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Comic Subjectivity: Žižek and Zupančič's Spiritual Work of Art

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Introduction

No contemporary cultural critic cuts as comic a figure as Slavoj Žižek. As John Milbank has recently remarked, “Somewhat like the tragicomic, clown-like Christ he sometimes invokes, he stands before us without the least vestige of pretence, revealing every last symptom of his quirky subjectivity, whilst always allowing this to witness to the universal.” (Milbank 2009: 111). Such a description not only characterizes Žižek, it also serves as a description of the comic process itself as recently articulated by Alenka Zupančič: “*comedy is the universal at work*” (Zupančič 2008: 27). According to Zupančič, and for reasons to be explained later, this form of comedy contains a more radically “subversive edge” (Zupančič 2008: 33), thus lending itself to Žižek’s critical ambition to re-actualise the Left as a radical political force. Zupančič and Žižek are not the first to employ comedy for its politically subversive edge, nor articulate comic theory in terms of its politically transgressive character, although rarely has such a theory of comedy drawn so explicitly upon a theological framework, whilst offering some key challenges *to* theology. This paper is an attempt to outline and critically evaluate Zupančič and Žižek’s comic revolt in the light of its theological implications, as well as offer a theological alternative to understanding the comic process in the light of that

evaluation.

I begin by making the case for a genealogical approach to comedy. Seen from the perspective of power, many of the finest critics of comedy, including Bakhtin are shown to operate with an implicit anti-theological bias in their work. In particular, they elide the place of comedy within the Christian Middle Ages. This occlusion of Christian sources is coupled with a further ideological form which views the function of comedy in wholly social terms as opposed to say that of the soul and its elevation.

In the second section I turn to an appreciation of Zupančič and Žižek's work on comedy. Their argument is simple. Comedy has traditionally occupied the ground of materialism, mocking lofty aspirations: *the particular usurps the universal*. By contrast their Hegelian approach identifies the moment of comedy with the incarnation: *the coincidence of the universal with the particular*, which divests itself of all metaphysical conceit, whilst refusing the reductionism of the materialist approach.

In the third section I assess their contribution from the perspective of theology. As I argue, despite their theological leanings, their theory remains trapped within the secular assumptions of modernity, maintaining much of the anti-theological bias of previous comic theory.

In the fourth section I introduce an alternative framework for comic appreciation: the medieval paradigm of analogy and participation, generally associated with St Thomas Aquinas, and recently championed by John Milbank. Articulating comedy in this way, I argue, avoids the twin reductions of religion to either the liberal private interior, or the sphere of the purely social, and thereby offers a genuinely critical reading of comic subjectivity. From this perspective the radical edge to comedy is not so much the divestment of metaphysics *per se*, but the refusal of the particular form of metaphysical presuppositions that shape Zupančič and Žižek's secular outlook: the doctrine of univocity.

In the fifth section I offer up both G.K. Chesterton and Søren Kierkegaard as contemporary critics who, as I argue, employed less a dialectical and more an analogical framework for comedy. In this way I question Žižek's reading of these theologians and his materialist appropriation of them.

In conclusion, I suggest that Zupančič and Žižek are right to identify the critical edge to comic subjectivity with the incarnation, but that means taking the incarnation and its theological metaphysics seriously.

I: A genealogical take on comedy

By way of situating this debate it is helpful to reflect briefly, not on the history of comedy as such; e.g. its development from attic drama to canned laughter, but the meta-critical history of comic theory itself. What is required is a genealogy of comedy because a theory of comedy is never

simply a theory. Theory is itself culturally bound, so comic theories reflect something of the specific ideological imperatives at work within the given field.

Bakhtin's theory of the comic as festive liberation from social restraints offers a clear example of this. Where eighteenth and nineteenth century theories of laughter tended to denigrate as vulgar the corporeal and derogative humour of the Middle Ages – what Bakhtin called “grotesque realism” (Bakhtin 1968: 18) – Bakhtin himself sought its recovery, championing laughter as a cultural and political force: “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract [...] is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (Bakhtin 1968: 19-20). This is the materialist bent of his work: comedy recalls us to appreciate our contingent existence in the face of lofty idealism. Carnival comedy becomes therefore “an expression of rebellion aimed at religious authorities and their institutions” (Gilhus 1997: 104). The forms and rituals identified by Bakhtin are said to place laughter outside the life of the official Church; the tone of official feasts are said to be “monolithically serious” and without the element of laughter” (Bakhtin 1968: 9). The carnival by contrast is the people's second life” (Bakhtin 1968: 8); laughter belonged to another world, a “folk culture” (Bakhtin 1968: 5), a disruption and challenge to the official feasts of the Middle Ages, which function to “sanction the existing pattern of things” (Bakhtin 1968: 9).

Much of the political thrust of Bakhtin's work is carried through his continual and crude dichotomising of the traditions represented. Where laughter is now taken as “an individual reaction to some isolated event” (Bakhtin 1968, 11), the festive laughter of the Middle Ages celebrates the social body, a folk community ever growing through the cycle of seasons. As Gilhus points out, the argument is framed by a narrative mythology of the fall in which the golden age of pagan humour is lost in favour of Christian seriousness and hence “laughter becomes an expression of a salvific generative power” (Gilhus 1997: 105), a case of what Lacan might term *jouissance*.

Bakhtin's work offered a welcome riposte to the age of reason, in which theories of laughter and comedy tended to subdue the body, and did much to encourage subsequent work, yet as Hokenson points out, Bakhtin “mutes the theological traditions behind much of the carnival history he is citing” (Hokenson 2006: 117; Bakhtin 198-199). For example, he readily “notes traces of Roman saturnalia in pagan humour as folk background, but neglects the doctrinal background of the Catholic Church, which sanctioned carnival.” Bakhtin sweeps it altogether as “folk humour” (Hokenson 2006: 117). Moreover, while Bakhtin held out that folk humour united “thought and body” (Bakhtin 1968: 48), in his aversion to modernity he still maintains the antithesis between reason and body.

One may concur with Hokenson that “it may have been simply prudent under the Soviets to omit theological questions, and Bakhtin is clearly chaffing against Stalin's authoritarian regime” (Hokenson 2006: 117), but this merely raises the more fundamental question as to the precise anti-theological construction at the heart of modern comic theories. In other words, what if Bakhtin is

not simply obeying prudence as Hokenson suggests, but rather, carnival laughter is rendered a secular equivalent to religious laughter so while his work on laughter may be about the Middle Ages, it remains a product of 20th Century assumptions?

Little wonder then that Bakhtin's work sits comfortably with Harvey Cox's self-proclaimed "companion piece" to *The Secular City, The Feast of Fools* (Cox 1969: vii) which takes a similar tack. Eliding the specificity of Catholic comedy in the Middle Ages he puts the festive play of the medieval tradition directly in the service of twentieth century protestant *death-of-theology*.

The point to take from this is not simply that we should recover the comic texts of the Middle Ages; medievalists have been doing a good job of that for some time now (Le Goff 1997); rather we need to redefine what we take as comic in the first place in such a way as to open the field to its religious and political potential. In the manner of Alexandra Koyre, it needs to be asked: what are the metaphysical presuppositions and shifts which facilitated the shift in comic theory so that it becomes avowedly anti-theological?

In order to clarify what is stake here, and support my argument, one may take a different but related approach. Consider for example the curious elision of medieval comedy from comic theory (Bakhtin notwithstanding). As Hokenson, in her magisterial study of comic theory puts it:

Despite the work of anthropological critics on folk culture, and Bakhtin on medieval folk humour in general, through the twentieth century the typical new theory of comedy continued neglecting medieval comic texts. The critic's continuum of literary history [...] erased the Middle Ages with a nod. (Hokenson 2006: 146)

She cites as examples George McFadden who dismisses centuries of Christian comic art when in *Discovering the Comic* he states "the comic theatre was revived during the Renaissance with astonishing fidelity to [...] Roman times" (McFadden 1982: 57). Louis Cazamian, in a book written in the thirties which allies comedy to national/racial types, is more openly disparaging. In *The Development of English Humour* he states that humour 'hardly came into its own till the Renaissance; prior to that time the mental capacity which it requires was not very diffuse' (Cazamian 1952: 4). Medieval humour was too derisive or vulgar and precluded the more complex laughter of what Hokenson calls "enlightenment tolerance" (Hokenson 2006: 146).

The relation of comedy to the ideological imperative for tolerance is central here. What is at stake is not any given content of a joke, but that comic theory privileged those texts where a more egalitarian mode was perceived to be at work; hence the Aristotelian theory, revised by Hobbes, in which comedy entailed the denigration of a butt who served to strengthen the existing social structures found itself increasingly under fire. Much better the butt who was witty, than wit found at the expense of the butt. (Hokenson 2006: 67). If the comic of the middle-ages was elided then, it was because he or she presented a mode of challenge to a wider liberal consensus and value of egalitarianism. The logic runs something like this: religion was subversive; therefore either its

humour was denigrated and elided for sake of the social, or humour itself was established in opposition to religious authority.

Indeed, this might serve as one of the central thesis of Hokenson's book although the argument is never explicitly spelled out. Instead, one of the principle foci of her book is the claim that "the comic mode is social; the comic stage is not the soul but the world [...] Historically tragedy, epic, lyric, and other genres could all be ethical, metaphysical, even theological, but they were never primarily social" (Hokenson 2006: 17). This is what combines both the Aristotelian view with the modern. The Aristotelian superiority theory whereby "socio-moral values are posited as superior to the butt who comically deviates from them" (Hokenson 2006: 18) is situated within the social plane: the joke functions to support the law (much like the manner of the scapegoat as articulated by René Girard). Likewise, while modern critical reaction may have highlighted "the self-serving discourse of the elite" that had underpinned the superiority view – championing instead the "underdog" as the comic hero who transgresses the law, it too remains within the social conception of comedy. In the former, one laughs *at* the comic protagonist, thereby reinforcing superior social values; in the latter one identifies *with* the comic protagonist, as if to satisfy "insurgent impulse to alter the social order" (Hokenson 2006: 24), hence Hokenson's thesis. One might wager that approached genealogically, the omission of medieval comedy is testimony to the way in which the medieval text risked exploding both modernist assumption about the social paradigm and where religion stood in that regard.

In sum, against the usual popularist claim that Christianity suppressed laughter (given notable expression in Umberto Eco's *Il Nome della Rosa*), one should entertain the counter claim that it was the secular theorists of comedy that suppressed religious laughter: against the Christian confinement of the comic, one could make the case for the comic confinement of Christianity?

II: Zupančič and Žižek on Comedy

All of this brings us to the post-modern comic theory presented by the so called Slovene-Lacan School; chiefly Alenka Zupančič and Slavoj Žižek. The former has worked extensively on comedy and her work is taken up – entirely appreciatively – by Žižek as his own, hence I shall have cause to refer to both Zupančič and Žižek's theory at times, as well as refer to them individually.

Zupančič's principle question concerns the following – whilst confirming the need for meta-critical reflection on the theory of comedy: "it is rather amazing how [...] comedy's supposed celebration of human finitude often seems to be the principle argument when it comes to justifying serious theoretical or philosophical attention to this rather underrated genre" (Zupančič 2008: 48). Zupančič's point is quite simple, and further serves to highlight the need for genealogical consideration: comedy is typically celebrated as a material imperative expressed in terms of the particular usurping the universal. For example, take philosophy's first joke, put into the mouth of

Socrates by Plato in *Theatetus*:

The jest which the clever witty Thracian is said to have made about Thales, when he fell into a well as he was looking up at the stars. She said that he was so eager to know what was going on in heaven that he could not see what was before him. (Berger 1997: 15)

How does this amount to a materialist view of comedy work? The universal standpoint (i.e. the idealist's heaven) is undermined by the particular and materialist standpoint. And it is this comic mode that Zupančič claims is silently assumed by the field. One can cite a number of examples in support of this contention. In Peter Berger's *Redeeming Laughter*, he manages to sum up an entire chapter offering a historical overview of philosophical writing on comedy with the claim "the philosopher looks at the sky and falls in the hole" (Berger 1997: 35). Nathan Scott is explicit: comedy is governed by a "gross materialism" (Scott 1965: 110); and George Aichele makes the claim in *Theology as Comedy* that:

comedy attacks whatever is partial biased, or narrow, especially when that particular viewpoint makes a claim to represent the whole. Theology may learn from comedy that such partial viewpoints are doomed to suffer from the barbs of the buffoon, whatever guise she may wear. (Aichele 1998: 103)

Zupančič calls the ideological field which governs such a reading: "*the metaphysics of finitude*" (Zupančič 2008: 48). In the first instance it is metaphysics because: the theory remains caught in the abstract dualism of the concrete and universal: "counterbalancing idealist escapades with the limitations posed by dense material reality" (Zupančič 2008: 47). So while on one level the joke offers identification with the concrete; it nonetheless leaves the universal "not only untouched, but even reinforced". Or as she says a little later on: what is at stake is the

mode of the comic processing itself [...] the concrete (where "human weakness" are situated) remains external to the universal, and at the same time invites us to recognise and accept it as the indispensable companion of the universal, its necessary physical support. (Zupančič 2006: 182-183)

To highlight Zupančič's point one might take the well known joke about a newly arrived in heaven:

St. Peter is showing him around the various groups; the Jews, the Protestants, the Muslims, the Quakers. Then they come to large area surrounded by a high wall from behind which they could hear the sounds of voices and laughter: who is behind the wall asks the newly arrived to which St. Peter replies they are the Catholics, and they think they're the only ones here.

On the one hand the joke ridicules the Catholic claim *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*: there is no salvation outside the Church (i.e. the Church's claim to truth stands above all others), by way of

including the representation of different religious traditions (i.e. the particular) within heaven. However, on the other hand the joke leaves intact at the implicit level the very assumption of Catholic exclusivity to the extent it is still a Catholic heaven in which the others are included, just as the newcomer is still met by St Peter. In other words, while it ridicules aspects of Catholic belief, it does not critique Catholicism *per se* which is left unquestioned. It maintains its position as the big Other which determines the meaning of the field.

The structural similarity to John Hick's Sufi tale of the blind elephant further highlights this very point (and hence in contrast to its treatment within the philosophy of religion it should be taken literally as a joke). In the tale, three blind men – representative of the various religious traditions – are asked to feel and thereafter describe an elephant which has been set before them. Yet in doing so, each one only partially grasps the elephant. The first feels only the trunk; the second feels only the leg; the third feels only the tail. Employing the language of Kant, Hick posits this difference in terms of *phenomena* (the particular) and the *noumena* (the universal). The implication: each religion is a partial cultural manifestation of an undisclosed whole at the *noumenal* level. Yet the analogy relies precisely on the position of someone who *can see*; i.e. occupies a transcendental position which the very story appears to usurp (in the Sufi tale it is the king who gathers the blind men). Hence the materialism of jokes yields an implicit idealism, the metaphysics of comedy, producing a necessary difference to sustain the initial belief. This explains why Zupančič deems such a comic process “conservative”: they can “successfully promote the very ideology whose human side and weakness are being exposed” (Zupančič 2008: 33), remaining dogmatically metaphysical in a disguised fashion.

In the second instance comic theory presupposes finitude because finitude ultimately appears as “consolation for, and explanation of, our little (or not so little) disappointments and misfortunes” (Zupančič 2008: 48). The thrust of such comic intervention may be summed up thus: “we have to consider and accept the material, physical, concrete, and human aspect of things otherwise we will be carried into a dangerous abstract ideality, extremism, if not even fanaticism” (Zupančič 2008: 31).

Yet such an approach as Žižek and Zupančič argue, fosters a certain resignation, because such a view is irresistibly driven towards pathos; we must accept “gap, a failure, defeat, non-closure, as the ultimate horizon of human existence” thereby lending an “ultra-serious heroic confrontation with our destiny” – the very opposite of what we traditionally take as comedy (Žižek 2006: 110).

It is tempting to call this paradigm of comedy Kantian (as distinct from a Kantian theory of comedy) for the reasons given above: it invites one to accept a certain epistemological humility in the face of an idealist claim; yet allows that idealist claim to remain intact; only out of sight, presupposed only empirically non-verifiable. By contrast Zupančič and Žižek's comedy – what Zupančič terms the physics of infinity, rests on distinctly Hegelian suppositions.

This move to resuscitate a subversive comedy via Hegel¹ may strike the reader as initially odd, yet as Zupančič highlights, Hegel introduces comedy in the *Phenomenology* under the sub-heading “The Spiritual Work of Art”. The section concerns how art has represented the relation of the human to divine; i.e. the particular to the universal, which is detailed through an account of the passage through the three primary genera of drama identified by Hegel and Schelling: epic narrative, tragedy, and comedy.

Epic narrative marks for Hegel the first time in which the relationship between the human and divine is *presented* to consciousness (Hegel 1977: 441; Zupančič 2008: 23). The medium is language, which Hegel associates with the universal, and the narrative takes shape through an individual, the minstrel. Hegel characterises the relation between the universal and the individual in this mode as “a synthetic combination” (Hegel 1977: 441) in which the universal remains external to the individual. For example, the actions of the gods in the narrative are identical to the actions of men and hence take on the character of individuals; yet at the same time

they are no less the universal that withdraws itself from this connection, that remains unrestricted in its own specific character, and through the invincible elasticity of its unity effaces the atomistic singleness of the doer and his constructions, preserves itself in its purity and dissolves everything individual in its fluid nature. (Hegel 1977: 443)

The following form of the spiritual work of art is dramatic tragedy. In tragedy, language is no longer the sole medium of representation; the heroes are not simply spoken about, but speak. The content of tragedy is not merely found in the representation of the gods, but in the actual speech and actions of the actors. However, the actor still *re-present* the gods through the use of a mask. Representation is a function of the relation of the mask to the actor. As Hegel says, “The hero who appears before the onlookers splits up into his mask and the actor, into the person in the play and the actual self.” (Hegel 1977: 450) Through the mask the actor represents the universal, and as such, the essence of the universal, with the actual self merely assigned to characters. This renders tragedy problematic in the same way as epic narrative: the relation of the universal to the concrete remains external: “The self-consciousness of the hero must step forth from his mask” (Hegel 1977: 450).

In the final spiritual work of art, comedy, representation is done away with all together. So As Hegel points out, if in tragedy the self-conscious individual represents the universality; in Greek comedy

the actual self of the actor coincides with what he impersonates [...] What this self-consciousness beholds is that whatever assumes the form of essentiality over against it, is instead dissolved in it – in its thinking, its existence, and its action – and is at its mercy. (Hegel 1977: 452)

What is at stake in the above passage is not that the contingent is subsumed in the universal – but that the universal is utterly contingent. This is what Hegel means by the ‘Concrete Universal’. Hegel’s chapter piece on the most accomplished spiritual work of art is situated just before the chapter on revealed religion; in other words, the moment of comedy (as Kierkegaard also understood) borders the incarnation in which the universal appears directly as the individual. In this way Hegel makes Christianity the religion of comedy.

To clarify the distinctiveness of what is being introduced here one can point to the metaphysics underlying the Kantian joke – with the post-metaphysical Hegelian joke. If the former issues forth in a kind of moralising joke with its false humility - as in the case of the Christian ecumenist joke; a Hegelian joke runs more along the lines of the Marx Brothers’ famous quip: He may look like an idiot and talk like an idiot but don’t let that fool you. He really is an idiot. Or, to give it a theological spin one might say of Christ: he may look like a man and act like a man but don’t let that fool you, he really is a man (and to follow it through: he may look like God and act like God but don’t be fooled, he really is God). This joke works by setting up the Kantian opposition between the subject and the big Other – the particular and universal – leading one to believe in each case that the Other serves as the transcendental support (e.g. Christ may look like a man but in fact he is a God). Yet in the final instance the subject is forced to identify precisely as this Other (Christ *is* God), and in this way gives expression to its Lacanian counterpart: there is no Other of the other.

By way of clarification one may characterise the two comic universes presented here in the following ways: In the former finitude is principally taken to imply a boundary or limit; in the latter, finitude is an “emphatic concept” (Zupančič 2008: 51). If the former comic universe is built within a horizon of immanence by closing off its finite self in relation to the infinite; the latter abandons the beyond and situates the Essence in a concretely existing situation; i.e. it includes it in the immanence of a given situation. If the former comedy “encloses itself within a heart-stirring humanism of acceptance and weakness claiming ultimately that: Man is Man; the latter refuses such a materialist reduction: man is not a man” (Zupančič 2008: 50); and where the former issues in a politics of the possible (i.e. acceptance); the latter implies a politics of the impossible.

In sum then, Zupančič’s theory finds the comic mode not in the usual materialist critique of idealism; but the very point at which the ideal appears directly as the material, and it is this paradox – this incongruity – which generates the truly subversive comic mode of comedy; taking man not simply as not-infinite; but also not-finite; such that where before the spilt lay between the finite and the infinite, the contradiction is now inherent to the notion of finitude itself: the human condition is a contradiction that cannot be qualified as finite.

All this serves the conceptual basis of Zupančič and Žižek’s ‘materialist theology’ – not in the crude sense of reducing life to its biological ground – the comic Spirit Zupančič tells us, “far from being reducible to this metaphysics of the finite, is, rather, always a ‘physics of the infinite” (Zupančič 2008: 50). And it is precisely this physics of the infinite which, ironically, situates comedy

on the ground of true materialism. It is 'infinite' because the contradiction involved in the human condition is a contradiction that cannot be qualified as finite, and it is 'physics' because this necessary contradiction is always materialized in finite objects and actions. In other words, it's not that comedy is too material, always bringing us back to the ground, like Thales, who slipped whilst his gaze was fixed upon the heavens; rather, comedy exposes the way that despite being brought back down to the ground we carry on with our eyes fixed upon the heavens. When one reduces materiality to a realm of nature, it cannot account for the seeming self-transcendence of nature by consciousness: the moment of comedy; i.e. that human exists only in this kind of excess over-itself. Yet what is the precise nature of this 'excess' over human?

III: Critical Comedy?

Here we encounter the anti-theological thrust of their work. As Zupančič argues, the excess of the inhuman over the human testifies to nothing more than the irreducible interplay of material and symbolic interaction; a creation or product of life's own inherent contradiction: "*Not only are we not infinite, we are not even finite*" (Zupančič 2008: 53). To employ William Desmond's taxonomy as Frederiek Depoortere has done, one might call this an instance of "immanent transcendence"; in other words, it merely attests to a moment of self-transcendence *within* immanence and so continues the materialist tradition (Depoortere 2007: 500). Of course, this hardly warrants criticism to the extent this is precisely the position advocated by Zupančič and Žižek. My argument is that this move renders their theory of comedy no more radical than the preceding theories by leaving intact the wider ideological field governing the presuppositions of comic theory: the theory remains antagonistic to the theological paradigm.

By reducing the 'inhuman excess' to a sublime phenomenal manifestation of the real, Zupančič and Žižek confine God within the aesthetics of sublimity; i.e. a private experience. Yet as Milbank highlights, drawing on Kierkegaard's initial insight: the sublime is the modern transcendent (Kierkegaard 1938: 346). The theory of the sublime within aesthetic discourse replaces medieval discussion of participated beauty; the sublime no longer refers to an encounter with God, rather, it becomes a purely aesthetic rendering of transcendence as the sublime (Milbank 1998: 258-283). Yet Western democracy relies on representation: if a thing cannot be represented in some manner; i.e. given a place within the symbolic, it has no political import. The reduction of religion to a private ineffability therefore conforms to the liberal consensus.

For this reason, Zupančič and Žižek's theory of comedy, while resisting the metaphysical thrust of comedy in favour of a Hegelian twist is precisely that: a further turn of the Kantian screw which intensifies the anti-theological and agnostic heart of modernity. Zupančič and Žižek's work on comedy belongs within the same trajectory as the model they critique.

Approached another way, one might be tempted to suggest that their criticism is more aptly described as a critique of the role of metaphysics within the structuring of religious thought, which is not a criticism of religion *per se*. Hence when Zupančič states that ‘It is precisely this physics of the infinite that exempts Hegelian comedy “from all forms of spiritualism, and also gives it its contrareligious thrust” her point is not that she is “mocking the infinite Other, but rather, by deploying this infinite Other as the very material Real of human life as such” (Zupančič 2008: 50). Yet here we have a clear statement of intent: to redefine transcendence within aesthetic categories.

In both cases what gets lost is the alternative critical gesture of theology. What if comedy was (as Milbank might suggest), less dialectical and more metaxogical, or rather, in line with medieval thought, analogical and paradoxical? By medieval I do not mean to look at medieval theories of comedy as such, but, taking up Milbank’s challenge to Žižek, offer an appreciation of how comedy might function according to the medieval paradigm of analogy.

IV: Analogy and participation

To consider this we need first to clarify what is initially at stake between these two approaches: modernity. Here I rehearse the succinct restatement of Milbank’s project by Simon Oliver in *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*. Broadly speaking, the advent of modernity may be located in a shift that took place within scholastic thought of the high medieval period. The transition from the medieval paradigm to the modern can be characterised as the transition from analogy and participation to univocity. How so?

Generally speaking, this distinction arises in the context of philosophical reflection on the ways we speak about God. When it comes to this fundamental question, Aquinas was on the side of analogy and participation. He argued that we name God from creatures, because as effects, they resemble their causes in the manner of their character (this is the neo-Platonist strain within Aquinas) (Oliver 2009: 13). Of course, we cannot know God in the manner of a thing, because God is not reducible to a thing of the world; the creator cannot be reduced to an object of creation. Yet because God is the cause of creation, creation expresses something of its creator; so while there are reasons we cannot speak about God it is also the case that we cannot not speak about God. To speak analogically then is to infer both this likeness and unlikeness. It is not to speak univocally; i.e. positing terms of God in the same sense across diverse species. What it means to speak about God’s goodness is not the same as speaking about Bob’s goodness. Rather, the relation is one of analogy, or more specifically, the analogy of attribution.

According to Aquinas, who starts from the presupposition of God’s simpleness, only God is existence himself: God’s existence is his essence. We have existence attributed to us by virtue of our relation to God in the same way that some foods are not healthy in and of themselves, but

merely by virtue of the fact they contribute to a human's health. Likewise, human existence is due to the relation we share with the source of being: God. More particularly, and by way of drawing a distinction from the pantheistic undertones of this model, we are only in so far as we participate in the *gratuity* of God's gift. Creation is not self-existence but has existence by virtue of God's grace. Participation therefore asserts that creation is real, but not as distinct from God, it is only real to the extent it participates, which is to receive itself as gift: the more we participate in God, the more human we become.

However, as Oliver contends, "In the generation following Aquinas, his analogical understanding of the relationship between God and creation was radically recast" in terms of the univocity of being (Oliver 2009: 21). For Aquinas, there is no being separate from God: Being is not an abstract concept posited as common to both. By contrast, the application of univocity to being implies that God and creation fall under a common genus: being.

According to this model, often accredited to the work of the Franciscan John Duns Scotus, (c.1265-1308) the difference between God and man is simply that God possess more being than man. Yet because God's is infinitely great, so to is the distance between God's being and man's: God has infinite Being in contrast to man. In this way, God slowly becomes sundered from creation, becoming a distant infinite power whose only recourse back to creation is through a dramatic intervention (Pickstock 1998: 121-125). This is a voluntarist God, who intervenes only through a concerted act of his will.

Milbank's point is quite simple: this theological sundering of God from creation is the basis of secular autonomy. In other words, where we take secularism to imply the loss of God, as if the choice were between God or no God, better to suggest two rival versions of the relationship: God – creation.

Accompanying this shift was change in the status of knowledge and representation. Under the scheme of analogy, knowing involved ontological elevation: we are known by reference to the divine, through elevation towards participation in God's own knowledge. For example, our knowledge of tree is also a participation in the life of that tree. By contrast, when knowledge becomes representation, the process is more akin to taking a photograph: we do not know the subject as such, only the representation thereof. Herein lies the birth of modern scepticism. Moreover, as Oliver points out "because knowledge is now somewhat problematic, the focus for philosophy shifts from *what* we know [...] to *how* we know" (Oliver 2009: 23); i.e. from ontology to epistemology.

Taken together the shift from analogy to univocity, participation to representation, or ontology to epistemology, affects and supports the autonomy of the secular realm.

What then of comedy? My argument is simple: Zupančič and Žižek's comic theory remains within the scheme of univocity. So while on their anti-metaphysical thrust may suggest otherwise (e.g. the God they wish to banish is precisely the God of univocity – the principle sovereign

individual will, distant yet securing the whole, the big Other), as might their refusal of a reductive materialism, creation is rendered nonetheless an entirely autonomous sphere albeit never fully present to itself. This in turn accounts for the primacy they accord the social as the site of comedy. They fail to even consider the “Thomistic alternative” (Milbank 2009: 138). In place of Scotus’ being - possessed exceptionally so by God – we have instead its dialectical other: Void, the nihilist alternative. So where creation *ex nihilo* emphasises creation *out of* nothing, the dialectal shifts now determines, as Conor Cunningham puts it: the nothing *as* something (not unlike the deluded ghost who refuses to fully realise he is dead) (Cunningham 2002: xiii).

In the second instance, Zupančič and Žižek treat comedy at the level of representation. This is clear from the formal framing of comedy within the Hegelian problematic of religious representation, and the way they employ the sublime as a category of aesthetics.

V: Divine Comedy

So what of comedy from the perspective of analogy and participation? G. K. Chesterton has already gone some way to suggesting just as much by linking comedy to paradox and paradox to analogy. Briefly put, the role of paradox (and hence comedy) in Chesterton’s work is part of a larger opening for analogical relations:

“[the reader] must realize the first and simplest of the paradoxes that sit by the springs of truth. He must surely see that the fact of two things being different implies they are similar. The hare and the tortoise may differ in the quality of swiftness, but they agree in the quality of motion. The swiftest hare cannot be swifter than an isosceles triangle or the idea of pinkness. When we say the hare moves faster, we say that the tortoise moves...”
(Chesterton 2007: 40)

As Alison Milbank points out (not to be confused with John Milbank at this point), analogy involves likeness in difference, and illustrates the way in which individual beings participate in being. “The result of this analogical way of thinking is a world that offers infinite opportunity as a network of analogies consisting in unity with difference, and hence infinite opportunity for paradox.” (Milbank 2007: 91) And because being itself is analogical, all systematic thinking has a paradoxical cast. However, and in contrast to Žižek’s dialectics in which it can be said “the monstrosity of the opposition baulks thought and reveals the unknowable mystery [Real] of existence, it [analogy] leads to a moment of recognition beyond the contradictions in which the truth becomes manifest”. (Milbank 2007: 90). Chesterton develops paradox in a more “metaphysical and realist direction”. It does not merely present the coincidence of opposites by way of inversion; the truly paradoxical form is one in which a truth is “revealed in and through the contradiction” (Milbank 2007: 88). And as Alison Milbank puts it, having been presented with the paradox, a reader “is presented with the

difference between two things, and seeks for that which unites them – their relation. Thus relation takes him or her back beyond the two contrasted things to their cause which is God.” (Milbank 2007: 91).

Chesterton was not the first to view comedy in this analogical way. Kierkegaard’s brilliant parodying of Hegel often masks what is at heart an analogical appreciation of comedy. For example, on the subject of wit he calls it “that Divine accident – an additional favour which comes as a sign from the gods, from the mysterious source of the inexplicable” (Kierkegaard 1962: 43).

My reference to Chesterton and Kierkegaard is not incidental, it highlights John Milbank’s contention with Žižek: Žižek reads Chesterton – and one can add Kierkegaard here – as sub-Hegelian; i.e. he recasts them within dialectics. Hence their resultant reading tends to stress the courage to confront the death-of-God, which invokes a moment of teleological suspension of the ethical, or in Zupančič and Žižek’s terms, a suspension of the big Other, but not the possible elevation of the soul as the necessary correlation of the materialist move (the genuine position of absurdity according to Kierkegaard); i.e. participation in the Divine *Logos*. In short, they are more correctly read in terms of analogy.

Returning then to my initial questions, several points may be drawn out from the proceedings. First: what are the metaphysical presuppositions and shifts which facilitated the shift in comic theory so that it becomes avowedly anti-theological? I have suggested that one account for this shift in the transition from analogy to univocity.

In the second place, this accounts for the reduction of the field of comedy to the social: with the shift to univocity one can only speak of the world, and hence comedy without God. Only theology resists this reduction by positing the soul as the seat of comic elevation.

Thirdly, one should note the ethical implications of locating comedy within analogy and participation. Without such a framework, comedy easily lapses into a form of oppositional contradiction, and the laughter it provokes unbridled. By contrast, as Jacques Le Goff argues, following scholastic attempts to establish the casuistry of laughter (i.e. who laughs, what laughs, why laugh, and when to laugh?) we have the appearance of the *hilaris dator*, ‘the smiling donor’, attributed for example to Saint Francis of Assisi who admonished his brethren to remain *hilaris vultu* [‘of a joyful countenance’]. Laughter becomes a “manifestation of sainthood, a form of spirituality and comportment” (Le Goff 1997: 51). Similarly, the Latin tradition recognises the *homo risibilis*, the man ‘gifted with laughter. Both cases underline the link between comedy and gift.

Theologically speaking, creation is *ex nihilo* [out of nothing]; i.e. it is the supreme gift, and the church a reciprocal community of gift. Linking comedy – understood analogically – to gift in this way ensures that the given is not reducible to trade goods; i.e. that Christian comedy plays a key role in the critique of capitalist exchange. Little wonder then that one of Christianity’s fiercest critics of liberal capitalism was also one of its most comic: Kierkegaard (Kierkegaard 1962). My wager then: comedy only attains this subversive edge to the extent it is understood analogically because

only analogy refuses the reduction of the world to the sphere of goods and the subject to the autonomous individual.

Much of this may appear to hang on a naive realist assumption, but the challenge is to ask whether the belief in the autonomy of the secular and the reduction of comedy to the social - over and against the religious - remains a genuine critical endeavor on the part of Zupančič and Žižek, or are merely the accentuation of modernist anti-theological trends which were themselves the result of bad theology.

Conclusion

In sum I have made the case for a genealogical approach to comedy, to highlight the anti-theological thrust at the heart of our modern accounts of comedy. Despite Zupančič and Žižek's criticism of much comic theory in favour of a more radical Hegelian approach, their work fails to avoid a more generalised genealogical pull. While they draw upon the Christian legacy, they espouse a theology underpinned by univocity, which irrevocably leads comedy to close in upon the social gathering to which theology is ironically not invited.

As for any derisory laughter on the part of the philosopher, it is no better than that of the jester or buffoon who laughs at the philosopher, baring his butt as if to embody the obscene underside of the situation. One can imagine for example a scene in which academics sit round and discuss in a highly abstract manner comic theory, only for a buffoon to burst in baring his butt and thereby expose the comedy of the very situation – the distance between the concept and the reality. What is intolerable to the jester is precisely the seriousness of the argument. And what this act veils is not only the possibility that reason may be the greatest mystery; but also that comedy itself might not stop at the butt, but run all the way up?

¹ While Zupančič is keen to highlight that her offering is a Hegelian theory of comedy as distinct from Hegel's theory of comedy, it is helpful nonetheless to grasp something of Hegel's attitudes to comedy, and more generally its social context. As Mary Townsend highlights, "the inhabitants of Prussia's capital city had long prided themselves on their wit" to the extent "Guidebooks hailed Berlin as the "mother city of wit" (Townsend 1997: 200). And Theodor Mundt, writing in 1844, described popular humour as the "Robespierre of the Berliners, their charter, their constitution, their everything" (Townsend 1997: 201). Townsend detects a social ambivalence of in the uses of humour, reflective of shifting patterns of social strata in Prussia during the transition from pre-revolutionary society to the time of Restoration. Reflecting on the *Eckensteher Nante* (a rough and tumble day labourer who appeared in various satirical and comedic narratives, plays, and caricature form), Townsend argues that in the pre-revolutionary society humour tended toward an un-enlightened vulgarity and denigration of the lower strata, epitomised in the lampooning of the *Eckensteher Nante*. In this way, humour served to establish social demarcations – "us and them" in an age of social mobility. By contrast, in the time of Restoration one detects a shift as the *Eckensteher* becomes increasingly perceived as an embodiment of the German *Volk*, reflecting a middleclass desire to "unite all the people in opposition to the repressive Prussian State" (Townsend 1997: 216).

Hegel's comments on comedy in his *Lectures on Fine Art* are exemplary of the latter approach. Consider for example his comments on the Dutch painters of the Seventeenth Century: we have before us no vulgar feelings and passions but peasant life and down-to-earth life of the lower classes which is cheerful, roguish, and comic." (Hegel 1975: 886-887). Hegel goes on to distinguish the laughable from the comic. "The comical as such implies an infinite light-heartedness and confidence felt by someone raised altogether above his own inner contradiction and not bitter or miserable in it at all" (Hegel 1975: 1200).

Mark Roche has further argued for the centrality of the 'comic' in Hegel's suggesting that "In a sense comedy functions as an aesthetic analogue to Hegel's practice of immanent critique, by which the philosopher seeks to unveil self-contradictory and thus self-cancelling positions" (Roche 2002: 414-415).

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