

ANALYSIS, HEGEL AND THE SEVENTH ART

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Summary: This paper investigates the significance of filmic analysis in the contemporary theoretical paradigm inspired by Slavoj Žižek, which we term ‘Transcendental Materialism’. After characterising its distinct peculiarities within the history of psychoanalysis and film theory, we demonstrate the limitations of previous (possible) answers, arguing they are partly formulated in response to confrontations with other paradigms. Our own approach is then informed by a study of another popular object of analysis in Transcendental Materialism – the joke. We show how Freud’s understanding of the joke was adapted by the paradigm and supported further by certain philosophical insights by (among others) G.W.F. Hegel. Finally, we demonstrate how parallels can be drawn between this adaptation and the significance of the filmic form within Transcendental Materialism, inspired in part by Alain Badiou’s reading of Hegel.

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Introduction

One would be hard-pressed to think of a moment more encapsulating of the end of the 50s, than when Jean-Paul Sartre was approached by legendary director John Huston to write a screenplay on the life of Sigmund Freud. After heavy bickering between the two, Sartre decided to ‘cut down’ his over 250 pages version of what would become *The Secret Passion* (1962), by handing in a manuscript twice the length – “the Texan public could not manage four hours of complexes” (Sartre, 2013, p. viii) – and eventually quit the project altogether. Nothing seems more appropriate considering Freud’s infamous resistance to the moving image. Both privately and theoretically, the German analyst avoided the cinema, considering it a childish endeavour which received too much attention already. This arguably continued with Jacques Lacan, who, despite very much enjoying the seventh art (as opposed to Freud), hardly took a theoretical interest (Heath, 1999, pp. 26-28). As a

result, to paraphrase the central argument of Stephen Heath's excellent *Cinema and Psychoanalysis* (1997), the history of these two disciplines is a tale of unrequited love. Even before the eventual explosion of psychoanalytic film theory in the 70s (and subsequent tensions), there was a long line of filmmakers, critics, theorists and enthusiasts whose interest in psychoanalysis was generally met with dismissal.¹

This history in itself raises the fundamental question of *significance*: why does one (not) seem to care so much about the other? As answering this question *in toto* would be a near-impossible task, this paper limits itself to one particular paradigm: that now well-known style of interdisciplinary effort set out by Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989). Here the gap between Lacanian psychoanalysis and (neo-)Marxist media critique is bridged through in-depth investigation of German idealist philosophy, more specifically ontology and logic. Over the last decades, what is known as 'Žižekianism', 'Disontology', 'the Ljubljana School', the 'Evental turn', 'New Theory' or 'Transcendental Materialism' ('TM')² has become its very own theoretical paradigm, with central publications, edited book series, conferences and institutions. It utilises particular concepts, approaches and methods which have become commonplace, and therefore, no longer seem particular worthy of questioning. On the one hand, open theoretical dialogue between film studies and TM has been very limited, and was more popular when still in its infancy. On the other hand, over the last few decades, vast swaths literature have been written by TM's central figures like Slavoj Žižek, Todd McGowan, Alenka Zupančič and Joan Copjec, which concern themselves *with* film, and bring up cinema as a way to develop some theoretical kernel. This is not a "digression" but a methodological need: something *of theory itself* is "at work" in these examples (Zupančič, 2000, pp. 121-136). This follows some of the few explicit details on methodology ever written by Žižek, notably in his least-read,³ but most 'film-theoretical' work, *The Fright of Real Tears* (2001): "the aim is ... not to talk *about* [cinema], but to refer to [cinema] order to accomplish the *work* of Theory" (p. 9).

1. Nothing illustrates this dynamic perhaps better than how the televised interview titled *Psychoanalyse* was republished, first in French, later in English (by Joan Copjec) as *Television* (1990), despite television (nor cinema) hardly ever being mentioned, as the introduction promises.

2. Our preferred term following the systematization efforts by American philosopher Adrian Johnston (Johnston, 2013).

3. In the sense that it is his only English book not to get a second edition – though there obviously may exist other reasons for this.

It is this complication, brought about by a disconnect between the very limited *explicit* entanglements with film theory and cinema in TM, and the omnipresent *implicit* connection between TM's psychoanalytic approach and cinema, which concerns us. Whereas the first was only addressed when TM was in its infancy, the second has only become more pressing. This paper seeks to integrate these two phenomena, demonstrating how it puts pressure on the shortcomings of past accounts, and develop its own alternative answer to the question: why, if at all, is the filmic form relevant to transcendental materialist analysis?

1. Cinema, Theory & Film Theory

Let us, before setting out on a course of our own, pay homage to the theoretical reflections produced in the past. Although the debate about the relationship between film theory and TM has mainly receded into the background now, it was a more prevalent topic at the turn of the century, following the rising popularity of Slavoj Žižek's writings within the scene of film theory. Most famously, this resulted in the publication of *Fright of Real Tears*, followed by a polemic exchange between Žižek and film theorist David Bordwell (Bordwell, 2005b). Though there can be very little doubt as to the political motivations of Bordwell (see his comments on Žižek and Lenin), there was clearly also a disciplinary concern: Žižek's "absence of sustained engagement with any filmic texts" (McGowan, 2016b, p. 9). It is this gap that theorists such as Todd McGowan, Stephan Heath and Joan Copjec (who all had a background in film theory) attempted to bridge at the time. So, one would expect at least some specialists in the field to, in some sense, object to the necessity of this paper, by arguing that the question of the film-form was already addressed decades ago. We can divide such objections into three broad categories.

The first and most immediate puts pressure on this very question of significance itself. Is it one which is even capable of being answered? After all, one might argue that the question of significance boils down to asking speaking subjects why they speak about the things they do. One could argue this is an example *par excellence* of attempting to find something 'behind' discourse, something of the order of metalanguage – the very impossibility

which plays a central part in the Lacanian understanding of language and symbolic structure (Lacan, 2007). Omnipresent in psychoanalytic practice is the theoretical danger which arises when one condenses the gap between technique and literal content. As Lacan famously aphorised: “one of the things we must guard most against is [an inclination] to understand too much ... To interpret and to imagine one understands are not at all the same things. It is precisely the opposite. I would go as far as to say that it is on the basis of a kind of refusal of understanding that we push open the door to [analysis].” (Lacan, 1991, p. 71). There is an important difference which must be maintained between e.g., examining the techniques of self-censorship present in the dream construction of the patient, and a questioning of ‘why’ the patient dreams at all – as was the case centuries b.C. in Ephesus (Artimedorus, 2012). However, although one can imagine this to be a very fruitful objection in some Lacanian schools of thought, in the case of TM specifically it is decidedly not so. Core to the development of TM and its methods was the idea that the *il n’y a pas de métalanguage*-aphorism should very deliberately *not* be used as a theoretical crutch, as reason *not* to investigate something. This is what sets TM apart from other, more post-structuralist readers of Lacan, termed ‘deconstructionist’ or ‘hermeneutic’.⁴ As Žižek put it: “Is this not a little bit too convenient? The position which prompts the deconstructionist ... is the position of metalanguage in its purest, most radical form.” (Žižek, 2008, p. 173). This is because TM regards the *absence* of an attempt to find a metalanguage as its own curiosity. It marks a lack, a failure, a “sinister cover-up” (Copjec, 1994, pp. 229-230). It is in line with this idea that we position our investigation.

The second sort of objection was entertained by Stephen Heath in his paper on the history of psychoanalysis and cinema (1999), and mirrors in a sense Bordwell’s: TM is actually not concerned with film at all. Since the path that leads to this conclusion is slightly different, we will characterise them separately. Bordwell considers TM to be just the latest iteration in a long line of Lacanian ‘Grand Theory’, psychoanalytic approaches to cinema which pose as film theory but aren’t (Bordwell, 2005a, pp. 258-269). It “seeks to

4. Against the writings of whom Žižek, who’s background was in the adoption of French structuralist writing into the established Slovenian Marxist canon, positioned himself.

describe very broad features of society, history, language, and psyche” as opposed to a “more modest trend which tackles more localized film-based and short stories, with the exception of a few isolated comments about shot structure or the use of sound... [he] downplays the importance of form ... the distinctiveness of film as a formal structure” (McGowan, 2016b, pp. 3-4). So, does TM really even *care* about cinema? This would indeed be damning evidence if the particular affects and interests of Slavoj Žižek were on trial, but that is not the case. As pointed out in our introduction, but also by McGowan, it is Žižek’s “focus” which was shared by the movement that came in his wake (McGowan, 2015, pp. 67-70). This is a case where the question of metalanguage, the non-identity of *énonciation* and *énoncé* does come into play. Žižek may be as careless in his language surrounding the specificities of cinema as he likes to be, this does not make TM’s apparent interest in it disappear. Heath (1997) presented his own version of this dispute long before there was a TM-movement to speak of, arguing that the long history of unrequited love between film studies and psychoanalysis mainly concerns the first (film studies) trying to attract the affections of the second (psychoanalytic theory). According to Heath, Žižek and TM buck this trend by relinquishing the desire to study film itself. Instead they seek to isolate what Heath dubs the “Žižek-film[s]”: little ‘snippets’ of a film which are shown during a hypothetical lecture, and are required for the event to proceed (Heath, 1999). This pre-echoes the Žižekian phrase of ‘doing the work of Theory’ before the man himself even wrote it. However, we do not believe it is correct that this amounts to the claim that TM does not care for cinema. The question still persists: why does our hypothetical lecturer choose to show clips from films, and not read, say, a poem? In fact, why does our hypothetical lecturer seldomly seem to do anything else but show clips?⁵

Lastly, some would argue that this question has already been answered, with great brevity even. The question of significance is, to TM theorists at large and Todd McGowan most of all, the “question of enjoyment”: cinema is significant to anyone, including theorists, because it is *enjoyed* (in the Lacanian sense of *jouissance*) so much, by so many “and when they cease to enjoy it (or when another medium promises greater enjoyment), the cinema will

5. He/she is, after all, hypothetical, and has had thus endless time to prepare.

effectively die out” (McGowan, 2016b, p. 5). The intuitive response is to wonder why *cinema* of all imaginable things which are enjoyable, should make such a particularly interesting object of study. One must give TM some due respect here and properly understand the context in which their ideas are being posited. Insofar as there exists an explicit TM theory of cinema, it is one which posits itself in direct relation to, one might even say *opposition to*, its predecessor in Lacanian film theory: Screen Theory. Termed after the British film journal *Screen*, this movement spans theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Christian Metz, Colin MacCabe and Jean-Louis Baudry. As presented by TM literature, Screen Theory’s major Lacanian insight revolves around the concept of ‘the Gaze’,⁶ building on previous film theoretical ideas on (the) spectator(ship); addressing “one of the most important problems”, and as a result amounts not to a theory of *cinema* but strictly one of *culture* (Bordwell & Carroll, 1996, p. 3). As acknowledged by McGowan, Žižek’s particular writings certainly play into this: “Žižek tends to treat films in the same way that he treats novels of the many problems in film theory ... the mechanism of affective and perceptual participation in the spectator” (Metz, 1991, p. 4). Its innovative drive is the integration of Lacan’s *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience* (1949/1966) and (less but also significantly) to posit the condition of the spectator as one which “reconstructs the situation necessary to the release of the ‘mirror stage’ discovered by Lacan” (Baudry, 1974, p. 45).

Though it is discussed less,⁷ one direct way of understanding Screen Theory is as a continuation of the *semiotic* tradition – recall the subtitles of Metz’ work (*A Semiotics of Signifier, The Imaginary Signifier*). This is not a unique phenomenon, as many of those innovative movements which contributed to the all-encompassing term ‘Theory’ in the 70s dealt precisely with the same question: how to apply the highly successful semiotic tools prevalent in literary studies (as utilised by Barthes, Eco, et al) to other fields in the humanities? In psychoanalytical terms, the central issue became how

6. It should however be noted that, should one go to *Screen Theory* literature to find an oasis of mentions of the Gaze, one will most likely be disappointed – one is more likely to find it in responding TM literature.

7. With as greatest exception perhaps (Copjec, 1994).

to deal with elements which do not seem to be ‘symbolic’ (and thus readily available for a theorist to ‘read’), but rather function at the topological level of the ‘imaginary’: architecture, musicology, photography etc. (Jameson, 2007, pp. 104-105). The Gaze functions here as the suturing concept, which allows for Metz’ defining phrase: “Reduced to its most fundamental procedures, any psychoanalytic reflection on the cinema might be defined in Lacanian terms as an attempt to disengage the cinema-object from the imaginary and to win it for the symbolic, in the hope of extending the latter by a new province.” (Metz, 1983, p. 3). The dominant response from TM literature then claims that Screen Theory is not a ‘real’ Lacanian approach, but rather a form of film theory which borrows from some early texts by Lacan, and Louis Althusser’s highly influential text on interpellation, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1970). What is unequivocally agreed upon is that this suture of the symbolic-imaginary, due to its semiotic bearings (and inexperience with general Lacanian thought) lacks the theoretical integration of the third element of the Borromean knot: the real.⁸ If the Gaze really functions as it does, it should not be approached through Lacan’s mirror stage, but his theorising of the real, and with it (again, naturally) *jouissance*.⁹ McGowan’s central work on this matter (with a punny title) *The Real Gaze* (2007) concludes: “In the experience of cinema enjoyment occurs most radically in the direct encounter with the gaze” (p. 210).

These insights do not close off our investigation, as much as they point us in a different direction. In the paradigm of Screen Theory, the act of film analysis is able to follow the structure of semiotic approaches: a particular reading of a scene or film similar (but more thorough and grounded) to Barthes’ approach to Joseph Mankiewicz’s *Julius Caesar* (Barthes, 2013, p. 24). As Copjec very elegantly puts it: the Gaze in Screen Theory functions as a way of founding not any particular ‘Grand Theory’ (to paraphrase Bordwell), but that very act of analysis, of reading.¹⁰ By developing the Gaze further, by fleshing it out in line with Lacan and TM theory, its functioning as a “metapsychological” concept, as the assumed

8. A path ‘pioneered’ by (Žižek, 2008) and (McGowan, 2003).

9. (Copjec, 1994), (McGowan, 2003, 2007), (Žižek, 2001).

10. “I am claiming instead that the gaze arises out of linguistic assumptions and that these assumptions, in turn, shape (and appear to be naturalized by) the psychoanalytic concepts.” (Copjec, 1994, p. 240).

ground of theoretical engagements with cinema, is shaken (Copjec, 1994, p. 19). McGowan calls this problematic theoretical kernel the “existential dimension of film” (McGowan, 2007, p. 16). Perhaps because of the phraseology, he supports it (in part) by referencing Jean-Paul Sartre and existential philosophy, despite his acknowledgement of the fact that they make for poor bedfellows with Lacan (ibid., p. 225). Colin MacCabe, the screen theorist who wrote the introduction to Žižek’s *The Fright of Real Tears*, identifies very accurately that if the TM approach is to succeed, it must make true Žižek’s promises and introduce *philosophical* notions (Žižek, 2001, p. vii-ix). These can function similarly as the ‘metapsychological’ version of the concept of the Gaze, in that they can silently read into every piece of individual act of analysis. What makes the Gaze such a theoretical force (to repeat the earlier quotes by McGowan)? Why does it make the enjoyment in relation to it so significant from the point of view of theory?

2. Consider The Joke

Luckily, there already exists a precedent for such questions within this paradigm, namely *the joke*. TM literature has continuously used the method of ‘doing the work of Theory’ through jokes since its rise in the late 80s. Jokes have been so prolific in Žižek’s writings in particular that MIT Press has capitalised on their popularity by publishing a volume consisting solely of them (Žižek & Momus, 2014). Like in the case of cinema, there seems to be no question that TM theorists *love* jokes. However, quite unlike it, TM literature has reflected structurally over the significance of this love, most notably, in Zupančič’s *The Odd One In* (2008) and McGowan’s *Only A Joke Can Save Us* (2017). Jokes, comedy, and even the inclination to ‘be funny’ are taken very seriously: “Humor and the comic must be a part of an authentic seriousness, otherwise the seriousness attests to its failure to take everything seriously” (McGowan, 2016a, p. 9). Here, TM stands clearly in line with the foundations of the psychoanalytic tradition. In contrast to his dismissal of cinema, the joke plays a central role in the early writings of Freud. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) forms, together with Henri Bergson’s *Laughter* (1900), the foundation of the 20th century study into what makes something funny. So, by examining TM’s reasoning

behind the significance of the joke-form, and by paying special attention to the way in which Freud's writings are adapted today, one might be able to articulate more effectively the significance of the filmic form.

2.1. *The Freudian Foundation*

As *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* is already a widely-discussed source with many applications, we will focus on three main ideas which continue to challenge TM theory today. The first is the distinction made by Freud between jokes and comedy, or, more accurately¹¹: jokes (*Witz*), comic (*Komik*)¹² and humor (*Humor*). All three are considered as challenges, disruptions to the "linguistic process", similar to the lapsus, but it is the joke which is the most significant for the analyst (Freud, 1999, p. 20). A joke is a very specific instance, something *told* by one participant to another with the intent of making them laugh ('active behaviour') – even though neither party may be able to articulate why it does (ibid., p. 154). On the other hand, something is *comical* if it caused us to laugh, and *humorous* when there was a clear intent to do so (the success of which might be irrelevant).¹³ So, a joke may have *comical* or *humorous* qualities, but not everything *comical* or *humorous* is a joke. This gives the joke a specific structure, an implicit, necessary logic which may be studied – a condition absent from both the *comical* and the *humorous*. This is because, to Freud, only the joke is truly entrenched in language, as it demands the necessity of an Other, and with it, the compulsion to repeat. We can only tell a joke once, at which point it necessarily *ends* following a punchline (producing either a laugh, or not), and then one has the urge to tell it to someone else to experience it again. Whereas, to Freud, something *comical* and *humorous* can be enjoyed 'by oneself', the joke always necessarily requires a "hearer" (ibid., p. 143). When a man accidentally slips on a banana peel to the amusement of strangers,

11. This last distinction seems to be ignored more often than not in literature.

12. We will be using 'comic' interchangeably with 'comedic' in lieu of *Komik*, both in the sense of the adjective 'comical', possibly the most appropriate translation.

13. One 'funny' consequence of this is that, according to Freud, this, to paraphrase, "works against the mechanisms of comic". So effectively, Freud's central work on comedy as such ends with the now well-rehearsed observation that the least laugh-worthy events are when someone is clearly *trying* to be funny (Freud, 1999, pp. 228-229).

this would be a *comical situation* as nothing was intentionally communicated by him, which results in the possibility of it seizing to be comical if, say, he continued laying there as blood began to seep from a head wound. A man condemned to die might employ ‘Gallows humour’ in order to make the judge laugh before his final moments, but it is this act of humanisation which is relevant, of ‘being able to joke in the face of’, not the reaction of the crowd. In both situations, Freud argues, neither would be compelled to repeat it, or certainly not in the same manner.

It is this compulsion to repeat that reveals the activity of the unconscious. Similar to that other staple of Freudian thought, the dream, the analyst is not really interested in the finished product and or its success. This is why a joke can only be ‘bad’ if nobody wants to tell it again – beyond that the quality of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ is as theoretically interesting to ponder as asking the analysant if he considered his dream to be a ‘nice’ one. (ibid., pp. 120-121). What must be considered is the “technique” that goes into the telling of the joke; the labour which makes the joke function. In Freud’s careful examination of this “joke-work”, it is revealed to utilise the same toolkit as the “dream-work” of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900): condensation, displacement, representation, and so on.¹⁴ As such, the titular relation between jokes and the unconscious is about as (in)direct as the one between the latter and dreams. Contrary to popular belief, Freud does not argue that all jokes can be directly interpreted as distorted tales of sexual deviations, similar to how he does not argue that one’s fantasies are directly translated into dream images. Rather, it is the compulsion to *repeat* with seeming *indifference*, how so much is done with such great ease, that should draw the attention of the analyst, that is revealing, of theoretical interest (Freud, 2010, pp. 473-475). How is this possible? Freud in this regard predates Bill Clinton, “It all seems to be a question of economy” – psychic economy (Freud, 1999, p. 42).

Laughter is the localised discharge of pent-up psychic energy. Or, to be more accurate to Freud’s writing at the time: free-floating energy which will *become* pent-up if blocked and unable to discharge. It’s a *relieving* physical act in general. So, in the case of both jokes and the comic, first one ought to the *attention* of the listener, leading to *cathexis*, the localising build-up of psychic

14. Freud humorously recognizes this "coincidence" (Freud, 2010, pp. 165-167).

energy. This is where already, in the case of the joke, quite a bit of work is required. Every sentence must implicitly signal that a punchline is coming, without telegraphing how. Without either, the other will lose their attention. Then this energy can be physically discharged when, in a moment of peculiar *surprise*, our inhibitions which come with cathexis, with build-up, are bypassed or *liberated*. This surprise is a very specific one, as it is a direct continuation of that which one's attention was drawn to. If, while listening a joke, one suddenly gets punched in the stomach, this would hardly be funny, because the localisation and the surprise are unconnected.¹⁵ This is where, to Freud, the theories and observations on the comedic by his predecessors (such as Lipps, Bergson, et al) are relevant, the joke as “the characteristic of playful judgement, the coupling of dissimilar things and contrasting ideas, the ‘sense in nonsense’, the succession of bewilderment and enlightenment [or] the bringing forward of what is hidden” (ibid., p. 14). It is through these techniques that the comedic is able to function as a local discharge (ibid., p. 172).

To understand the compulsion to repeat a joke, and with it the relation to the unconscious, it is important to realise, with Freud, two things. First, telling a joke also leads to cathexis, as we are “making use of the other to arose our own laughter” (ibid., p. 157). Though we may not be as surprised as the audience, their surprise, their laughter, can ‘make up to that effect’ – though, obviously, not entirely. Second, that laughter, when induced deliberately, is a ‘free discharge’ (*freien Abfur*), both ‘free’ in the sense of *liberating* us from specific, localised inhibitions for a brief moment, and ‘free’ in the ‘Wallmartian’, two-for-the price-of-one sense (ibid., p. 158). With laughter there is always *other* forms of pent-up energy, other inhibitions, which may also be lifted (though, to abuse more recent phraseology, never all). So, in the case of the joke teller, he/she is compelled to repeat the joke in search of more ‘general’ relief (ibid., pp. 157-158).

15. As with all non-jokes, given the right context or level of absurdity, this very situation could very much become comical. Imagine, say, a Pythonesque gag, in which a professional figure recants a long-winded, complex set-up with multiple characters and repeated patterns, ending on a “So the man says...” before punching the attentive listener straight in the face.

2.2. *The Transcendental Materialist Adoption*

Now, we are able to consider how the Freudian theory is adopted and shaped to the preferences, history and framework of Transcendental Materialism. As we will observe, different adoptions of the discussed aspects informed a *new* formulation of significance. Naturally, the most immediately noticeable changes are those in terminology. Absent are the mentions of ‘discharge’, ‘energy’ and ‘inhibition’, but omnipresent are the ‘big Other’, ‘lack’, ‘trauma’, etc. Where the Freud of 1905 struggles to formulate how our repetition of jokes seeks a secondary pleasure ‘beyond’ the first (ibid., p. 179-180), a contemporary writer can, through Lacan (and the Freud of 1920) speak entirely in terms of ‘enjoyment’ (*jouissance*).¹⁶ The Freudian understanding that concealed in every comedic discharge is always an additional *free* discharge of other inhibitions, can be understood as laughter being a necessarily *excessive* response (McGowan, 2017, p. 13).

Interestingly enough, Freud’s first position, the distinction between comedy and the joke (as mentioned, humour is largely ignored), is a matter of internal discussion. As can perhaps be expected, the Freudian theory of comedy and humour is difficult to adopt wholesale, as its very definition requires the possibility of a structured, linguistic usage ‘without Other’. The comic requires only “an object” to laugh at, and the humorous even “completes its course within a single person” (Freud, 1999, p. 144, 229). This is very hard to maintain in the face of one of Lacan’s earliest, most fundamental developments of the psychoanalytic approach to speech, language and the symbolic *as* the big Other (Lacan, 1991, pp. 243-247), and with it all disciplinary investigations which flow from it, from discourse theory to the study of ideology. So, to a Transcendental Materialist, if one accepts the Freudian distinction, “a joke is comedy with the big Other made visible” (McGowan, 2017, p. 191). To some, such as McGowan, this makes said distinction obsolete (ibid., p. 55), whereas to others, such as Zupančič, the issue of *temporality* remains: “comic dialogue with an example of a joke ... the temporal and dynamic difference is evident” (Zupančič, 2008, p. 139). So,

16. Take for example the near-literal paraphrasing of Freud, with one important, clarifying substitution: “Even while one is recounting the joke, one identifies with the listener and finds enjoyment in the listener’s enjoyment” (McGowan, 2017, p. 10).

Zupančič reverses the relation: something is a joke when it has a ‘point’, more specifically a ‘button tie’ (*point de capiton*). Like any function of speech, in order to be repeated, the joke requires a period at the end of the sentence, as we don’t know what we’ve heard until its arrival (*ibid.*, p. 146). This means she also includes under the concept of joke, many instances which Freud does not, such as the physical comedy of the gag, as displayed by Keaton or Chaplin (*ibid.*, p. 136). However, the comical is *not* the negation of this, a ‘bad’, incomplete joke, but precisely what persists in its absence. If a joke is a passionate instance of romance, then comedy is love. Though some may look at love as a continuous repeat of the first, the concept more accurately describes the moments when it is repeated without being repeated, in between, it is “the nonrelation that lasts” (*ibid.*, p. 135). To put the manner more quotidianly: the joke is at the very least *an instance* of comedy.

Another crucial development concerns the methods underlying the production of jokes. Gone is the importance of the analogous relationship between the dream-work and joke-work, and with it, the necessity to demonstrate how this analogy persists at the level of various ‘techniques’. Only the central question remains: how do jokes ‘work’? What are the necessary conditions so they may *surprise* us in that very particular manner that makes us respond in such a physical, excessive, uncontrollable way? Zupančič introduces a transcendental solution: every comedic instance is only possible due to the ‘joke-joke’. The ‘joke-joke’ or ‘Joke’ is, simply put, the *joke that there is a joke*; the surprise is that we are laughing (Zupančič, 2008, p. 133).¹⁷ It is this retroactive reaction to a physical response which commands repetition – a theorisation completely in line with contemporary readings of Freud through the lens of Lacan’s 14th Seminar, *The Logic of Phantasy* (1966-1967).¹⁸ This raises a new set of questions: what does it mean for something to *be an instance* of comedy? In what way *is* the Joke a joke? In a way, these become the central questions to Zupančič’s book. As Transcendental Materialism aims to ‘take jokes seriously’, it is much more compelled to address these *ontological* questions, and to do so

17. This is arguably the transcendental motive at the heart of much of Lacanian psychoanalysis. To cite a colleague who finally decided to see an analyst after having read nearly all of Lacan’s seminars: “the most unexpected moment was when it actually worked”.

18. See (Van de Vijver, Bazan, & Detandt, 2017).

with that mediating force in its arsenal: philosophy, more specifically the German idealist logic and metaphysics of G.W.F. Hegel. Her response is to include Hegel's writings on comedy in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), which Lacan famously called "this booklet so full of humour" (Lacan, 2006, p. 192), and to reconsider 'instance' in terms of the Hegelian conceptualisations of finitude and concreteness (Zupančič, 2008, p. 211). At first glance, this appears obvious. The relation between comedy and joke, between lasting non-relation and single punctuation, is precisely what Hegel articulates in his notion of an 'affirmative' infinite dynamic (such as that of reason) or the 'finite infinite' (Hegel, 1977, p. 114). Comedy is quite literally, from a Hegelian point of view, a universal which we have only come to understand through our experience with the particular joke, which we determine to be a concretisation of it. So the 'Joke' is a clear concrete universal (ibid., pp. 546-549). Still, there is a critique which must be levelled here, though it is hard to pinpoint to whom. Zupančič sticks close to the very 'popular' terminology of universality and infinity, and the even more popular source of *The Phenomenology*, this gives the appearance as though these elements conclude in a complete whole.¹⁹

But when taken in line with the total Transcendental Materialist canon, this answer is insufficient to the questions raised. It relies in a sense on the fact that the *Phenomenology* predates Hegel's *Logic* (1814-1817), which, as the title suggests, provides the logical structure of his other writings (among other things). Furthermore, the *Logic* sets out to explore one question: what is being? What does it mean for something 'to be'? As the book progresses, every answer to this question is reflexively included in the method of investigation itself – as such, one can open it up randomly and always find an acceptable answer to questions with an ontological set-up. It would be equally acceptable to state that comedy and the Joke function as concepts (*Begriffe*) which aid us in our attempt to grasp (*Begreifen*) jokes. Jokes also articulate the Joke in its actuality (*Wesentlichkeit*), adapting it to a specific context or system (Hegel, 2010a, p. 465). This is to say: though these answers may be informative, if one takes them seriously, they are insufficient. If jokes and comedy are truly concrete matters, they must be studied in concrete Hegelian terms,

¹⁹ For example (McGowan, 2017, pp. 60-64).

the (onto)logical question functioning as an “animating soul” (Hegel, 1991, p. 58). So, we must return to those aspects of the *Phenomenology* that deal with comedy specifically, which Zupančič addresses momentarily (Zupančič, 2017, pp. 20-21): the question of what makes something *significant*. Comedy is significant according to Hegel, because it is a method by which the Spirit or *Geist* furthers itself, self-actualises, is able to reflect on itself (Hegel, 1977, pp. 583-584).

There exists a danger here, to cut *Geist* short to a concept as ‘societal unconscious’, and perhaps even fortify this with the writings of Theodor Adorno, drawing an immediate connection between Hegelian *Geist* and the Freudian unconscious of *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Adorno, 2004). Perhaps this is why Transcendental Materialists such as McGowan produce very direct (at times perhaps even incidental) summaries of this insight which bypass *Geist* altogether²⁰: “Comedy is always speculative ... Though philosophy speculates more directly, comedy offers a more accessible version of speculative thought” (McGowan, 2017, p. 179-180). Speculative production exploring the horizons of thought by immanently and concretely reflecting on our reasoning itself (which in turn is the earlier mentioned progression of *Geist*), is indeed the aim of philosophy for Hegel. It explores/produces seemingly new insights solely through determinate, rigorous reflection. This is why Logic itself, when studied in the way Hegel sets out to do, is also speculative (Hegel, 1977, pp. 502-504). The joke is as such *significant*, not *just* because it functions with dynamics of excess, lack, trauma, repetition (after all, what isn’t). but precisely it “is an encounter” with these notions *for the subject*, it “makes clear” these dynamics without the assistance of an analyst (McGowan, 2017, pp.

20. The bypassing of *Geist* is nowhere more evident than in the discussion on the possibility of ‘conservative comedy’. A certain reading of Zupančič summarizes her views as follows: conservative jokes are not jokes at all, because although such a joke can perhaps still *surprise* (actualize the Joke), it by definition cannot explore any new insights. McGowan in turn critiques this view by arguing there are plenty of racist, sexist or homophobic formulations which are undeniably ‘jokes’ – no other term seems appropriate. This eventually culminates in a seemingly mundane question: “[can one] find the joke politically and ethically reprehensible and nonetheless recognize the comedy”? However, the true theoretical kernel fueling this dispute is whether the progress of *Geist* (or lack thereof) as it relates to comedy can be understood in an ethical or political frame. This is a much more technical question, as it considers the *position* comedy (in relation to e.g. politics) takes up within the Hegelian system. So what determines comedy’s relation not only to *Geist*, but within theory as a whole (so also its significance), is precisely this position.

180-181). In a sense, the transcendental materialists make the complete *opposite* argument to Freud – jokes are precisely so interesting because you *don't* have to talk to your analyst about them to have underlying techniques (the Joke) be revealed to you. As such, the significance of the joke, devoid of certain Freudian underpinnings such as the distinction with the comical, returns in TM to a Hegelian understanding of “comic consciousness” (Hegel, 1977, p. 584).

3. Cinema, At Last

The comic consciousness connects two specific positions in Hegel's thought. The first considers comedy a necessary conclusion of *art* (in the comedy *genre*) – mainly explored later in his career and development (in a work seldomly returned to in TM literature), for example his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Fine Art* (1818-1829).²¹ Art, in this context, can most directly be understood as the most immediate attempt to approach *Geist* in its most concrete and universal – to engage with it, grasp it, explore it, develop it, and so on (Hegel, 2010b, §558). This project, for reasons we will get into later, eventually results in the *comical* engagement; “yet on this peak comedy leads at the same time to the dissolution of art altogether” (Hegel, 1975, p. 1236). At the moment of laughter, we have a sense of arriving at a great insight but are completely without the tools to do anything with it, to drag it into the symbolic order. It is, to repeat the language on cinema, of the order of the real: it is excessively enjoyable. It is this great disappointment which pushes us to the most serious, regulated, ritual engagement with *Geist* thinkable for Hegel: religion (Hegel, 2010b, §562). However, through religion we arrive at the importance of *revelation*, which in turn reminds us of the comedic insight (*ibid.*, §571). Both are resolved in philosophy (which, in TM, includes psychoanalysis and film theory, of course), which as such could be described as a *serious/rigorous return to comic consciousness*.

The comical insight arises out of art, in Hegel's perspective, through the Comedy *genre* of ‘dramatic poetry’. Hegel's presentation of art in his later work structures the various art forms in a dialectical process of investigation, where the lack or negativity

21. See e.g. in (Zupančič, 2017, pp. 20-21).

present in one moves us to engage with another. Say we briefly, for the purposes of effective summary, limited/conceived of art's engagement with *Geist* as/to its entanglement in an individual. How could art effectively attempt to *capture* this very small aspect of *Geist* – being an individual, part of a community at a certain point in time? The most unmediated way would be by building a structure around the individual (effectively claiming “there it is, between those walls”) – this would be the first form of art, *architecture* (1). However, this art's unsatisfying relation of *form* and *content* (what exactly, between said walls *is* that which captures *Geist*), moves us to unify and sublimate the two – this results in *sculpture* (2). Whilst the relationship between form and content might be presented very clearly in petrified form (say, a statue of an individual), a dynamic tension remains between internality and externality, between object and environment – resulting in *painting* (3). Though this painting could depict the entanglement of an individual into his/her surroundings, it would still not fully satisfy, as it would equally petrify them *in time* - this illustrates the significance of *music* (4). However, in music there arises the issue of how to connect the art to the object – what about a piece of music tells us it is *about* something? As such, the ‘final’ art Hegel seems to land on is *poetry* (5), “the art of speech” (Hegel, 1975, p. 960). It is here where language can be actively deployed at last, and as such, the comic can arise. Though some as such describe Hegel as dealing with ‘only’ five arts, as opposed to say the commonly understood seven of today (architecture, sculpture, painting, music, literature, performance and cinema), this is already a mistaken observation. After all, crucially, Hegel delves further into poetry (as *literature*), dividing it into *epic* and *lyric* poetry. The first captures the *objective* experience (events), the second the *subjective* one (‘inner’ monologues, emotional states, etc.). Both can be included through performance, which results in the distinct form of ‘dramatic poetry’ - which is really *performance art* or *theatre* (6).

It is here where we are indebted to that other pillar of Transcendental Materialist thought, Alain Badiou. In a chapter of *The Immanence of Truths*²² (2018) which received some attention, he ponders the potential tragedy of Hegel having come to pass before the advent of cinema. While we do agree with his central interest,

22. Untranslated in English. All following translations are mine.

that “Hegel [most likely] would have crowned cinema king” (Badiou, 2018, chapter 23f), his sensibilities need expanding upon. First, Badiou’s main argument is essentially that Hegel would echo Ricciotto Canudo who popularised the name ‘the 7th art’ in 1920s (ibid., chapter 23g). Canudo posited that cinema’s unique qualities stem from its incorporation of all other art forms that came before it: it requires a knowledge of architecture and sculpture (the set), painting (the composition/cinematography), music (the score), literature/poetry (the script) and theatre/dramatic poetry (the performances) (Canudo, 1988). This lure of cinema as an all-encompassing “total” art form would, according to Badiou, be irresistible to Hegel, who would have pushed it as “the absolute art” which incorporates all others, “supplanting comedy” as the most significant (Badiou, 2018, chapter 23f). Then, Badiou draws an analogy to Marx’ analysis of capitalism, which also revealed something just inches outside of the paper bounds of Hegel’s writings on political economy (Hegel, 2005, §189). Cinema is as such “the visual communism”, because it functions, in a similar way, as a post factum keystone to Hegel’s thought, which one may feel compelled to reinsert, but is much more interesting when considered in its concrete political, contemporary dimensions. What fascinates Badiou is not Hegel’s failure or flaw, but the impossibility of him being right: even if he *would* have theorised a more total art form, this would, according to Badiou, never have captured ‘real existing cinema’²³. Just as Hegel’s thought is characterised by Badiou by his necessary inability to think communism, so is it characterised by its lack of cinema (Badiou, 2018, chapter 23g). These are relevant insights by Badiou, but perhaps even more insightful are their shortcomings.

In our view, the French thinker misses two crucial aspects: (a) he assumes that there is no space for cinema in the *Lectures* as they stand, and (b) he pays no attention to what is the most curious dimension to us – the relation to comedy. Near the end (both textually and structurally), Hegel’s formulations on art develop some odd characteristics. As frequently in his writings, there are some vitally important shifts which take place in the last few pages. Dramatic poetry is discussed in its genres, where one appears to be slightly more apt at capturing *Geist* than the previous. This structure

23. A pun of our own making.

is solidified using the same logical progression used in the *Lectures* overall (or any piece of late Hegelian writing): we realise a certain lack in tragedy, and find it in, for example, comedy. But then, to put it in earlier terms, we are confronted with the Joke at the level of our engagement with *Geist*. This results in the development of comic consciousness, which in turn janks us out of our discussion of art. The crucial endpoint of disruption is not performance art as the perfect, ‘most total art’, but the entrance of the comic insight (Hegel, 1975, pp. 1233-1237). Not only does this make the whole slightly more dynamic than Badiou credits it, there are actually even moments earlier, where Hegel, intriguingly, realises a point of lack or negativity in performance art itself (the kind that would normally drive us towards a new form), such as his comparison of *ballet* and *pantomime*. Hegel argues that certain performance arts, such as dance, have gotten so technically impressive that the whole stage becomes too cluttered, too busy. To use earlier terms again, the techniques of theatre allow for the impossibility of cathexis: one’s focus or gaze is able to ‘miss’ the comic insight under a disorienting bombardment of fancy. However, rather than seeing this as the necessity for a new form of art, Hegel ascribes this to the fancies of the time – something society ought to move away from, but which reveals no internal contradictions (*ibid.*, pp. 1190-1192).

Is this not precisely what has been left unspoken in the Transcendental Materialist’s understanding of cinema? What Hegel indicates here is the *philosophical* necessity of the Gaze as present in cinema. So, although Transcendental Materialism has detailed cinema’s relation to enjoyment, to the real and to repetition with expert rigour, what has not yet fully been articulated is this ‘existential’ dimension. Out of all the arts, it is in cinema where we comprehend the conditions to be at their most *immediate-determined* for the comical insight to arise. This is not the same as claiming cinema is the best vessel to deliver a joke (as commonly understood), but rather that it is the best condition for the kind of *comic insight* to arise, to which philosophy/theory seeks to return. Considered in the broadest of terms, this might simply mean that they follow a similar structure, where the development of psychoanalytic theory must be furthered with an intervention *grounded in* philosophy (more specifically German idealism and Hegel). However, our investigation reveals an even more specific relation: the significance

of the joke and that of cinema directly intersect in Transcendental Materialist thought. It is this specific intersection which should differentiate it from Screen Theory *both* in theory and *at the level of method*. So, in the most vulgar of terms, what distinguish Transcendental Materialist analyses of cinema from semiotic ones, is that they are necessarily, always, accompanied by the implicit phrase: “So, here’s a funny idea ...”.

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