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Learning to Tickle: How to transmit knowledge as if re-telling a joke

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1. Introduction

Despite what the title of this paper promises - an analysis of the educational potential of jokes - we will only feature a singular, though not particularly funny, one in the following pages. This is because we are not so much concerned with the various structures of jokes that are possible, or with a theory which could help us categorize and relate different jokes to each other. We do not promise to yield a method which can simply be applied to existing knowledge, making it more digestible for the student - and we definitely are not proposing that knowledge should be somehow humorous before it can be transmitted. Rather, we are looking for a methodology which itself does not rely on knowledge, but produces it. This claim should seem quite strange if jokes function precisely by introducing the same knowledge each time, in the form of a funny punchline. This “sameness” of jokes seems to be somehow antithetical to the production of new knowledge. Yet, we cannot say that what we know of a joke is exactly the same after the joke has been told. An effect is produced which is not simply of the order of knowledge, but can be said to have structuring effects on knowledge itself. Here, it is useful to introduce the difference between a joke and a comic sequence. As our main reference for the theory of jokes, Alenka Zupančič, explains: a joke is structured around a temporal instant in which the *point de capiton* [quilting point] “captures the structure of the joke as made apparent at that moment” (Zupančič

2008: 136). A comic sequence, on the other hand, “can be read as structuring a certain length of time and displaying an elementary form of its unfolding” (2008: 137). So, while a joke’s punchline may retroactively change the meaning of the preceding sequence leading up to it, the comic sequence is characterized by multiple reversals of the same *master signifier*, another Lacanian term for the quilting point.

Though in both cases, this signifier is at work in producing the effect of comedy, it is only the latter in which it is taken as a “comic object” itself. A good example of the latter, which is developed in Zupančič’s book, is the famous “Hu’s on First” by James Sherman. It is quite a long joke which takes place in the Oval Office around the time of Hu Jintao’s rise to presidency in China, coinciding with George Bush’s administration – the dialogue takes place between Bush and Condoleezza Rice (see appendix). This comic dialogue shows how the initial misrecognition of the signifier Hu both produces the comic effect, and can also serve as the motor for the subsequent development of the joke. Zupančič defines the structure of such a sequence as “continuity-through-discontinuity” in which there is no necessary conclusion. (2008: 140)

Let us now take, for example, a racist or sexist joke (this time I have no examples, you can take any one you might know): we cannot say that they do not rely upon the functioning of actual racist or sexist motifs. Yet, there is also an aspect of these offensive jokes which is more ambiguous in the totality of the struggle for racial and sexual equality. Žižek, for example, has stated that the only way to truly combat racism is to be racist without exceptions. The distinction between joke and comic sequence, along with their different deployments of the master signifier, is operative in this claim. Though a joke’s punchline is often based on a disgusting premise, there are certain moments in which this premise itself is subverted in the telling of a joke, say, by a member of the race or class which the joke is targeting.

However, we should be very careful in noting that such a subversion cannot be guaranteed - we cannot say, for example, that a Chinese man making a racist joke about Chinese people necessarily neutralizes the racist premise of the joke. Such a guarantee is impossible because the premise of the joke is not held entirely within its content, but also lies outside in the concrete forms of social, political and economic injustice. The master signifier is neither the explicit content of the joke, nor its historical background, but the very difference between these two levels (as developed in Zupančič’s work, referenced above). We are dealing with a comic sequence in the precise sense that the master signifier is not only what gives meaning to a sequence, but is also the inconsistent motor of its further development – the fact that these two levels never actually intersect is the basis of the comic.

It would be obscene to suggest that simply having an ironic attitude in telling the joke is enough to suspend this aspect. Yet, there is also something dishonest in the way political correctness deals with these jokes, when it refuses to acknowledge their efficacy in the social space. The dialectical question to ask is: at what point does political correctness coincide with its opposite? We should take as an example the common enough situation in which an impolite comment slips out during conversation. Regardless of the intentions of the offender, something is transmitted, an extrusion which threatens to destroy civility itself. Those who feel interpellated by such comments are often embarrassed and quiet, attesting to the fact that they bear the surplus themselves. However, the polite response from them is not to ignore such insinuations, but rather to take responsibility for their status as subjects, and possibly strike back. One could say that, while in normal interactions, the big Other can be relied on to save the function of civility, *it is in these cases of excessive outburst that it is we who must help it.*

And it is precisely since there is nothing which could determine what is transmitted by a joke – neither the objective background nor subjective attitude – that jokes belong to an ethical order. Political correctness fails because it assumes that simply avoiding certain configurations of words is enough to prevent the offensive surplus - in its avoidance, it perpetuates the power of those configurations to guarantee that one is absolved from responsibility.

Here, a brief passage from the introduction of *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* provides a useful distinction:

“Back in the 1960s, Lacan named the irregular short-lived periodical of his school *Scilicet* – the message was not the word’s predominant meaning today (“namely”, “to wit”, “that is to say”), but literally, “it is permitted to know”. (To know what? - what the Freudian school of Paris thinks about the unconscious...) Today, our message should be the same: it is permitted to know and to fully engage in communism, to again act in full fidelity to the communist Idea. Liberal permissiveness is of the order of *vidilicet* - it is permitted to see, but this very fascination with the obscenity we are allowed to observe prevents us from knowing what it is that we see.” (Žižek 2009: 7)

To be “permitted to see” is the slogan of those who already know - they are authorized by their knowledge to see the forbidden - the cynical realists who not only accept the wretchedness of the situation, but enjoy watching it unfold. To be “permitted to know”, on the other hand, is the slogan of those for whom knowledge does not authorize anything - except that it makes them responsible.

For us, this question is the crux of the concept of transmission - *Vidilicet* works only from the standpoint that one is allowed to see what others cannot, while *Scilicet* is a principle of

egalitarian learning and self-discipline. The rest of this text will be focused on this latter concept, and the requirements it imposes on the question of transmission.

2. Attention and Equality

In Jacques Rancière's seminal work from 1969, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, he extracts a series of emancipatory lessons from the French teacher Jacotot's texts on pedagogical method. Jacotot was a teacher who taught Flemish children how to speak French, using only the text, *Telemachus*, which they studied without any explication of the material. He discovered that, by repeating a simple method of interrogating and verifying work, one could teach something that one doesn't know. Though Rancière's text, which recounts the lessons of Jacotot's "intellectual adventure", is very rich with concepts, two in particular are crucial for our analysis, that of "equality as a starting point" and "attention".

The first is the overcoming of stultification, which Jacotot defines as the effect of explanation of producing a division between superior and inferior intelligence. That is, explanation always has an element of infinite regress – an explanation of an object can always be itself taken as an object requiring further explanation. What is common to all explanations is that the teacher knows more and can gauge the misunderstanding in the student – according to Jacotot, this inequality is propagated with every explanation. However, as we will show, this stultification is not simply the effect of explanations, but of something much more constitutive of the act of learning itself.

The second concept, attention, is "the act that makes an intelligence proceed under the absolute constraint of a will" (Rancière 1991: 25). We will critique this use of "will" by appealing to another aspect of the comic object mentioned above. Our first proposition is that comedy has an affinity with "equality as a starting point", insofar as it is anti-stultifying by nature. We could say that, a joke cannot be explained, since when it is explained, it is no longer a joke. But we also note that a joke does not simply begin with equality – prior to the moment of the punchline, the person telling the joke *does* occupy a certain privileged position. The comic sequence, to complicate things further, does not begin from equality, but rather from a radically unequal status of the signifier to itself – there is comedy of the Hu joke insofar as there is never a "synthesis" of the opposing meanings. If it is not the equality of knowledge or meaning, what exactly is egalitarian in jokes?

We turn to Zupančič for a detour which will allow us to grasp this question:

“Lacan introduced his conceptualization of transference with a reading of Plato’s symposium, in which he emphasizes the notion of *agalma*, the mysterious surplus-object, ‘something in himself more than himself,’ that Alcibiades ascribes to Socrates. He relates this to his concept of the object a. It is precisely this treasure, situated in the Other, that activates the transference of knowledge; it is, so to speak, an objectified trust, later to be followed by subjective trust. The presupposition of the analyst’s knowledge is not exactly ‘objective’ but, rather, ‘object-related’, fixed to an object – it is ‘blind faith’ in the object-cause of the subject’s desire, which is situated in the Other. Yet in spite of – or perhaps precisely because of – its blindness, it functions in such a way that it produces, in analysis, real effects of knowledge and truth.” (Zupančič 2007: 86)

So it is clear that, for psychoanalysis, the problem of stultification is more complicated – every analytic act is preceded by transference – we can say its motor is a desire predicated on a mistake. That is, we make the mistake of seeing something in the analyst which compels us to follow him or her – this object which causes our desire is our blindness “objectivized” in the world. To use our previous example, it is Bush’s blindness to the name of the president of China which is right in front of us, leading us and him through the joke. This blindness is not simply an aspect of Bush’s character, but part of the signifier Hu itself. Likewise, far from being a matter of the patient’s will, knowledge, or any other personal limitations, transference operates through an *objective* trust – a trust which provides the distance to work through his or her subjective problems. We could say that analysis itself is structured like a joke in which the patient is “led by the nose” to produce serious effects on his own subjectivity. What is egalitarian about the analytic experience is not the equality of the patient and analyst – it is not equality between *subjects*, but between the patient and his own blindness.

Let’s read a quote from Žižek right after he introduces his concept of parallax:

“Materialism is not the direct assertion of my inclusion in objective reality (such an assertion presupposes that my position of enunciation is that of an external observer who can grasp the whole of reality); rather, it resides in the reflexive twist by means of which I myself am included in the picture constituted by me – it is this reflexive short circuit, this necessary redoubling of myself as standing both inside and outside my picture, that bears witness to my ‘material existence’. Materialism means that the reality I see is never ‘whole’ - not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it.” (Žižek 2009: 17)

Thus, the “parallax object” permits us to conceive of a materialist theory of transmission that subtracts itself from the usual distinction between knowledge and ignorance. We could say, in fact, that it is *knowledge about ignorance* which is being transmitted, and that this knowledge is of ignorance grasped externally, in the field of symbolic determinations themselves. For

example, the current focus of many educational institutions is how to assess the use-value of knowledge so that we can allocate funds appropriately. To make such a measurement, one must presuppose that our blind spot is simply subjective – e.g. we do not know yet what will be the determinants of a successful economy, but we estimate that it won't be more trained philosophers. Our position, on the other hand, is not simply that it is impossible to know how an education benefits us, but that this value-less instance is the very foundation of education itself – a parallax which any true conception of transmission must account for.

In his seminar on anguish, Lacan gives an interesting critique of the work of Piaget - specifically one of his experiments with children that involved transmission of knowledge. (Lacan 1963: 264) The experiment proceeds as follows: a child is given a diagram of a tap and a basin, and is instructed in a schematic way the functioning of this tap. The child must then repeat what the schema lays out, first to the experimenter, and then to another child of the same age. Piaget discovered that only in a quarter of cases did the child successfully “reproduce” the explanation to another, and secondly, that these explanations had deteriorated compared to the one repeated to the experimenter. He concluded that, for children under the ages of 7 or 8, “the ego-centric factors of verbal expression (elliptical style, indeterminate pronouns, etc.) and of understanding itself, as well as derivative factors (such as lack of order, in the accounts given, juxtaposition, etc.) are all too important to allow of any genuine understanding between children.” (Piaget 1998: 126)

Lacan's critique begins by saying that Piaget's experiment is founded on the assumption that the word is meant to communicate. For Lacan, on the other hand, words are meant to evoke signification in the subject – that is, they evoke understanding at the level of the body itself. Lacan says, in a slight detour to his main analysis, that if Piaget had properly told a myth to a child, there would be no entropy or “wastage” in the reproduction to another child. He then points out that, in the case of the explanation of the tap, the aspect which was successfully transmitted (he cites the explanation the child gives here) had to do with the fact that the tap could be turned off and that the basin which received the water would therefore not overflow. (Lacan 1963: 267)

Lacan interprets this in a very interesting way, namely that the tap functions at the level of the phallus for the child – it evokes something of desire at the level where it is stuck, not flowing. What Piaget misses is that, for the child, what is essential is that the tap is highlighted by what it does not do – it does not make the basin overflow – and that the child's desire to know this is commensurate with what is evoked by Piaget's own desire to test the child. To say that desire is the desire of the Other is to say that there is fundamentally an indistinction

between the child's desire to be recognized by the Other and the Other's desire itself. In other words, we have desire only where there is castration, the psychoanalytic term for the impossibility of having a desire untainted by otherness. We can therefore differentiate transmission from communication in that the key element in the former is not a message, but something rather like a gap or malfunction in the order of messages.

Furthermore, Lacan himself poses a question which echoes and answers to the "infinite regress" of Jacotot's definition of stultification – that is, if education depends on communication qua function of language, then how is language itself acquired? (Lacan 1963: 268) It is clear from Lacan's analysis of Piaget that a notion of language which does not account for the deadlock of desire goes hand in hand with instinctual development. The Lacanian solution, rather, is to conceive of the entrance of the word into the body as the introduction of castration – what occurs in the case of the child is the incidence on his body by the "not" of the tap – a "not" which bestows recognition by the Other.

Thus, we can say that the psychoanalytic supplement to the problem of stultification is that castration is the *constitutive stultification* of the subject by language itself – the desire which defines our internal subjectivity is only possible with the disappearance of its object from the external world. However, this object does, in fact, return – in the form of anguish. The basic question which must be posed to Jacotot is this: why does explanation provoke understanding in some and stultification in others? Following Lacan's definition of anguish as the lack which comes to lack, we could say that anguish occurs for a student not when he or she is unable to understand something, but, rather when there is no space for a lack in understanding. "Constituted stultification", opposed to the constitutive, does not simply occur when a child receives an explanation which reinforces his or her lack, but rather when the space for lack itself is threatened to be erased. One can cite instances where a child is measured and classified at an early age as either "gifted" or "slow" – such a procedure may serve to cover up castration insofar as it displaces the responsibility of the child's desire to the teacher. But it does not suffice to critique the concept of intelligence by claiming that it is a product of our measuring apparatus – such a critique would only further displace responsibility – what is required instead is a thorough *denaturalization* of learning.

3. Three Figures of Transmission

The first step in such a project is to examine the origin of learning. As we have said, the Lacanian theory of transmission is based upon a concept of language that includes impossibility. We have used several terms interchangeably regarding this impossibility –

castration, malfunction, stultification, lack, and so on – which raises the obvious question: how do these terms, which seem to be versions of “cannot”, lead to learning?

The Oedipus complex, as Freud originally conceived it, involved three terms: the father, mother, and child – the incestuous desires of the child for the mother are prohibited by the father. But Lacan showed that there is an inversion at play in this prohibition – it is not that, first the child desires and then the prohibition comes, but rather that the castration, in the form of prohibition, creates the space for desiring as such. Lacan also proposed, through an analysis of Freud’s case study of the Rat Man, that a fourth term - which is present as vanished - prevents the father from fulfilling his function. (Lacan 1979: 391) Every prohibition produces an excess, which in a very precise sense, elides it: one can just as well enjoy the renunciation of the object of desire as the object itself – this is the basic logic proper to Freud’s death drive.

What we have called constitutive stultification is thus not the end of the story – it is the starting point from which the logic of the drive, with all its reversals, can be articulated. The first task then, for both psychoanalysts and educators, is to locate and make use of such moments. Myths were for Freud and Lacan a first attempt at this – since they dealt with the origins not simply in a factual way, but through a metaphoric preservation of the “not” at the core of knowledge, which is *in knowledge more than knowledge*, to turn a phrase from Lacan. This excess in knowledge is itself unknowable, and this is precisely what opens the ethical dimension – one could say, to not forget what we cannot know. For psychoanalysis, it is not simply a matter of discovering the original Cause of the symptom, but that this Cause itself, and its determining influence, is disrupted from within by its own anti-epistemological kernel. The repetition of the Oedipal complex is thus always a failed repetition - a neurotic is not simply doomed to repeat his “individual myth”, but that, due to the work of the death drive, his repetition itself *constructs* what it repeats. The myth which serves as the constellation of this repetition, a metaphor of the Cause, is the original form of any transmission. We can thus say it constitutes an *idea of origin*.

If this allows us to articulate the origins of learning, the Lacanian notion of the *matheme* can help us grasp its ultimate ends. François Regnault points out two interesting facts: first, in psychoanalysis there are no borderline cases – in his words, “a case is an exception to the law that it belongs to”. There is no ideal neurosis, for example, in which all neurotics asymptotically approach. Second, Lacan (almost) never presented cases in his published seminars or *écrits* – Regnault offers a hypothesis regarding this:

Whereas the Freudian method seems to go forward from the singular to the universal, Lacan’s method consists in keeping together the absolute singularity of the case and the

level of universality, which is an equation, or what he calls a *matheme*. (Regnault 1991: 47)

In other words, the *matheme* stands in for the case studies of Freud – they are formulas which present what is singular in a case. In this sense, *mathemes* constitute an *idea of exception* which resides at a certain limit of formalization of one's own trajectory in analysis. General properties such as will, determination, or intelligence are disregarded by these formulas – what is essential in a case is not a trait which might assign it to a class, but that which subtracts it from all classes: desire. In the example of the tap, what was of interest to the child was that it could be shut off, a fact which cannot fail to evoke the properly ethical task of a child – it is insofar as the tap is a metaphor for the child's own struggle to be the "not" of his universe that it is of interest, that it can elicit desire. But this tap must also be imbued with something of the Other's desire as well – Piaget's desire to know if the child can communicate like an adult, for example. Lacan's point is that Piaget himself couldn't recognize the reflection of his own desire in the desire of the child – the overlap of each elides measurement insofar as desire is always an exception.

And, to recall our discussion above regarding Rancière's "starting point", we can say now that jokes constitute an idea of equality. What is at stake in this equality is not a right to learn, but a permission to know – and, given the three conceptualizations of the object, we can answer a latent question regarding the doctrine of *Scilicet*: namely, who is it that permits us? It is neither the stultifying master, nor the big Other, but what Žižek names the tickling object. More precisely, the answer to who permits us is... Hu!

4. A Methodology

What does this triad of ideas – origin, exception, equality – and the tickling object offer us as regards to a possible methodology, which we promised at the beginning of the text? We offer an example which we hope will both clarify the triad at play and also link the comedic sequence mentioned above to a method. This example just so happens to also be Chinese-themed: by far the most common motif in kung-fu films is that of the young student who visits a master eagerly yearning to learn martial arts (usually to avenge his family). What the student receives instead is a series of meaningless tasks that seem to only free up the master's leisure time: carrying water up and down the mountain steps, cooking and cleaning the house, getting rid of mosquitoes, etc. At first, the student takes this in good humor, thinking it to be some sort of test of his sincerity. Inevitably though, his patience is pushed too far, and he complains irritably that he came to learn how to fight, not to do chores. Whereupon the master attacks him, and he

discovers that the household skills he had unwittingly honed was itself the martial arts he had hoped to acquire. Does this example not have the structure of a comedic sequence, insofar as the proper knowledge to be sought was already in the very misrecognized path to knowledge? What should be added, however, is that this “parallax shift” also occurs for the master himself – he is ignorant of the effects of his own teaching. One could imagine that the master was just trying to humor the student and also get some of his household cleaning done for free. We could even say that it is not his method which transmits the knowledge, but the student’s - a method which teaches precisely by disrupting the known – namely, his symptom.

Perhaps this is the proper answer to those who complain that philosophers do not provide any solutions to our current predicament. What they perceive as a series of meaningless tasks - clarifying questions, inventing new terms, re-reading classic texts – is already the philosophical kung-fu we need. What is truly transmitted through these efforts is the knowledge that the master does not exist to solve our problems, but is the very name for how we misrecognize them.

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Appendix

Hu's on First
James Sherman

(We take you now to the Oval Office)

George: Condi! Nice to see you. What's happening?

Condi: Sir, I have the report here about the new leader of China.

George: Great. Lay it on me.

Condi: Hu is the new leader of China.

George: That's what I want to know.

Condi: That's what I'm telling you.

George: That's what I'm asking you. Who is the new leader of China?

Condi: Yes.

George: I mean the fellow's name.

Condi: Hu.

George: The guy in China.

Condi: Hu.

George: The new leader of China.

Condi: Hu.

George: The Chinaman!

Condi: Hu is leading China.

George: Now whaddya' asking me for?

Condi: I'm telling you Hu is leading China.

George: Well, I'm asking you. Who is leading China?

Condi: That's the man's name.

George: That's who's name?

Condi: Yes.

George: Will you or will you not tell me the name of the new leader of China?

Condi: Yes, sir.

George: Yasser? Yasser Arafat is in China? I thought he was in the Middle East.

Condi: That's correct.

George: Then who is in China?

Condi: Yes, sir.

George: Yasser is in China?

Condi: No, sir.

George: Then who is?

Condi: Yes, sir.

George: Yasser?

Condi: No, sir.

George: Look, Condi. I need to know the name of the new leader of China. Get me the secretary-general of the U.N. on the phone.

Condi: Kofi?

George: No, thanks.

Condi: You want Kofi?

George: No.

Condi: You don't want Kofi.

George: No. But now that you mention it, I could use a glass of milk. And then get me the U.N.

Condi: Yes, sir.

George: Not Yasser! The guy at the U.N.

Condi: Kofi?

George: Milk! Will you please make the call?

Condi: And call who?

George: Who is the guy at the U.N.?

Condi: Hu is the guy in China.

George: Will you stay out of China?!

Condi: Yes, sir.

George: And stay out of the Middle East! Just get me the guy at the U.N.

Condi: Kofi.

George: All right! With cream and two sugars. Now get on the phone.

(Condi picks up the phone)

Condi: Rice, here.

George: Rice? Good idea. And a couple of egg rolls, too. Maybe we should send some to the guy in China. And the Middle East. Can you get Chinese food in the Middle East?