Filozofski vestnik Volume/Letnik XXVI • Number/Številka 2 • 2005 • 173–186

REVERSALS OF NOTHING: THE CASE OF THE SNEEZING CORPSE

Alenka Zupančič

That uncertain limit

As with many things, comedy is also a good place to look if one wishes to be enlightened about matters regarding the question of nothing. *Much ado about nothing*, for example, is not just the title of a comedy. Like more than one Shakespearean title, it is paradigmatic. It captures a crucial dimension of comedy. On the condition, of course, that one does not take this "nothing" too lightly, or as synonymous with insignificant, trifling, irrelevant, and immaterial, but that one takes it seriously. Comedy does a lot of things with nothing. But above all, it likes to point to the irreducible materiality of nothing.

Let's look at a very direct example of this, a joke told in a comedy (Ernst Lubitsch's *Ninotchka*), yet a joke that excellently captures one of the crucial mechanisms of comedy:

> A guy goes into a restaurant and says to the waiter: 'Coffee without cream, please.' The waiter replies: 'I am sorry sir, but we are out of cream. Could it be without milk?'

A lot of things could be said about the mechanism of this joke. Linguistically, it extends the paradox involved already in the word *without*, which literally means "with absence of". And one can easily see how, following this logic, coffee *with* absence-of-cream could be something quite different than coffee *with* absence-of-milk. At stake here are not just more or less interesting and amusing logico-linguistic peculiarities, but also, and as said before, a certain – rather ghostly – materiality of nothing. With the waiter's reply, denying the possibility of non-serving something that they don't have, there emerges a very palpable and concrete dimension of this absence, a spectral

object. Or, perhaps even more precisely, the object "cream" (or "milk") appears in its spectral dimension, deprived – by the negation – of its symbolic standing, yet insisting in the real, searching for its cup of coffee, so to say. The object appears in its negative counterpart, which would not let itself be reduced to nothing, or treated as nothing. It is important not to miss this point: we are not dealing simply with "nothing appearing as something" in the sense of a symbolic rendering of nothing (like in the case of the symbol 0 or some other marker of negativity), but rather with the *remainder* of nothing, with nothing as insisting/emerging in the real, while being deprived precisely of its symbolic support. One could also say that we are not dealing with a lack on the signifying level, but with a lack as a partial object or, even more precisely, as sticking on to partial objects (such as cream, milk …).

What links the above example to a more general functioning of comedy is precisely the production of this kind of spectral object, that is, so to say, of the "materiality of the spectral". This doesn't mean that the nothing itself is so directly visible in all such comic objects as it is in the above joke. The point is that this kind of "irreducible nothing" is involved every time the comedy performs its trick of objectifying something seemingly immaterial, or existing only in a (differential) relation to other things. In the case of "verbal comedy", this is often achieved by taking certain figures of speech quite literally (ignoring the gap that makes them symbolic), or else by treating certain "immaterial" things as objects. Let's take two examples from Shakespeare, who was a master of this kind of verbal comic poetry. Both examples are from *Much ado about nothing*.

First a simple example of comic retort:

> *Leonato*
> (…) There is a kind of merry war betwixt Senior Benedick and her [Beatrice]: they never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them.
> *Beatrice*
> Alas, he gets nothing by that. In our last conflict four of his five wits went haling off, and now is the whole man govern'd with one (…).
> (Act I, Scene I)

Here we have the idea of several "wits" literally leaving a person and "haling off" on their own (causing trouble elsewhere, one could imagine). "Wit" is produced as a detachable, autonomous, self-standing object. The next example combines body parts and soul parts as if they were detachable. Beatrice complains about how Count John is too melancholic and barely speaks, whereas Benedick is too tattling. Upon which Leonato proposes a practical solution, indicating what an ideal man would be:

> Then half Senior Benedick tongue in Count John's mouth, and half Count John's melancholy in Senior Benedick's face, -
> (Act II, Scene I)

Let us make a rather abrupt stop here, and introduce the central question of this paper, which is the relationship between comedy and anxiety or, more specifically, between comedy and the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*). For the "materiality of the spectral", as well the production of the "impossible" (detachable and re-attachable) objects are precisely what both phenomena seem to have in common. A wit going around by itself, half a tongue in somebody else's mouth, parts of melancholy being transposed from one face to another, or, to return to the first example, entities such as "absence-of-cream" going around all by themselves – all these seem to be precisely the kind of "objects" that we encounter both in comedy and in the uncanny.

It is also amazing how well their respective definitions seem to fit the other as well. Bergson's famous definition of the comical, "something mechanical encrusted on something living"[1], with all its versions ("a person giving us the impression of being a thing") and subversions ("a thing behaving like a person"[2]) could function perfectly as definitions of the uncanny. On the other hand, Schelling's famous definition of the uncanny, praised by Freud in his essay on the topic, could easily be applied to the comical: "everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light."[3] The proximity between the comical and the uncanny seems itself both comical and uncanny. We are dealing with two phenomena that are *at the same* time extremely close to one another and extremely far away. They appear to be two completely different universes, yet separated by an exceptionally thin line, very hard to pin down.

There is, of course, the whole phenomenon of laughing out of uneasiness: we can laugh because we are troubled by something, or scared by it. Yet this kind of laughter as a response to anxiety is not what interests us here. What interests us, instead, is the proximity between the uncanny and the *purely* comical, that is to say the comical that immediately strikes us as comical, and cannot be described as a response to, or a defense against, anxiety.

This odd coincidence of the comical and the uncanny is not confined to the supposedly abstract level of their definitions. We started out by indicat-

---

[1] Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1980, p. 97.

[2] Wyndham Lewis, *The Complete Wild Body*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Barbara 1982, p. 158.

[3] Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'", in: *Art and Literature*, The Pelican Freud Library, Volume 14, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1987, p. 345.

ing a certain proximity in the nature of the objects they produce and play with. In a recent paper dedicated entirely to the relationship between the comical and the uncanny, Robert Pfaller put forward four essential elements that they have in common: the advent of symbolic causality (something that starts as a play or a pretence takes the upper hand and starts functioning in the real), the success (not only that everything succeeds, it even succeeds too much, "more than intended"), the repetition, and the figure of the double.[4] Elaborating on Octave Mannoni's analysis of theatrical illusion, and introducing the notion of "mental experiment" as central, Pfaller proposes the following definition of the structural difference between comedy and the uncanny: *the comic is what is uncanny for others*. Mannoni's example of an actor playing a dead man on the stage, and suddenly sneezing, is indeed a very good illustration of this. In order to find the occurrence of a dead man sneezing comical, the following constellation would have to exist: not only do I have to know that the man is not really dead (but is merely an actor pretending to be dead), I also have to be able to presuppose that somebody could believe him to be really dead, that they could be deceived by the theatrical illusion (and could thus be horrified by his sneezing). In other words, it is as if I ran through the following mental experiment: "Just imagine that someone didn't know that she was watching a play, and believed that the corpse was really dead. The sneezing would have scared the shit out of her!" We must be careful not to confuse this with simple mockery. The point is not that we need this ignorant other in order to feel good about ourselves (to feel "superior" or smarter). The point is rather that we need this other in order to be able to *relate* to the uncanny object, instead of being overwhelmed by it.

In what follows, I will propose a somewhat different reading of the relationship between comedy and the uncanny, focusing on the question of the status of the nothing in one and the other, as well as on the question of the real (in the Lacanian sense of the term), a reading that nevertheless remains indebted to Pfaller's analysis at many points.

"Theatrical illusion"

There are some grounds for challenging Mannoni's reading of theatrical illusion as basically following the scheme of "fetishist disavowal" or delegated belief (we know better than to believe this or that, but we keep on believing

[4] See Robert Pfaller, "The Familiar Unknown, the Uncanny, the Comic", in: S. Žižek (ed.), *Lacan's Silent Partners*, Verso, London 2005 (forthcoming).

it by delegating this belief to the Other(s), by presupposing it in the others).[5] According to this scheme, and simply put, we can follow a theatre performance most vividly, tremble for the characters, cry for them, etc., although we know very well that all this is only a play, because we identify with the gaze of the Other who is supposedly fooled by this performance. In other words: although we know that the things we see are not real (or really happening), we (can) believe they are *via* the hypothesis of the Other for whom this performance is put up, or via the presupposition of some others who would believe the performance real. According to Mannoni, at stake here is the same kind of delegated belief that helps us to maintain, against our better knowledge, some of our own archaic beliefs which are banned by the demands of rationality that we live in.

Although this structure of delegated belief, conceptualised by Mannoni and some others, is absolutely pertinent and applies to many a case of our everyday interactions, it is questionable if it indeed applies to theatrical illusion (or, more broadly, to other forms of artistic fiction).

We know that we are watching a play, a performance, and that there is a constitutive difference between the actor and the character she is playing, so that if the character dies, the actor does not. If this does not prevent us from feeling deep distress when the character dies, is the reason really that, against our better knowledge and by presupposing this belief in the Other(s), we allow ourselves to believe that the person really died? Is it not rather because (artistic) fiction is not the opposite of the real, but one of its best vehicles? There is real in theatre (and other forms of artistic fiction), which is different from saying, both, that all that happens in theatre is unreal or that it is all real. The Lacanian distinction between reality and the real is of course of crucial importance here, as well as his argument that the real is not something to be unveiled or revealed under the always somehow deceiving reality (as essentially imaginary, or "fantasmatic"), but something to be *constructed* (which is different from being represented or imitated). This is why a certain dimension of what an artistic "fiction" produces can very well be the real.

It is true, however, that without this something of the real being framed (delimited from reality) by a more or less explicit form of fiction, there is the risk, not of confusing reality with fiction, as one often hears, but of confusing reality with the real, which is usually to say the risk of reality "running crazy". (This is also one of the possible definitions of the uncanny: reality coincides with the real, they become indistinguishable.) So, in order to sustain this

[5] Cf. Octave Mannoni, *Clefs pour l'Imaginaire*, Seuil, Paris 1969, pp. 161–183.

frame or demarcation, it is indeed necessary to rely upon the instance of the Other. Yet, does this really involve our believing (in the real of what is happening on the stage) by presupposing this belief in the Other, or delegating it to the Other? Is it not rather our explicit *knowledge* that is being delegated to the Other? Is it not that in order to "enjoy" a fiction (which is to say, at the same time, to allow it to produce the effects of the real, and to prevent this real from being confused with reality), we deposit, so to say, our knowledge with the Other, as for safekeeping, while we can relax and let ourselves "fall into" the play, be completely absorbed, "fooled" by it? In other words: we delegate our knowledge of "how things really stand" to the Other, so that we can calmly indulge in *believing* (what we see). The Other is the guaranty that outside the play, there is a reality firmly in its place, a reality to which we can return (after the play, or at any moment of the play, if we choose to). The logic at stake in this configuration is thus the following: as long as the big Other knows that this is only a play and not reality, I can enjoy its dimension of the real. For the play can indeed affect me, and it can affect me beyond the place and time of the performance. The "effects of the real" produced by the play do not necessarily go away when the curtain falls and I return to my usual reality. They can become a part of this reality, without becoming one with it.

Let's now go back to the "sneezing corpse" example. In a theatre performance, a sneezing corpse will not strike us as uncanny – it will strike us as funny, possibly comical, and we'll come back to that distinction in a moment. What *could* strike us as uncanny, for example, is if at the end of the play, the actor playing the corpse did not stand up to receive the applause with the other actors, but were to remain lying dead on the floor. This would imply precisely that the Other (supposed to *know* how things stand in reality and to *guarantee* that they remain standing as they do) no longer holds this knowledge and this guaranty for the subject. In other words, it would imply that our own better knowledge (of the fact that this is "only a play" we are watching) is left without the support in the Other. If we think about it for a moment, this is a very typical configuration of the uncanny: the nightmarish feeling when the subject is alone in seeing that there is something wrong with what is happening, with no Other to support her knowledge or experience, and to make it transmittable to others.[6] In the uncanny, the emergence of the impossible-real object in the field of the Other always involves this radical severance of the subject from the Other.

[6] On this and many other crucial points of the uncanny, see Mladen Dolar, "'I Shall be with You on Your Wedding-Night': Lacan and the Uncanny", *October 58*, 1991, pp. 5–23.

On the other hand, among the things that make us laugh we must distinguish several different configurations and feelings that are not all already comical. One is the feeling of pleasurable relief that we experience when – after a certain period of anguish and doubt – we get some reassurance that the Other is still guaranteeing the reality outside the fiction, thus supporting the constitutive division between reality and the real (for example, if, after a while, the "corpse" on the stage nevertheless got up to receive the applause with the rest of the actors). This relief, which can make us laugh, is not yet in itself comical. A further, and perhaps more interesting distinction is that between funny and comical strictly speaking. To take again the sneezing corpse example: an actor playing a corpse that suddenly sneezes can be (only) funny or (also) comical. The episode is funny when it functions as something that *displays a lack* in the edifice of representation. The conditions of the possibility of representation are not challenged themselves, the Other keeps guaranteeing the difference between the actor and his character, but the actor fails to continue filling in, covering all the representative space that is opened to him by the Other guaranteeing the difference between himself and his character. He lets his "reality-self" disturb the character. If they remain on this level of empirical reality (of actors, or setting, or something else) disturbing the "purity" of the performance (i.e. of the representation), pointing to its failures, then these kinds of incidences are merely funny, lacking the real comic quality.

On the other hand, the sneezing of the actor playing a corpse can induce a comic feeling if we come to perceive it not simply as the actor's failure, but rather as the knowledge of the Other, sustaining the very frame of fiction, suddenly appearing within this very frame, on the stage, in the form of the sneezing as an object. In other words: differently from the uncanny, where the emergence of such object implies a withdrawal of the (symbolic) Other, and with it the collapse of the frame delimiting the space of "fiction", a properly comic configuration implies this frame appearing within its own scope (in the form of the object), without disappearing as a frame. This simultaneous appearance of – in Lacanian terms – the Other and the object *a* on the same level is a comic scene par excellence. In the case of our example, the very knowledge (guaranteed by the Other) that what we are watching is only a play, appears within the play in the form of the sneeze. And, as stated above, this is also what distinguishes a comic configuration from other kinds of funniness.

For example, there is a difference between a "romantic" reading (including the phenomenon of "romantic irony"), according to which, in sneezing, the supposed "real" of the actor's body is contesting the purity of symbolic

representation, refusing to be reduced to it, and a quite different, comic, reading, according to which the very guaranty of the symbolic representation itself appears on the stage as this corporal, sneezy presence.

This latter "reading" can be accentuated on the stage. We can imagine the following, incontestably comic situation: in a "serious" play, the actor playing a corpse suddenly sneezes – which leaves open both possible readings or reactions mentioned above. However, let's say that at this point another actor on the stage interrupts a dialog in which he was fully engaged when the "accident" occurred, turns to the "corpse", says "*bless you*", then turns back and calmly continues his interrupted dialog. – This acknowledging of the unexpected object (sneezing without a body from which it would "naturally emanate") on the stage, responding to it *as such*, is precisely what emphasises, even fortifies its status as an object.

We can imagine a further prolongation of the above situation: after automatically replaying "bless you" and returning to the previous dialog, the co-actor suddenly freezes and looks at the corpse again (only just realizing what has in fact happened). This delayed reaction (or delayed recognition of what is happening), which follows after an automatic response, is abundant in comic situations, and is very much a part of various "comic techniques". It serves one of the principal comic purposes, which is: to objectify the inner contradiction of human life, and to present this contradiction itself as something.

For one should not fail to notice that the "sneezing of a corpse" produces a very similar object as the absence-of-cream in the joke about coffee without cream. A sneezing wandering around on its own, detached from the organic link with a body to which it belongs. An object which "forgot" that its body is already dead …

However, the true object of comedy is not simply the sneezing, but precisely that space or zone that simultaneously separates and links the sneezing and its body, or the voice and its source, the smile and its face, the pleasure and its cause … It is this interval itself that becomes objectified by comic techniques.

Nothing remains to be seen

What both comedy and the uncanny have in common has to do with – nothing.

In the normal, or ordinary run of things (which includes a large diapason of phenomena that are "funny" and/or "scary", without possessing the

specific feature that would make them either "comical" or "uncanny"[7]) we are dealing with the following configuration. There is a fundamental negativity which exists and functions as the condition of differentiality within our (symbolic and imaginary) world, i.e. of its readability. According to Lacan, the constitution of reality presupposes an element "falling out" (of it), supporting – through its very lack – the consistency of given reality. There is a constitutive lack, which is of a different order than any lack that we encounter in our reality. Differently from that constitutive lack, the lack that we encounter in reality is always-already reflective, constituted, mediated by the symbolic, manageable by the symbolic. That is to say that it includes the possibility of referring to nothing as if it were something. A symbol can fill in the lack, it can designate its place, it can designate an absence, it can make what is not here present. It is thus important to distinguish between two kinds of negativity: the fundamental negativity of a constitutive lack (which is never visible as such, but through which everything else becomes visible), and an asserted or "posited" negativity, lack, absence, etc …

As was pointed out at the beginning, both comedy and the uncanny can involve certain "illogical" appearances that point to the collapse of that fundamental-constitutive negativity itself. Comic objects can be very similar to uncanny objects in their "spectral materiality".

In his analysis of the uncanny (as related to anxiety), Lacan chooses to capture what is at stake in this configuration with the formula: *le manque vient à manquer*, "the lack comes to lack".[8] The constitutive lack which, precisely as a lack, supports our symbolic universe and its differentiations, comes to be lacking. What emerges in its place is an "impossible", surplus object that has no place in given reality and blatantly contradicts its laws. To a certain extent, Lacan's formula also applies to the comical. It is implied, for example, in the figure of "surplus-success" which, according to Pfaller, is common both to comedy and to the uncanny (things have a funny way of not only succeeding, but of succeeding too much, "more than intended").

Lacan further claims that this "lack of the lack" is what is involved in his concept of the object *a* (as real). Which is why anxiety "is not without object"[9]. In order to provide a more concrete rendering of these formulas on the side of the uncanny, let us look at an example. Take the image of

[7] In other words, and in the same way that not all that is scary, or horrible, is uncanny (or related to anxiety), the comical should not be confused with the much larger field of what we can find "funny". It is a specific category of funny which, indeed, has more in common with the uncanny than with some other instances of "funny".

[8] Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre X, L'angoisse*, Seuil, Paris 2004, p. 53.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 105.

someone's eyes being plucked out (and appearing autonomously), an image that seems to haunt the human imaginary from a very early stage, and which is often associated with the uncanny. When analyzing the uncanny aspect of this image, one usually points out two things: 1) instead of the eyes, two empty holes yawn in the person's face. 2) Eyes themselves, once detached from the body, appear as ghastly, impossible objects. In relation to the first point, one has the tendency to assume that the holes are terrifying because of the lack they imply, i.e. because they are holes, empty corridors leading to uncertain depths. Yet is it not rather the opposite that is really ghastly? Namely, that instead of the eyes, which – on the imaginary level – always suggest an *in(de)finite depth*, an opening into a possibly inscrutable, bottomless dimension of subjectivity (eyes being considered as "openings into a person's soul"), the holes instead of the eyes are *all too shallow*, all too finite, their bottom all too visible and close. So that, once again, what is horrifying is not simply the appearance (or disclosure) of a lack, but rather that the "lack comes to lack", that this lack itself is removed, that it loses its support. One could say: the moment when the lack loses its symbolic or/and imaginary support, it becomes "a mere hole", which is to say – an object. It is a nothing that, literally, remains (there) to be seen.

At the same time, and correlatively to this, the eyes – once they are removed from their sockets – are immediately transformed from "openings" (into the soul) to the very opposite of an opening, to a surplus "abject". In this sense, the plucked out eyes appear as that which is absolutely *en trop*. They are the surplus which cannot be re-inscribed in the symbolic economy of plus and minus, of lack and its complement.

Incidentally, these observations can help us understand the tectonic shift in a subject's symbolic economy that Lacan aims at demarcating with his formula of anxiety ("the lack comes to lack"): the subject loses the very support that her desire and, broadly, her symbolic universe had in a (constitutive) lack. This is exactly why he insists that the castration complex – which is the point where both the Freudian analysis of anxiety and his analysis of the uncanny in Hoffmann's story *The Sandman* lead to and stop at – is not, in fact, the last step in analyzing anxiety. There is, claims Lacan, a more fundamental, "original lack", a lack in the real, a "structural flaw [*vice de structure*] inscribed in the being-in-the-world of the subject that we are dealing with"[10]. One must be careful not to take this claim as a kind of "philosophical culturalization of psychoanalysis", which would replace the always somehow controversial notion of castration with a much more acceptable (and much more

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 160–161.

profound sounding) idea of a "structural flaw", or "ontological defect/lack". Lacan does not aim at dismissing the central role of the "castration complex" in human experience – on the contrary, he aims at *explaining* it. The castration complex functions as the pivotal point of our experience because it provides a symbolic rendering, a symbolic support, and hence a way of dealing with/transposing the "lack in the real".

In other words, the point where Lacan goes further than Freud on this issue does not consist in his dismissing the castration complex as not central or fundamental, but in turning the tables around. His claim is that at the bottom of anxiety, there is not a (revived) fear or menace of castration, but a fear or menace of losing the castration itself, that is to say of losing the symbolic support of the lack – the symbolic support provided by the castration complex. This is what his formula of anxiety, "the lack comes to lack", finally aims at. The pivotal point of anxiety is not a "fear of castration", but instead the fear of losing the support that the subject (and her desire) have in castration as a symbolic structure. It is the loss of this support that results in the apparition of those ghastly objects through which the lack in the real is present in the symbolic as an absolute "too-muchness"; ghastly objects which dislodge the object of desire and make appear, in its place, the cause of desire.

The realism of desire versus the realism of the drive

The above remarks already provide a first indication of the direction in which we'll search for a possible definition of the difference between comedy and the uncanny. The uncanny relies entirely on the structure of desire, based on the antinomy of the object of desire and its (transcendent) cause. The cause of desire is the originally lost object, the loss of which opens up the scene on which all possible objects of desire appear. The object-cause of desire is constitutively excluded from the field of desire (and its objects), that is to say, from the Other. This absolute disjunction of the real-object and reality (constituted through the Other) is fundamental for the possibility of the uncanny: If the object-cause emerges on the level of the Other (instead of being "present as absent"), it produces the uncanny. A good example of this antinomy of the Other and the object-cause, which cannot appear on the same level, is given by Mladen Dolar a propos of the figure of the double in the uncanny. If, as Lacan maintains, one can only have access to reality, to the word one can recognize oneself in, on the condition of the loss, the "falling out" of the object *a*, then

> the double is that mirror image in which the object *a* is included. The imaginary starts to coincide with the real, provoking a shattering anxiety. The double is the same as me plus the object *a*, that invisible part of being added to my image. In order for the mirror image to contain the object *a*, a wink or a nod is enough. Lacan uses the gaze as the best presentation of that missing object; in the mirror, one can see one's eyes, but not the gaze which is the part that is lost. But imagine that one could see one's mirror image close its eyes: that would make the object as gaze appear in the mirror. This is what happens with the double, and the anxiety that the double produces is the surest sign of the appearance of the object.[11]

One could thus say that the uncanny is based upon, and "exploits" the realism of desire: the emergence of that what "ought to have remained secret and hidden" – to use the Schellingian definition[12] – induces a collapse of reality (as, fundamentally, the reality of desire). The literature of the uncanny plays with the threat of this collapse, which is also to say that it plays with the fundamental ambiguity and ambivalence of desire: a desire cannot desire the real that makes it desire; yet it is also tempted to fantasize about embracing this Cause in a self-destructive (over)realisation, that is to say, precisely the "over-realisation" that we encounter in the uncanny. It is an "over-realisation" with which we pass over to the other side – which is not the case with surplus-realisation in the comical.

In relation to this "realism of desire" (the constitutive lack cannot come to be lacking without the reality constructed around this lack falling apart), comedy seems to take an utterly unrealistic stance: the lack comes to lack, the ghastly object appears where it shouldn't, the Other and the object appear on the same level – but *so what?* Nothing terrible happens, it is rather terribly funny.

Indeed, comedy does not follow the laws of the "realism of desire", that is to say, the laws of reality as underpinned by the structure of desire. On the contrary, it blatantly defies them. Yet, at the same time, there isn't a good comedy in which we could not feel quite distinctively that there is something

---

[11] Mladen Dolar, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

[12] Indeed, in order to see how Schelling's definition of the uncanny ("everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light") is very close to Lacan's definition, it is enough to stress the following: "what ought to have remained secret" is to be understood in the strong sense, i.e. in the sense of a *constitutive* absence from the scene, and not in the more relative (or even moral) sense of what is "appropriate" to be seen and what not.

very real in all this unrealism. It is as if comedy referred to a different real of human experience, a real that doesn't follow the laws of desire to begin with (which is different from saying that it "transgresses them"). Comedy strangely combines the "unbelievable" with a rather down-to-earth realism. It avoids idealization, yet it remains strangely optimistic regarding the satisfactory outcome of anything that happens. In view of this, should one not say that the realism of comedy is in fact a realism of drives, which is "unrealistic" precisely in the sense described above? Drives always find their satisfaction, regardless of the objective outcome of their quest. They have a way of stubbornly returning to their place, which is de-placed to begin with.

To go back to our example: in comedy, the sneezing of a corpse is not the ghastly object/real that should not be there, it is the real of a very different human experience, which can be formulated as follows: *dead or not, the guy is still sneezing*. Or: *sneezing always returns to its place* (even when this place is no longer there). In other words, what comedy aims at enacting is precisely the object of the drive.

In this perspective, we can see how what is usually referred to as the "vitalism" of comedy (the fact that it seems to stretch life beyond all the laws of probability) is in fact nothing other than the *vitalism of the death drive*. That is to say, the vitalism of the internal contradiction of (human) life itself. Far from referring to something in us that "wants to die", or that aims at death and destruction, the Lacanian notion of the death drive refers to an excess of life itself. In the human subject, there is something that has for its one and only purpose to go on living and perpetuating itself, regardless of how the subject "feels" about it, or of how she "leads" her life.

Since this notion of the death drive is often the issue in contemporary philosophical debates, and has earned Lacan the reputation of assigning to death the determinant role in human subjectivity (along the lines of the Heideggerian Being-towards-death), one cannot stress the above point too much.[13] Lacan's "death drive" is precisely the reason that the subject can never be reduced to the horizon of her death. This is not to say, on the other hand, that as an excess of life the death drive saves us from our finitude, or that this "immortal, irrepressible life" (Lacan) will indeed go on living *after* we die, that something of us will survive in it. The archetypical comical figure of, say, a passionate habit or a tick that keeps persisting even after its subject

[13] On this controversy, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, Verso, London & New York 2000, pp. 163–167. See also his contribution in the present volume, which makes a point of distinguishing between *objet-petit a* as object-cause of desire and as the object of drive, along lines very similar to those we are pursuing.

is already dead (or asleep or indisposed in any other way), is the way comedy renders palpable the inherent and always-already existing two-fold nature of human life, its internal separation/contradiction. The "real" life is precisely not beyond our life in reality (it does not lie with the Thing lost from reality), it is attached to it in a constitutively dislocated way. For comedy, the real life is the reality of our life being out-of-joint with itself. By drawing on the structure of the drive, comedy does not preach that something of our life will go on living on its own when we die, it rather draws our attention to the fact that *something of our life lives on its own as we speak*, that is to say, at any moment of our life. It draws our attention to the fact that, in a certain way, sneezing (or any other tick, habit, obsession that comedy chooses to bring forward) is always-already attached to us: irreducibly linked to us, yet also leading a somehow autonomous life. This is precisely what is at stake in the point we made earlier: the true object of comedy is not simply this tick, or habit, or sneezing, but precisely that interval that simultaneously separates and links the sneezing and its body, the habit and it bearer, the smile and its face, the pleasure and its cause … It is this logic of *constitutive dislocation* (as immanent nothing) that links the comedy to the dynamics of the drives, and distinguishes it from the uncanny, which is bound to the dynamic of desire with its logics of *constitutive lack* (as transcendent nothing).