



PROJECT MUSE®

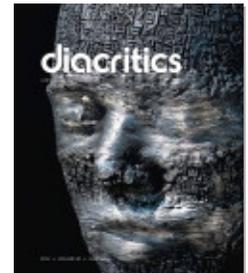
---

## Slipping on Banana Peels, Tumbling into Wells: Philosophy and Comedy

Paul A. Kottman

diacritics, Volume 38, Number 4, Winter 2008, pp. 3-14 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: 10.1353/dia.2010.0001



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/dia/summary/v038/38.4.kottman.html>

# SLIPPING ON BANANA PEELS, TUMBLING INTO WELLS PHILOSOPHY AND COMEDY

PAUL A. KOTTMAN

**Alenka Zupančič.** *THE ODD ONE IN: ON COMEDY.* Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2008.

[T]he philosopher . . . is the jest, not only of Thracian handmaids but of the general herd, tumbling into wells and every sort of disaster through his inexperience [hupo apeirias].

—Plato, *Theaetetus* 174c

*Why stop philosophy's most precious intrinsic comedy when it comes to comedy?*

—Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In*

## 1

“Comedy,” writes Alenka Zupančič in *The Odd One In*, “draws our attention to the fact that *something of our life lives on its own as we speak*, that is to say, at any moment of our life” [218]. Reelaborating some of Jacques Lacan’s formulations regarding comedy, drive, and desire, Zupančič clarifies that this “something” is the “Real of human desire”—namely, “the incongruence of the reality of desire and drive with all those (also quite factual) outlines that determine our supposedly realistic reality” [218]. This extrapolation from Lacan frames Zupančič’s views on comedy and its subversive character; but it is her unique engagement with G. W. F. Hegel’s remarks on comedy—particularly the sections of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in which Hegel tracks the passage from the Comedy of Aristophanes to Christianity—that give a distinctive arc to Zupančič’s highly original and generative approach to comedy and its subversive character. In this review essay, I will draw attention to some of the most original aspects of this critical appropriation of Hegel, while highlighting key elements of the text’s argumentative trajectory. Toward the end of this essay, I will also suggest ways that Hegel’s speculative remarks, which see the comic figure as symptomatic of a community that is not yet conscious of itself as such, might allow us to put into question some of Zupančič’s central claims regarding the subversive nature of both comedy and her own critical intervention.

Zupančič’s reflections on comedy—which are not only innovative, but also delightfully readable—merit, in their own right, the attention of anyone interested in the intersection of literature, philosophy, and contemporary culture; but her text is all the more significant in light of the oft-remarked rarity of sustained philosophical reflections on comedy. Although there are a number of books on comedy as a literary genre, philosophical studies of comedy are surprisingly rare.<sup>1</sup> Henri Bergson’s *Le rire* (published in 1900)

---

1. Some noteworthy publications include Elder Olson, *The Theory of Comedy*; Jan Walsh Hokenson, *The Idea of Comedy*; Richard Keller Simon, *The Labyrinth of the Comic*; John Morreal, *Taking Laughter Seriously and other works by the same author*; and Andrew Scott, *Comedy*.

is perhaps the most well known. More recently, Simon Critchley has written about laughter, wit, and jokes in *On Humour*. Perhaps the most comprehensive philosophical account of comedy to date—Agnes Heller’s *Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomenon in Art, Literature and Life* (2005)—was published only three years before *The Odd One In*.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to Heller’s work, which offers a philosophical account of a variety of comic works and genres, and unlike these other earlier studies, which deal with the poetics of comedy and related phenomena such as laughter or jokes, Zupančič does not approach comedy as an object of inquiry that might be analyzed by philosophical categories or methods, nor even as a phenomenon that is extrinsic to philosophy. Instead, she sees comedy and philosophy as intrinsic to one another, such that the fate of philosophical activity is tied to the fate of the comical. In assessing Zupančič’s claims, therefore, I will strive less for a summary catalogue of the claims presented in the book than for a reelaboration of what I take to be her most provocative and important assertions regarding what she calls the “critical edge” shared by both philosophy and comedy [Zupančič 9].

*The Odd One In* is the eighth title in the series Short Circuits, edited by Slavoj Žižek, in relation to whose writings Zupančič’s text clearly stands in intellectual and stylistic propinquity. (Žižek himself might be taken as a prime figure in whom comic and philosophical practices, in Zupančič’s sense, coincide.) The book opens and closes with a reminder that we too often mistake the subversive side of comedy for “a consolation for, and explanation of, our little (or not so little) disappointments and misfortunes” by reducing the comical to a consideration or acceptance of plain old reality, the “material, physical, concrete, and human aspect of things” [Zupančič 48]. For example, we laugh at the baron who, by slipping on a banana peel, reveals himself to be a bodily being subject to the laws of gravity like any other. And this mistake, Zupančič argues, is part of our contemporary ideological climate and its “imperative to happiness, positive thinking and ‘cheerfulness’”—namely, the imperative to “perceive all the terrible things that happen to us as ultimately something positive; say, as a precious experience that will bear fruit in our future life” [5]. According to this ideology, comedy gets turned into a drab lesson meant to show us our mere humanity—to teach us that we are not perfect, that after all we are only human, that we should simply accept our weaknesses, limitations and imperfections. This mistake, as Zupančič points out, is part of a larger “metaphysics of finitude in which, often with a distinctively pathetic ring to it, finitude appears as our (contemporary) great narrative” [48].

Against this view, Zupančič makes a different assertion: “If humans were ‘only human(s)’ (and life ‘only life’), if the human equation indeed added up so neatly and with no remainder, *there would be no comedy*” [49]. Far from teaching us that we are after all “only human,” comic characters typically distinguish themselves from the other “normal” people by whom they are surrounded. In this sense, “the flaws, extravagances, excesses and so-called human weaknesses of comic characters are precisely what account for their *not* being ‘only human’” [Zupančič 49]. What is most human in the baron who slips on the banana peel (or, we might add, the philosopher at whose tumbles the crowd laughs) is not that he falls to earth like any other material body but rather his “unshakable belief in himself and his own importance . . . his presumptuousness” [Zupančič 29]. As Zupančič puts it, paraphrasing Lacan, “a lunatic is not some poor chap who believes he is a king; a lunatic is a king who believes he is really a king” [32]. What makes the baron comical (or human) is not his fall, in other words, but rather his belief in his own baronness, which allows him to rise again as if nothing had happened. Rather than reveal to us our limitations and finitude, therefore, comedy demonstrates “that a man is never just a man, and that his finitude is very much corroded by a passion which is precisely

---

2. An insightful response to Heller’s *Immortal Comedy* can be found in Dmitri Nikulin’s contribution to *Engaging Agnes Heller: A Critical Companion*.

not cut to the measure of man and of his finitude” [Zupančič 49]. We could also invoke Pascal’s version of this humanist sentiment, “What a chimera is man. . . . Man infinitely passes [*passé*] man” [7.434].

If the “axiom of abstract idealism,” its brand of humanism, is that “man is only man” (that is, “man is not God”) then the humanism that Zupančič sees in the comical is something else entirely: “the true materialist axiom, promoted by comedy, is, rather, ‘a man is not a man.’” The true comic spirit—and this, I think, is Zupančič’s central thesis—is not “a metaphysics of the finite” but rather a “physics of the infinite” [50].

## 2

As I have already indicated, and will now more fully explain, the originality of Zupančič’s work can be handily exemplified by underlining a significant difference in critical orthodoxy between *The Odd One In* and Heller’s text.<sup>3</sup> Whereas Heller induces her theoretical conclusions from a methodical analysis of what she calls “high comedy,” in its various modes and different authors, Zupančič proposes to “bring forward some strong conceptual points made by the practice of comedy” by focusing on the comical not as a mode of literary or artistic representation but as a “movement” (in Hegel’s sense of that term) intrinsic to philosophizing itself. This means that Zupančič does not offer a philosophical “account” or conceptualization of “comedy” (as a given form of literary or aesthetic representation); she aims rather to bring into focus “philosophy’s most precious intrinsic comedy” [10]. In contrast to Heller’s *modus operandi*, and in a pursuit analogous to that announced by Hegel in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Zupančič aims to bring out “the specificity of the comical . . . from itself” [9].<sup>4</sup>

In this sense, the distinctiveness of comedy for Zupančič is not the many (more or less) arbitrary ways in which comedy has been traditionally or generically recognized—such as laughter, confusions of identity, happy endings, and so forth. Rather, the specificity of the comic is to be grounded by and through her philosophical work, as part of the movement of philosophy. In other words, the specificity of the comical—its difference from other domains—is not simply given; for it is part of philosophy’s “intrinsic comedy” to clarify and demonstrate this specificity and distinctiveness.

This ambition leads Zupančič to insist at various points on the conceptual purity of the comical—which would also have much to do with reasserting philosophy’s own purity, its structural irreducibility to artistic representation, to narrative, to the depiction of individual or collective human destinies. Nothing less than philosophy’s self-defining struggle with mimesis is at play in Zupančič’s conceptualization of the comic. She makes this clear in the opening pages when she points out that eschewing a philosophical “study of comedy along the lines of a history and theory of literature” is “precisely where comedy might come to philosophy’s rescue” [9–10]. This salvation of philosophy is crucial to

---

3. Despite this difference, several of Zupančič’s conclusions are rather similar to Heller’s. For example, following Heller, Zupančič repeatedly insists on the improvisational “present” of comic practices, as seen for example in *commedia dell’arte*; in contrast to which tragedy’s focus on a legendary past precludes a *tragedia dell’arte*. Another example would be Heller’s and Zupančič’s shared sense of the comic as arising out of “‘two initial a priori in human life’: a social/cultural a priori and a genetic a priori” [Zupančič 215, 224n10].

4. Hegel writes: “Philosophy has to consider its object in its necessity, not, indeed, in its subjective necessity or external arrangement, classification, etc., but it has to unfold and demonstrate the object out of the necessity of its own inner nature. Until this evolution is brought to pass the scientific element is lacking to the treatment” [Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* 13–14].

the restoration of the “subversive” edge to comedy as Zupančič sees it. That is, she seeks to revive philosophy’s critical edge as well.<sup>5</sup>

How, then, does “the true materialist axiom, promoted by comedy”—“a man is not a man”—come to philosophy’s rescue? Is philosophy’s rescue necessary for the affirmation of this axiom, or for a “physics of the infinite”? Is this axiom affirmable only through philosophy, or promoted only by comedy (as proper to “philosophy’s most precious intrinsic comedy”)? How might we understand the structural or formal purity of philosophy and comedy that Zupančič sees?

These questions imply more general ones that lie at the heart of Zupančič’s text: Is there something of human life known or revealed only by philosophy or the comical? Does the specific or subversive significance of philosophizing (or of the practice of comedy, or psychoanalysis) lie in its revelation of that “something” (say, that “a man is not a man”)?

### 3

Symptomatic of the foundational claim for philosophy and the comical in Zupančič’s text is her insistent isolation of everything that she discusses under the name of “the comical” from “tragedy” or “the tragic.”<sup>6</sup> After all, philosophy attempts to authorize itself early on by evicting tragedy, or at least by defining the limits and purview of tragic experience and representation. Thus, in order to better gauge Zupančič’s theses—not simply to question their philosophical validity as such (that is not my primary aim here), but to interrogate the way in which they validate themselves as philosophical (by bringing out “the specificity of the comical from itself”)—it will be useful to begin by considering some of the general ways in which she insists upon the irreducibility of comedy to tragedy.

“Comedy,” she writes, “is not a repetition of tragedy, it is a repetition of something structurally prior to or independent of tragedy.” Crucial to Zupančič’s claim here is the thought that comedy does not “derive” from tragedy, dialectically or otherwise; “there is no direct passage from tragedy to comedy” [175]. This assertion of the relative anteriority or independence of comedy is not only meant to gainsay, at least in part, the historico-philosophical movement that Hegel sees in the Greek world, wherein comedy follows tragedy and epic (in the pages on the “spiritual work of art” from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*); it is also meant to radicalize Hegel’s own speculative remarks on the specificity of the comic perspective—namely, to ask, “what is the singular moment [or movement] of Spirit that is at work in comedy?” [Zupančič 21]. That is, Zupančič aims to avoid overdetermining the specificity of the comical by identifying it too closely with Aristophanes or any other “historical-artistic” genre or work (whence the range of recourse, in her text, to Aristophanes, Borat, Molière, the Marx Brothers, George W. Bush, jokes, or television commercials as undifferentiated “examples” of the comical<sup>7</sup>). Bringing out the specificity of the comical from itself here means suspending a historico-philosophical dialectic in which comic genres or practices might be situated *in relation* to some prior or ulterior moment, in favor of “comedy’s link with the ever-present time” [Zupančič 178].

---

5. She writes: “this work is an attempt to bring forward some strong conceptual points made by the practice of comedy, which I believe to be of crucial importance not only for our ‘understanding’ of comedy, but for philosophy and (critical) thinking in general” [9].

6. I will leave aside the issue of whether there is a similar foundational claim for psychoanalysis in her text; or, whether psychoanalysis is likewise regarded here as the salvation (the future) of philosophy.

7. “Examples” is Zupančič’s term.

Thus, she writes, comedy “replaces the cause-effect relationship and its temporal logic (before-after)” [178] with a structurally present-time demonstration of whatever is happening. I hope the reader will forgive my awkward reformulation of Zupančič’s thought, intended to amplify its Heideggerian echoes: the comical is the disclosure of how whatever happens comes to presence. In contrast to the mimetics of tragedy, comedy does not so much reveal *why* something happens as demonstrate, reliably and unfailingly, *how* or *that* that “something” comes about. “There are, strictly speaking, no past causes and future effects for comedy” [Zupančič 178]. Comedy has no origins outside of itself.<sup>8</sup>

Here the affinities in Zupančič’s text between the practice of comedy and the self-authorization of philosophy come into clearer focus. Like philosophy, comedy defines itself as a practice that is, from the start so to speak, concerned with the present (or, more precisely, with the way in which things come to appear to us as they do); this is why it necessitates and implies a suspension of the narrative or historical orientation that is constitutive of tragedy (or epic).

For Zupančič, this point is key. She regards tragedy as bound up with the narrative revelation of an individual’s destiny, inasmuch as tragedy shows us how a particular human being’s fate gets decided by, or caught in, certain symbolic structures. Rather than show *how* this destiny comes about, through the affective vicissitudes of a tragic hero’s undoing, comedy brings to light the mechanism or functions that make this destiny (or any destiny) possible in the first place.<sup>9</sup> Like philosophy, comedy would bring into focus a non-narrative and relatively “detached” presentation of a “truth” of human lives, from which or through which individual destinies or histories can then be properly comprehended or represented.<sup>10</sup>

According to Zupančič, this relative detachment of comedy from the vicissitudes of tragedy’s narrative and affective dimensions (passion, tears, shivers, grief, fear, pity, and so forth) is essential to its critical possibilities. If tragedy stages the different forms and meanings that a given subject’s fate may take, including its attendant feelings of suffering or joy, then comedy offers the detached “repetition of the subject’s constitution”—“something much less deeply felt, albeit absolutely fundamental” [Zupančič 182]. Comedy facilitates knowledge of the subject not by presenting her story, but by presenting the “structural” (“impersonal”) comedy that constitutes the subject in the first place. The truth of the comical—correspondent to Brecht’s dictum “If it’s not funny, it’s not true”—is thereby grounded in its capacity to reveal without affecting; to isolate the truth of the matter, of “the subject itself,” as something impersonal or relatively detached. “Things that *really* concern us, things that concern the very kernel of our being, can be watched and performed only as comedy, as an impersonal play with the object” [182, my emphasis]. Or, again, “the impersonal in comedy is the *subject itself*” [182].

As Zupančič points out, the “indifference and uninvolvedness” of an audience with respect to comic events—namely, the fact that we cannot perceive something as comical if we are too deeply affected or moved by it—do not mean that comic events do not concern us. Rather, “things that really concern us . . . can be watched and performed only as

---

8. *Whence comedy’s improvisational prerogatives; both Heller and Zupančič note that “there is no tragedia dell’arte, only commedia dell’arte.” See Heller, Immortal Comedy 13; Zupančič, The Odd One In 178.*

9. *“In the comic rendering . . . the emphasis is not in how this general functioning of the Symbolic can affect the particular human being, but on the fact that it does so, and that it does so all the time. The emphasis is on the (repeated) display of this functioning, in all its oddity, not on the existential experience, feelings, and so on that it can produce in a particular human destiny” [195].*

10. *“[Comedy] is a ‘mechanical’ repetition of the subject’s constitution, not its representation through an unfolding of the destiny that follows from it, a destiny which can only be a repetition in disguise. It is not a representation of a subjective destiny but a repetition of the occurrence that makes the subject emerge under the sign of representation” [179].*

comedy” [182]. Comedy, in other words, differs from tragedy in that it does not make us *affectively* aware of the ways in which our constitutive bonds to others might be undone or transformed; rather than show us the specific actions that might lead to the undoing of a family, comedy avoids the representation of an individual or collective destiny.

Indeed, although she does not say so in as many words, Zupančič’s remarks on the importance of mechanical repetition for comedy might be understood as follows: the comic is that which does not rest by representing the social or personal vicissitudes of an unrepeatable human destiny.

In short, like philosophy, and in contrast to tragic representation, comedy reveals the constitutive truth (the coming to presence) of our experiences, precisely by *not* forcing us to undergo or to suffer the affective vicissitudes of experience through their mythic or dramatic representation.<sup>11</sup> Like philosophy, if we follow Zupančič, the comical thus signals a certain distancing of significance from experience, of insight from fate, of truth from mimesis, of presence from particular, historical destinies.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4

If Zupančič takes as a “starting point . . . the singular moment of the Spirit that is at work in comedy,” then it is perhaps worth considering what it means that her discussion goes on to view the significance of comedy in part through the comical’s suspension of the authority of narratable “experience.”<sup>13</sup> Might not Hegel’s phenomenological analysis of Spirit (including the moment of Comedy) be plausibly read as challenging the supposition that, at any given moment of Spirit (even what Hegel calls “Absolute Spirit”), we could cease having experiences? Does not the phenomenological analysis imply, instead, that “only through experience [*Erfahrung*] . . . is philosophical insight possible?”<sup>14</sup>

In Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* it is comedy—symptomatically, the comedy of Aristophanes, as it supersedes Sophoclean tragedy—that completes the speculative passage of the abstract universal to the concrete universal. Rather than signal a shift from the perspective of universal values to limited and imperfect individuals in their concrete materiality, comedy for Hegel lays bare the limitations and imperfections of the abstract universal itself. Comedy reveals the pitfalls to which our oldest values are exposed. Or, rather, comedy demonstrates that these values turn out to be no more and no less grand than their appearance on the world stage, in the lives and loves, the ups and downs, of individual selves.<sup>15</sup> Inasmuch as these values, these gods, are no longer separate from these individuals, they are no longer “represented” by them. Here human beings drop the “mask”—which in (Attic) tragedy had separated “the person in the play and the ac-

---

11. The pages of Zupančič’s section on “Repetition” [148–82]—in which she breezily escorts us through passages of Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Lacan, and Deleuze in order to tease out the irreducibility of repetition to representation—aim to conceptually justify the heart of this claim; see especially 167.

12. “A tragic story will usually show us how this happened . . . and narrate the individual destiny that follows. . . . In the comic rendering . . . the emphasis is not on how this general function of the Symbolic can affect the particular human being, but on the fact that it does so all the time” [195].

13. See, for instance, the first paragraph on 179.

14. I am here citing a succinct expression of this reading of Hegel’s text, found in the first paragraph of J. M. Bernstein, “Confession and Forgiveness: Hegel’s Poetics of Action” 34.

15. “The pretensions of universal essentiality are uncovered in the self,” writes Hegel, “it shows itself to be entangled in an actual existence, and drops the mask just because it wants to be something genuine” [PS 450, par. 744].

tual self”—in order to let “the self [appear] in its significance as something actual . . . stand[ing] forth in its own nakedness and ordinariness [PS para. 742, 744].

Thus, as Zupančič has it, “through the fact that it is individual consciousness in the certainty of itself that exhibits itself as this absolute power . . . absolute powers lose the form of things represented by appearing themselves as subjects or as concrete beings” [27]. This “appearing” is what we call comedy. In other words, comical practices are the way in which universals show up in, or get incarnated as, individual selves. Miserliness is not “represented” by this or that character but rather appears as the “miser,” baroness appears as the “Baron Munchausen” and so forth [cf. 746 and passim]. Comedy offers itself as the demonstration—or, the “proof”—of this appearance. In Zupančič’s words: “Comedy is the universal at work.”

In order to pry open a different window on her claim, I wish to alter this formula only slightly: the comical invites the rest of us to *believe* that the universal is at work in individual selves. The comical requires a community of believers, and takes the form of good news or glad tidings that it asks us to accept as true and to take seriously.

Believe it, seriously, and rejoice—there is pure comedy!

Putting things this way might help us to account in part for the passage from comedy to Christianity seen by Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Zupančič articulates this passage as follows: “the Essence descends from heaven to earth, and is incarnated in the concrete. . . . When it appears in this world in a concrete form, it literally disappears from the other world, and with it disappears the other world itself” [Zupančič 39]. Hence, the first part of the good news, and its attendant nihilism: God is man.

Although this glad tidings is already related to the comical (because it says that “substance is subject”), it is in the second part of the good news that we might really recognize that we are on comic terrain. For the whole story is not only that God has become man, and died (meaning: really, *seriously*, God is man), but that he got right back up again, like that baron who slipped on the banana peel. (“Jesus Christ is the God that has slipped on the banana peel” [Zupančič 45].)

The “comedy of Christ” reminds us that God did not become man in order to demonstrate, glumly, that God is “just” a man—a mortal body, subject to the laws of physics like you and me [Zupančič 40]. Rather, the glad tidings deliver a further invitation to believe not only that God is man, but furthermore that “man is not just a man.” In other words, it is his belief in *himself*—his sheer presumptuousness—that stirs *us* to believe.

*[W]hat is most human, concrete, and realistic is precisely the baron’s unshakable belief [my emphasis—PK] in himself and his own importance: that is to say, his presumptuousness. This is the feature that makes him “human,” not the fact that he falls into a muddy puddle or slips on a banana peel . . . but, much more, that he rises from it and goes about his business as if nothing has happened. [Zupančič 29–30]*

Allow me, once more, to put Zupančič’s claim here in slightly different way. The baron’s, or the philosopher’s, belief in himself—his sheer presumptuousness—is what provokes or invites our belief in him as a comical figure, and indeed our belief in the comic procedure as such. The greater his fall, the more astonishing his rise, the deeper the belief that is required.

An unjustifiable, bald-faced presumptuousness—beyond all realism, not given by experience, anterior to any skepticism one could muster—is the first condition of philosophy, or comedy, thus construed.

Indeed, the philosopher’s “presumptuousness” must, in this sense, be absolute and indefatigable, to the point of testing our disbelief by appearing at times unrealistic and

by pushing the limits of the absurd<sup>16</sup>—“defying all human and natural laws, and getting away with things that one would never get away with in ‘real life’” [Zupančič 217]. For example, by rising from the dead. This is precisely how Zupančič describes the “proverbial vitalism” of comedy and philosophy—“a kind of undead, indestructible life, a persistence of something that keeps returning to its place no matter what . . .” [217].

One other point follows from this, although it is not a part of Zupančič’s argument. Essential to the “presumptuousness” of this “vitalism” is not only a “life . . . that keeps returning to its place no matter what,” but also the fact that this “return” or “defying (of) all human and natural laws” signals a crucial change in the status of the downfall itself. Whereas we had taken the downfall to be an *experience* from which the sufferer could not quickly recover—a slip on a banana peel, a tumble down a well, a death upon a cross—it happens that not only was the downfall survivable, but also that from this perspective *it turns out not to have been an experience* (in our previous understanding of “experience”) *at all*. This is not because the philosopher-baron did not fall, or because the fall was not painful, but because he arises and returns as “his old self,” unbroken and indeed uneducated by virtue of having fallen. He remains, says Socrates, “without experience [*apeirias*]” even as he keeps tumbling into wells, or slipping on banana peels.<sup>17</sup>

His belief in himself has not been changed by experience—that is, by the so-called “school of hard knocks,” which we had imagined to be stronger and tougher than any presumptuous individual. Far from it! Unlike the tragic sufferer, the comic figure does not move from ignorance to knowledge, or learn for the first time a new truth about himself by virtue of some external fate. *He* is not transformed by experience. Just the reverse: the “experience” in question is transformed by the triumph of his sheer presumptuousness, his belief in himself.

In this way, he appears to pull off a shift in our very perception of experience itself. The downfall, the “school of hard knocks,” no longer appears as something outside the comic figure, but rather is absorbed by him as if it were now merely one other component of his presumptuousness. “This self-certainty,” writes Hegel at the end of his remarks on comedy, “is a state of spiritual well-being and repose therein, such as is not to be found anywhere outside of this Comedy” [PS 453, para. 747].

This is the “singular moment of Spirit” that Zupančič sees in the comical [Zupančič 21]. This, she says, is its “true realism” in the face of all the hard knocks of life—its resistance to the tendency to reduce life to a suffering of the flesh, its playful surplus and presumptuousness [217]. In terms of its theoretical development, this is where her text leaves us.

## 5

And yet for the rest of us another problem remains.

Yes, Zupančič delivers the good news that the philosopher and the baron believe in themselves—at the same time asking us to believe in the tidings implicit in this manifest self-belief, “that a man is never just a man.” She in fact tests us to see *if* we believe in the existence of comedy: “Is not the very existence of the comedy and the comical telling us most clearly that a man is never just a man . . . ?” [49].

But such questions—posed in this way, inasmuch as they beckon us to take a more appreciative look at the comical figures in our midst, and to better hear the news they

---

16. Zupančič suggests at one point that comedy is distinguished from the absurd by the fact that comedy “works” by moving more “towards some form of ‘nonsense that nevertheless makes sense’” [58].

17. See my first epigraph.

bring—must also imply that the rest of us have not achieved this happy state. We remain mired, as it were, in the dreary view that experience is a school of hard knocks; if anything, “we” recognize ourselves in tragedy.

As is rather obvious from the opening pages of *The Odd One In*, the polemical frame of Zupančič’s text takes this state of affairs for granted—namely, that the good news of comedy, which she announces, has not yet made its way into the broader community.<sup>18</sup> In accordance with Socrates’s account, the “general herd” sees in the philosopher only a laughing stock.<sup>19</sup> The movement of comedy and the life of the community are not in sync. This presumption can be seen, for instance, in Zupančič’s avowed opposition of the comical to “the contemporary ideological climate” and its empty “rhetoric of happiness,” or to an “ideological hegemony” that instrumentally confuses comedy with an “imperative of happiness.”

Although Zupančič does not admit it in so many words, we can easily see that the ubiquity of this “ideological hegemony” is at the same time precisely what allows the comic figure to stand out *as comical*. After all, the comical figure makes his appearance on the world stage as a living individual, not as a community of the living and the dead (or, perhaps, it could be said that he makes his appearance in a community that is nothing but “individuals,” and that therefore does not or cannot believe in itself as a community at all).

Far from being a “mistake,” as Zupančič suggests, this “ideological hegemony” of the community is therefore itself inextricably related to the appearance of the comical figure as such. Consequently, despite Zupančič’s claims to the contrary, the appearance of the comical figure as such cannot simply serve to critique “our present socioeconomic reality” because the very appearance of the individual comical figure presupposes a community that is not possessed of self-consciousness [Zupančič 7]. These are two sides of the same coin. The axiom “a man is more than just a man” is most clearly perceived in a social context in which the “the rest of us” are not (yet) “more than just the rest of us.” The appearance of the presumptuous “odd one in” must itself mean that the community *in* which the *odd one* appears does not believe in itself *as a community*, that we have not recognized in *ourselves* the audacious self-belief that we perceive in the baron-philosopher.

Put differently, the humanism announced by the comical figure is not a humanism that has entered the community *as community*; and this is also precisely why the comic figure makes his individual appearance as such in the first place. It is why, to use Zupančič’s terms, he is so *odd*—full of stereotypical quirks and traits, like the “tramp,” the “baron,” the “misanthrope,” or the “absent-minded professor.” He is, after all, not yet recognized or recognizable as one of *us*, as immediately *our* own self-belief.

---

18. For example, this appears (to Zupančič) to be the case if one lives in what Borat refers to as the “U.S. and A.” (The moniker “U.S. and A” would itself express a division within the community, a deficiency of shared self-certainty.) Zupančič’s analysis of Borat in fact makes clear that the comical figure of Borat—his sheer presumptuousness and audacious self-belief—succeeds (that is, his self-belief is magnified) inasmuch as the naïve or obscene beliefs inherent in the “American way of life” can be made to “explode before our very eyes” [32]. Indeed, it is precisely by laying bare the obvious contradictions in our beliefs and the gaps in our self-consciousness that Borat comes to appear as “more than just a man.” It is true that Zupančič notes that “making fun of ourselves and our own beliefs, or of others and their beliefs” is not the true subversive edge of comedy—since the practice of “making fun” can just as easily work to reify those same beliefs. But this does not change the fact that a crucial difference is presupposed in her own account between the proper self-belief of the comic figure (Borat, the baron) and the naïve, dangerous, or obscene beliefs of the community, in contrast to which the comic figure stands out as such. And it is, furthermore, this precise difference that facilitates (and perhaps makes inevitable) the “making fun.”

19. See, in this regard, Zupančič’s comments on the general view that “philosophizing” is “a fairly useless enterprise” [10].

And this means, furthermore, that the sheer oddity of “the odd one in” indicates a disjunction *within* the contemporary community; a division between us (the community that is not possessed of comic self-belief), on the one hand, and the comic figure that Zupančič invites us to perceive and to believe in, on the other. Again, Zupančič takes note of the ubiquitous force of this disjunction as the motivation for her own text; it is implicit in her title formulation, *the odd one in*. We should therefore also admit that the very existence of the comic figure expresses and announces our relative shortness of self-consciousness; his moment arrives because we fail to see in one another what we see in him. If this were not the case—think of *Borat*—there would be no comedy.

Turning Zupančič’s question around, then, should we not ask: “Is not the very existence of the comedy and the comical also telling us most clearly that the community is not itself comical . . . ?”<sup>20</sup>

## 5

As we have just seen, a rift between the community (in which Zupančič sees “ideological hegemony”) and the comic figure is constitutive for the appearance of the latter as such. The advent of the comical figure could be said to be symptomatic of this rift. Thus—even granting that we heed Zupančič’s gospel, and come to believe in the self-belief of comic figures, and to see the “universal at work” in comedy—nothing can at this point offer assurance that the rest of us will consequently become “comical” or self-believing.

It might even turn out, quite to the contrary, that the community comes to perceive the comical figure as an object of devotion—exacerbating, rather than ameliorating, the split between the self-believing baron/philosopher and the rest of us. Of course, the baron-philosopher could just as well become an object of ridicule (as is the case, say, in the relationship Socrates describes between Thales and the maid from Thrace). But is not “ridicule” a prototypical form that objectification/devotion might take in respect to the comical-philosopher—inasmuch as it establishes him as an “objectified” spectacle of the community, as not fully part of us?

Does he not remain in some sense “the odd one out,” inasmuch as he appears as “substance-become-subject” within a form of sociality that has not yet grasped itself as “substance” in the same way?

What is to prevent a community of such believers from worshipping (or persecuting) this baron who rose after falling? Or, from seeing in him a new god around whom they might now organize *as* a community of believers? What is to prevent this community—inasmuch as it is a community *of believers*, and therefore not itself *self-believing*, *presumptuous*—from seeing in this god only further proof of the drabness of their lives? Or, from seeing another sign that they are “mere” mortals, frail, sinning, limited, imperfect?

“The community,” writes Hegel in a passage of the *Phenomenology* that follows the pages he devotes to Comedy, “is not yet perfected in this self-consciousness” [477, para. 787]. *This* is the community against whose horizon the comical figure appears most blazingly. The community that does not yet “possess the consciousness of what it is” or “which does not unfold itself to a consciousness of itself” (to stick with Hegel’s phrasing) is precisely the community in which *Borat* can thrive, in which the Marx Brothers, or Chaplin, or Aristophanes have their advent. Zupančič’s humanism—that a man is never just a man—has its advent in individual lives, as individuals, but this self-belief eludes the rest of us as a community of the living and the dead.

The comical and the community remain divided. The Thales of which Socrates speaks remains apart from the crowd who (mis)take him for a jester, a form of the “com-

---

20. *Again, is this not also the lesson of Borat?*

pulsive entertainment” decried by Zupančič [7]. Again, we can now see that this division is essential to the appearance of the comical as such. We might even wonder if this rift constitutes an impasse for philosophy, too, inasmuch as it is identified with the movement of comedy.

Might this division even constitute a “short-circuit” between the (tragic) community and comical figures—a kind of diremption within the community to which comedy, and philosophy as comedy, remain exposed?

Perhaps, to wrap things up, we could read into Zupančič’s *The Odd One In* a possibility that it does not claim explicitly for itself, but for which it certainly allows.

Let us imagine that she seeks to provoke our belief in the comic figure’s self-belief not only (as she says) in order to sharpen philosophy’s “edge” upon the dull stone of the community’s “ideological hegemony,” nor to trumpet the glad tidings of the comic figure’s specific humanism [Zupančič 9].

Instead, let us imagine that she returns us to the significance of the comical figure in a way that also aligns his singular presumptuousness more fully with our own—in order that his self-consciousness become, as it were, ours as well. At which point the “specificity” of the comical or philosophy might find itself transformed, its position disposed differently—perhaps even laughing with us at the seriousness with which philosophy takes its own comedy.

In order to facilitate such a possibility, however, at least one condition would have to be met: “Philosophy’s most precious intrinsic comedy” would have to appear rather less intrinsically precious.

#### WORKS CITED

- Bergson, Henri. *Le rire: Essai sur la signification du comique*. 1900. Paris: PUF, 1959.
- Bernstein, J. M. “Confession and Forgiveness: Hegel’s Poetics of Action.” *Beyond Representation: Philosophy and Poetic Imagination*. Ed. Richard Eldridge. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. Dir. Larry Charles. Prod. Sacha Baron Cohen and Jay Roach. 20th Century Fox, 2006.
- Critchley, Simon. *On Humour*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*. Trans. Bernard Bosanquet. New York: Penguin, 1993.
- . *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977. [PS]
- Heller, Agnes. *Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomenon in Art, Literature, and Life*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005.
- Hokenson, Jan Walsh. *The Idea of Comedy*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2006.
- Morreal, John. *Taking Laughter Seriously*. Albany: SUNY P, 1983.
- Nikulin, Dmitri. “The Comedy of Philosophy.” *Engaging Agnes Heller: A Critical Companion*. Ed. Katie Terezakis. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009. 167–92.
- Olson, Elder. *The Theory of Comedy*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1975.
- Pascal. *Pensées*. Trans. A. J. Krailsheimer. New York: Penguin, 1995.
- Scott, Andrew. *Comedy*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Simon, Richard Keller. *The Labyrinth of the Comic*. Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1985.