressed in the difference between the romantic idealization of love as a seamless union forever tragically plagued by worldly obstacles that can thus only be fully consummated beyond death, while comedy pragmatically finds love to be interesting precisely inasmuch as it is plagued by cracks, fissures, friction and misunderstandings that prove to be the sole providers of amorous transcendence in a relationship's here and now. In short, if serious genres see catastrophe as an evil intrusion into harmony that makes our world so sadly insufficient, comedy sees it as the prime platform for the only possible enjoyment there is, at once perilous and wonderfully exciting.

Finally, since this issue of *S* has obviously chosen its thematic thread due to its timeliness in an epoch of economic, ethical and cultural crisis, *and* a renewed consumer and theorist interest in comedy, I believe it is not the least bit inappropriate to close our text with a pointed referral to the spirit of our times. We live in an era when hitherto reigning empires are beginning to crumble; when the geographical centers of power are gradually shifting their locations; and when old ways that had until recently held the status of history's final word have proven to be in rapid need

of exchange for a new model. Simultaneously, however, our era is also marked by a prevailing spiritual attitude that is much too disillusioned, fatigued and cynically entrenched in post-modern ennui to seriously believe in, much less come up with a serious contender for a convincing vision of a new world order.

Now, if we are to learn anything from quality comedy in times such as these, it is that cynicism is not the only way to react to disillusionment, as well as that if something new is going to emerge from anywhere, it is the nothingness that surrounds us that is our best bet. Comedy would, I believe, currently advise us to, but of course, “conceive crisis as an opportunity,” as the currently popular business maxim goes, but not as an opportunity for selling instant cures for or weapons against the crisis nor for buying up cheap stock to sell with a profit after the storm has passed. Rather, we should conceive of crisis as an opportunity to stop waiting for the old order to reestablish itself and to instead change something radical in the world’s clockwork that has temporarily been laid bare. A crisis never fails to disclose the normally concealed paradoxes at work in the grounding of our worlds and this provides us with a unique chance to influence and inject something new into the latter. The more potent, intelligent, creative and revealing the ensuing comic chaos will turn out to be, the better chances we stand for a happy marriage that will sooner or later put an end to our lively period of comedic existence. And the better the closing wedlock, the more we can expect from the children born and raised into it who will inherit and rule the temporarily stable state before our next opportunity for a hilarious revelation of life, the universe and everything as implicitly catastrophic.