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HEGEL THE COMEDIAN

Or the Wink of St Vitus

Writing in *Flüchtlingsgespräche*, Berthold Brecht says that Hegel had what it takes to be one of the greatest comedians.¹ This suggestion works in opposition to a whole history of philosophy that has asserted Hegel's status as the philosopher of complete and secure totality, and of seriousness. Typically, Hegel would be one of the last philosophers to be associated with anxiety, disorder or comedy and yet Brecht sees his philosophy as embodying each of these things, writing:

He was always winking in the same way that others had an insuppressible St. Vitus' dance. His sense of humor was such that he could not think, for example, of order without disorder. It was clear to him that in the immediate proximity of the greatest order, there was to be found the greatest disorder, and he even went so far as saying: in one and the same place!²

Brecht refers here to the St. Vitus dance, a cultural name given to bouts of mania involving infectious erratic dancing and laughter, occurrences of which were recorded from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries. The phenomenon is sometimes called choreomania, from the Greek *choros*, meaning dance, and *mania*, meaning madness. This dancing madness involves being taken over by (usually) temporary hysterical laughter, sometimes in large groups. Pieter Breughel the Elder is among those to have famously depicted the phenomenon. When it comes to comedy, it is tempting to relate the St Vitus dance to Bakhtinian carnival, another kind of infectious and "insuppressible" group eruption into comic disorder, or to what has sometimes been called "relief theory" or liberation theory in laughter studies. On the contrary, I argue here for a Hegelian reading of laughter which counters Bakhtinian carnival and ideas of laughter as liberating, assumptions which have dominated discussions of comic theory in the fields of both literary studies and philosophy. This function of laughter is embodied by Hegel's wink: a wink carrying the insuppressible threat of St Vitus.

The paper explores laughter as a process involving a kind of paradoxical relationship between order and disorder. As Brecht's comment suggests, in laughter order and disorder are not only "in closest proximity" but are "in one and the same place." Looking at Hegel's comments on comedy in the last 50 pages of *Aesthetics*, as well as earlier comments in *The Logic*, this paper argues for a Hegelian conception of laughter as a kind of "beginning," or what would later be termed an "event" in the work of Alain Badiou; a moment at which a new "order" emerges and is asserted, retroactively changing the past so that it appears as if the new order was always-already destined to be.³ Laughter establishes precisely such new realities, I will show here, but it also comes with the wink of St Vitus, indicating the precarity of the new orders that it brings into being. Further, the article explores how Lacan understood this function of humour via his reading of Hegel and put it to work in his lectures to produce new realities in order to force his philosophy into being within the room of his seminars. In this paper, then, Lacan is used less as a commentator on comedy than as an example of a humorist who embodied a particularly and peculiarly Hegelian approach to comedy.

Hegel discusses comedy at length, though this part of his oeuvre is often critically neglected.⁴ There is discussion of comedy in several important sections of the *Phenomenology*, and there is a much more sustained discussion at the end of his last work, the posthumously published *Aesthetics*. Here, Hegel dedicates fifty pages to the topic of comedy, yet, due to their critical neglect, these final pages of his life's work seem to recall stories surrounding Aristotle's lost book on Comedy, the second part of the *Poetics*. Umberto Eco speculates about these lost pages in his 1980 novel *The Name of the Rose*, somewhat comically suggesting that discovery of the text would undo the Western traditions of thought that have been set on their course by Aristotelian philosophy. Hegel, likewise considered by many to be an embodiment of established European rationality, finished his final lecture series with a disruptive and subversive discussion of comedy that has been "lost." Hegelian comedy—if it is recovered—would be equally disruptive of a number of assumptions about Hegel's status as the philosopher of secure rationality. It would also counter assumptions about laughter's apolitical and supplementary status, showing laughter to be of vital political power and a key feature of philosophical discourse.

Writing in *Aesthetics*, Hegel discusses the "comic as such," which can be thought of as something like the pure spirit of laughter, often separate from the general things which make us laugh. Hegel writes that such laughter:

Implies an infinite light-heartedness and confidence felt by someone raised altogether above his own inner contradiction and not bitter or miserable in it at all: this is the bliss and ease of a man who, being sure of himself, can bear the frustration of his aims and achievements.⁵

This idea of comedy can be read as being on the side of the subject, and on the side of a traditional reading of the Hegelian dialectic and of Hegel's work as asserting totality and completeness. In such a way it could be read as asserting that laughter

helps the subject overcome its contradiction and progress in some way: there is first the subject, then the subject threatened by “its own inner contradiction,” and finally the subject “raised above” this problem via comedy. Yet this reading is insufficient, and the flicker of St Vitus is visible in Hegel’s eye, since he is clear that the process has to do not only with the development of a pre-existing contradiction into a total and secure conclusion (as in the clichéd thesis-antithesis-synthesis reading of Hegel) but with the absolute destruction of what has gone before in the emergence of something new, even if the new also, paradoxically, emerges out of the old in its very destruction or undoing.

Hegel returns to the definition of the comic as such and stresses the radically destructive function of the laughter it involves. For Hegel, such comedy occurs:

When what has no substance in itself has destroyed its show of existence by its own agency, [and] the individual makes himself master of this dissolution and remains undisturbed in himself and at ease.⁶

For Hegel, a moment of pure comedy destroys something which “has no substance in itself” and only ever had “a show of existence.” In its place, something new emerges. This new thing may be thought of as “truth,” as if comedy abolishes appearance and reveals “true reality” underneath apparent fictions (something laughter studies and general discussion of laughter have often claimed).⁷ Something is destroyed and “dissolved” which is shown never to have had any substance but to have been in the order of appearance only. This is an old tradition and one can think of any comedian revealing the fallacy of an eminent performer and showing the harsh and inadequate material reality underneath the show of appearance: Plautus’s *Miles Gloriosus*, Shakespeare’s Falstaff, Mel Brooks’s Hitler. This is a precursor to what Freud would call “unmasking,” a comic moment when “such and such a person, who is admired as a demigod, is after all only human like you and me.”⁸ Kant could also be thought of as philosophizing laughter in a comparable way when he comments that “laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.”⁹ Such ideas, also a kind of “relief theory” see laughter as the transformation of an (apparent) something into nothing. The confusing difference is that in Hegel’s conception of the comic this is carried out by the individual’s own agency and the individual is able to emerge in a new form as the master of the situation, making laughter at least as creative as it is destructive, at least as much the production of something as the dissolution of something.

As such, the key to the complexity of Hegel’s argument is found in another implication: that which is produced appears to have always-already existed; rather than appearing new, it seems to “remain” and to be “undisturbed,” even though it has been produced anew in the moment of comedy. In other words, this laughter doesn’t so much reveal the truth as produce it as preexistent. We might say that this type of laughter finishes something and starts something new, but that which it starts appears to have pre-existed, it “remains undisturbed” and “persists self-assured.” Hegel implies that true comedy is not about dismantling appearance and

revealing underlying truths but that comedy functions in the service of producing truth itself. Perhaps we can hypothesize that comedy turns existing truths into mere appearance and creates new truths which appear grounded in more than appearance, as indeed truth always appears to be. I will try to bear out this hypothesis in what follows.

Rather than the *Aesthetics*, where Hegel discussed comedy directly, Brecht singles out *The Science of Logic* as the most comical of Hegel's works. In that text Hegel explores the idea of a "beginning," questioning how order comes into being. For Brecht:

His book "The Greater Logic" ... is one of the great comic works of world literature. It is about the mode of a life of concepts, those slippery, unstable, unaccountable existences; how they insult each other and fight with knives, and then sit down to dinner together as if nothing had happened. They appear, so to speak, in pairs, each is married to its opposite ... What order declares is immediately denied, in one and the same breath if possible, by disorder, its inseparable partner.¹⁰

But, how is it exactly that, in the Hegelian schema, order and disorder can be married and sit down to dinner? To approach an answer to this we need an understanding of Hegel's conception of beginning, which is also developed in *The Science of Logic*. Viewing laughter through the idea of beginning can lead to an understanding of his conception of pure comedy in which order and disorder are simultaneously and dialectically present. For Hegel, when something *begins* it is established and presented as inevitable and secure, yet also threatened by a kind of infinite anxiety. As in Brecht's comment, Hegel explores how order is produced through a paradoxical relationship with itself. He writes:

There is nothing in heaven or nature or spirit or anywhere else that does not contain just as much immediacy as mediation, so that both these determinations prove to be unseparated and inseparable and the opposition between them nothing real.¹¹

Everything which appears immediate contains just as much mediation, and vice versa, anticipating a Freudian concept of the unconscious. Hegel considers these two things, mediation on the one hand and immediacy on the other, which have characterized all prior theorizations of the beginning, to be inseparable, although equally importantly, something falsely or apparently separates them. This process which divides the two is close to what we can think of as the beginning in Hegel's work. For Hegel we can say that the beginning does not exist at the beginning, but rather, the beginning is, in Hegel's own words, "*to be made*" by this division.¹² At the beginning there is a divider, something which precedes immediacy and mediation, cause and effect, which separates the two, producing them in relation to each other. The moment of laughter can be seen as such a divider, a rupture that produces both cause and effect, which determines both the object of laughter and

the subject laughing. It is this unsecuring sense of how truth and identity come into being which Brecht found so humorous in Hegel and called “those slippery, unstable, unaccountable existences [that] insult each other and fight with knives, and then sit down to dinner together as if nothing had happened.”

A whole history of laughter studies has focused on the *causes* of laughter, seeing it as purely the effect of something else, while more recent work such as that of Anca Parvulescu has begun to discuss its *effects* and what can be caused *by* laughter.¹³ In this conception of laughter via Hegel, laughter is conceived of as neither cause nor as effect but as a rupture which constitutes both. In his book *Event*, Slavoj Žižek defines the event as “*the effect that seems to exceed its causes*.”¹⁴ An event is that which exceeds its causes, so that whilst it has political stimuli, it also establishes new causes for itself, its effects retroactively re-structuring the past into a new structure and bringing us within this re-ordered world, whether we like it or not. Laughter, conceived as Hegelian beginning, is exactly such an event. It brings the subjects involved (those telling the jokes, those laughing, and those targeted) into new ideological structures which are produced, entrenched, naturalized and enforced by the process of laughter, with the laugh itself (considered only as *effect*) appearing to serve as evidence of the existence of what *caused* it. Instead, laughter is both cause and effect, as well as a force that falsely divides the two. It is a true Hegelian beginning, which has three constituent parts that cannot exist save in relation to each other. The political effects of seeing laughter in this way are significant. Rather than an effect of or response to existing political discourses, laughter must be seen as a more active participant in the establishment of and resistance to political realities. Since such comic processes produce political reality, establishing order, they also leave that political reality precarious and open to being reproduced again. In other words, such laughter is order and disorder “in one and the same place.”

Whilst for Brecht it is Hegel’s *Logic* which holds within it the greatest humour, for Lacan it is the *Phenomenology* that is “hysterically funny.” As if frustrated with his students’ failure to pick upon his suggestive comments about the humour of Hegel, in *Seminar XVII* Lacan notes that “it has no kind of effect [...] if I say to you that *The Phenomenology of Spirit* is hysterically funny. And yet, this is what it is.”¹⁵ Pointing to a lack of attention to Hegel’s humour, Lacan hides his insight in a throwaway comment, himself making a joke by offering his audience the chance to ignore him and misread Hegel. “Hysterically funny” means not just very funny but that Hegel’s comedy must be thought of in terms of the “discourse of the hysteric,” something he suggested some weeks earlier in the seminar. For Lacan, Hegel’s discourse goes against the history of philosophy, which has been nothing but “a fascinating enterprise for the master’s benefit.” On the contrary, with Hegel’s “outrageous absolute knowledge,” we confront the fact that “what leads to knowledge [...] is the hysteric’s discourse” (*S17*, 23). The hysteric’s discourse is a constantly questioning and never fixed sense of knowledge. As the servant to many masters, the hysteric suggests knowledge on the precipice, always capable of collapsing and being replaced by another. The St Vitus dance is also “hysterical,” both in terms of humour,

and in terms of the hysteric's discourse in a strictly psychoanalytic sense. For Lacan, Hegel counters the idea that knowledge is fixed (and the fixity, or ossification, of this very idea) with the fact that knowledge is always new. Truths are *produced*, rather than being perceptions of what is "already there."

While we talk of "discovering" the truth, particularly in scientific discourse, Lacan re-formulates the idea of discovery in *Seminar XI* to argue that "*the discovery is of a strange temporality*."¹⁶ Recalling Freudian *nachträglichkeit*, Lacan shows that *the discovery of something also brings it into being in a new form*. This production of truths found in Hegel is, for Lacan, "hysterically funny," with the pun fully intended. It is funny because it shows how humour itself functions like a beginning or discovery, appearing to be a blast of clarifying "unmasking" which renders what previously appeared true to be mere illusion and establishes a new truth in its place, just like the hysteric in its relationship to its masters. Any classic example of unmasking laughter will serve the argument well: laughter issued at the pompous king is often thought to shatter the illusion (his performance of superiority) and reveal the truth (the common humanity of us all). On the contrary, it abolishes one truth (traditional hierarchy) only to replace it with another (equality in the eyes of God). Via laughter, a new master is established, making laughter a truly hysterical affect.

Freud did not consider himself much indebted to Hegel and it is Lacan who brings Hegel into psychoanalytic discourse. In *Seminar XVII*, Lacan criticizes traditional philosophy and makes Hegel the absolute antithesis of this, calling him the "anti-philosopher" (23). Influenced by Kojève's lectures on Hegel that he attended in the 1930s,¹⁷ Lacan criticizes ideas of the ego-as-origin which characterize the psychoanalysis of Anna Freud and other Freudian schools. Distancing himself from these schools, Lacan writes that "one should not imagine that [psychoanalysis] is something that would be the discovery of being or of the soul."¹⁸ Lacan, like Hegel, asks not what the origin of the subject is but rather how we are formed as subjects who see ourselves as originary. Ian Parker and David Pavon-Cuellar explain that "Lacanian discourse analysis" is an attempt to move away from models which "attempt to go back to some reality that was expressed, represented or reflected in discourse" and instead place the emphasis on "the reality of discourse itself," not just linguistics but the way in which real subjects are produced and constructed within those languages.¹⁹ Lacan's comment about Hegel's humour is no throw-away remark but a central point of *Seminar XVII* to which he repeatedly returns.

All the way through—take as an example what Hegel is able to say about culture—the most pertinent remarks concerning the play of events and exercises of wit abound. I repeat, there is nothing more amusing. (171)

Lacan stresses that reason, the very thing affirmed by traditional readings of Hegel, operates in his work as a cunning trick: "the cunning of reason is, he tells us, what directed the entire game." "However," writes Lacan, "the high point of this cunning is not where one thinks it is. It is the cunning of reason, no doubt, but one has to recognize the cunning of the reasoned and take one's hat off to him." Lacan then re-

fers to the “extraordinarily dirty trick of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*” arguing that Hegel’s question “which is truth?” and “what brings him into play?” are humorous ones (171). Such humour—like Lacanian psychoanalysis itself—would operate against the discovery of the soul, working not to unmask what is already there but to reveal the cunning trick by which we emerge as subjects who see themselves as originary or who believe in the existence of a soul-like quality to our subjectivity. Lacan’s insistence that this element of Hegel’s project should be seen as hysterically funny indicates that the process described by Hegel is close to the heart of humour itself. We can put the hypothesis in the terms discussed above: laughter, while appearing to unmask the truth behind illusion and show what the subject really is, is in fact a process which involves bringing the subject into being while tricking it into thinking it existed to be unmasked.

Lacan’s own use of light humour in his seminars is an interesting case study of the function of such humour. Lacan’s humour has rarely been mentioned (except perhaps by those such as Noam Chomsky, who mindlessly labelled Lacan an arrogant charlatan). Like most jokes, they are usually seen as a light aside to the serious development of his arguments. On the contrary, his use of jokes supplies illustration of how Lacan understood the function of humour itself. From a certain perspective the jokes may seem arrogance, since he uses them to prove himself right, but in doing so he shows how ideologically powerful jokes can be. In short, Lacan’s own use of light humour shows how the joke can establish an argument as a truth. One example is a humorous gambit aimed at his contemporary writer Marie-Claire Boons:

Marie-Claire Boons would even give us to understand that [...] in some way psychoanalysis frees us from the law.

Fat chance. I am well aware that this is the register in which a libertarian hook attaches itself to psychoanalysis. [...] The father’s death [...] does not seem to me to be of a kind to liberate us from it, far from it. (*S17*, 119)

Lacan stresses that psychoanalysis, from Freud’s own work to his own, should not be thought of as on the side of liberation. Rather, its interest is in the *always structured* movement from one “discourse” to another, with the production of new subjects and discourses out of and in place of old ones. The joke in the above quotation turns on the phrase “fat chance,” takes as its target the idea that “psychoanalysis frees us from the law.” As such, by mocking the idea of liberation, it also targets the idea that humour operates as a “liberating release,” which is often considered to characterize Freud’s own theory of humour in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. His conception of humour via Hegel reflects this primary interest of his work, stressing a laughter that is not so much on the side of liberation—as Freudian relief theory and Bakhtinian carnival have often been considered—but involved in the process of moving from one structure to another. Lacan uses this small joke to make a certain event-like movement happen in the very text of his seminar. The laughter (albeit brief) that we might assume accompanied this phrase “fat chance” in the lecture theatre full of Lacan fanatics, is itself an evental change; it turns

a reading of psychoanalysis (that of Marie-Claire Boons, who thought that psychoanalysis may liberate us from the law) into a *past* that is now laughed *at* and shown to have only ever had “a show of existence,” to borrow Hegel’s language from above. In relation to this past, a new present is established in which it is made clear that psychoanalysis is “far from” liberating. The process therefore establishes a *new* present in relation to this *equally new* past, both of which emerge as the joke is made. The joke has the three-part structure of a Hegelian beginning.

Another way of putting this might be to say that Lacanian psychoanalysis (like laughter) is not about truths but about myths or the truth of myth; it does not reveal the “truth” but shows us the truth of discourse itself. Lacan makes more jokes to hammer home this point:

Bullshitting, as I have always said, is truth. They are identical. [...] Why is this privilege given to myth in psychoanalysis? [...] Claude Levi-Strauss states the complete myth of Oedipus [but] one can see that it concerns something quite different from whether or not one is going to fuck one’s mummy. (S17, 111)

This observation is not simply grounded in the argument made by many post-Freudians that the Oedipus myth is not to be taken literally but metaphorically. Rather than being a myth which shows us something true, as metaphor can function, it is the mythic status of Oedipus which makes it important. Here, the joke about fucking one’s mummy actually enacts what Lacan describes. The joke shows that we are wrong to see psychoanalysis as something which reaches back into childhood to find “truths,” indicating instead that it is the myths we tell ourselves (about childhood for example) which are important. These myths, in being shown for the myths that they are (or shown to be a kind of true “bullshit” which governs subjectivity) are revealed to have never had anything but a “show of existence,” to borrow Hegel’s phrase once more, and a new truth is erected in its place, which then seems to have always been the truth waiting to be revealed (“unmasked”) by the abolishment of myth.

Which truth is demoted to the status of myth here? It is the myth that fucking our mothers is at the root of psychoanalysis, a former psychoanalytic truth. Yet the joke doesn’t reveal essential truth (what psychoanalysis is *really* about), but it produces new truth in place of the old myth. This new equally mythic truth appears true by virtue of its comparison with the old and now abolished myth. Thus Lacan is able to defend Freud, to get him off the hook, and re-establish his theory as a new truth: from this joke on, psychoanalysis was *never* just about “fucking one’s mummy,” and Freud *always* meant something quite different. It is the same “dirty trick” played by Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and which Lacan found so humorous. Now playing this dirty trick on his seminar audience, Lacan shows that laughter functions to turn established truths into appearance and establish new truths its place. Psychoanalysis itself can be said to function comparably.

As a final example, we can consider one of Lacan's best comic moment from *Seminar XI*, in which he uses a humorous story about an encounter with a sardine can in order to explain the function of the gaze. Joan Copjec noted that the humour deployed by Lacan in this famous instance should be thought of in relation to Hegel.

Lacan tells his tale of the relation of the subject to its world in the form of a humorously recondite story about a sardine can. The story is told as a kind of mock Hegelian epic, a send up of the broadly expansive Hegelian epic form by a deliberately "little story" that takes place in a "small boat" in a "small port" and includes a single named character, "Petit Jean."²⁰

This little story is about the gaze—not my topic here—but it is also about humour. In the tale, the young man, Petit-Jean, points to a sardine can floating in the ocean and comments to Lacan (himself a character in the story) "You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!" For Lacan the theorist, the non-reciprocity between the subject and the sardine can illustrates a Lacanian theory of the gaze, but for Lacan the character in the story, what is most disconcerting is that while Petit-Jean finds his own comment "highly amusing," he had not. "Why did I find it less amusing than he?" asks Lacan, "it's an interesting question." The answer he gives is that the moment of exclusion from the humour makes it visible that the middle class Lacan had no place in the picture of working life in which he finds himself, but the further implication is that the laughter establishes a new reality to the scene in which the little story is set. After the laugh, the scene is rendered in a different light, with even its history constructed anew. Again, laughter is conceived as an eventual force that moves the subjects involved into a new structural reality. Recognizing this power of laughter is a prerequisite to being able to use it to create such a shift in the examples discussed above.

One of the most interesting comments Lacan made about laughter is the suggestion in *Television* that laughter may oppose capitalism. Here Lacan says, "the more saints, the more laughter; that's my principle, to wit, the way out of capitalist discourse—which will not constitute progress, if it happens only for some."²¹ The possibility of Lacanian laughter working against capitalism has been brilliantly explored by Samo Tomšič:

The association of laughter with the exit from capitalism is another surrealist moment in the citation from Lacan's *Television*. Laughter as a weapon against capitalism seems to suggest that capitalism might be structured like a joke, and the envisioned universalisation of laughter—"the more saints the more laughter"—would mean the downfall of capitalism. Should psychoanalysis teach us how finally to laugh at capitalism?²²

For Tomšič, laughter, as something which reveals the structure of capitalism, might cause its very downfall. Such an argument is comparable with the one I've made here, that laughter has the power to change the structure of a discourse and inaugurate new realities. Yet, Tomšič's insight provides another important dimension.

Laughter is not just any event, but a particular kind of event or movement which makes something structural visible to us. We can have many masters, and many beginnings, while still within the capitalist discourse and framework, but what makes laughter different is that it makes such structures visible to us, undermining their claim to inevitability. Speaking of Hegel and of Derrida on Hegel, Jean-Luc Nancy—perhaps an unusual writer to evoke here—puts it nicely when he writes of laughter that “what makes sense about meaning is that it senses itself making sense.”²³ If we can say that laughter is a beginning, or an event, that exceeds its causes and produces something which it appears to reflect, then what is specific about laughter is that it senses its role in the production of a cause which seems to have pre-existed, rather than believing in itself as an effect of already-existing objects, identities and subject-positions. Laughter, with all its anxieties, knows that what it brings into being is completely unsecured and always potentially subject to complete change. It could function not only like the hysteric’s discourse, but to change the structure of the discourse itself. In such a way, this Hegelian laughter could be the opponent of capitalism. Like Hegel’s philosophy, capitalism often presents itself as inevitable and secure totality, but if it is structured like a joke, and if jokes produce rather than reveals truths, then capitalism is shown to be based on the kind of dirty cunning trickery found in the *Phenomenology*.

Describing Hegel as the most anxious of men, his student Heinrich Heine makes the following comment which chimes with that of Brecht many years later:

I often saw how he anxiously looked around, fearing that people would understand him. He liked me a lot since he was certain I wouldn’t betray him; I even thought at the time that he was servile. When I was once uneasy about the saying ‘all that is, is rational,’ he smiled in a peculiar way and remarked: ‘This could also read “all that is rational must be.”’ He quickly looked around, but soon calmed down.²⁴

As Mladen Dolar has written, the passage depicts Hegel as “someone who must constantly attempt to hide his subversive underside.”²⁵ This subversive underside, this article has proposed, is to do with laughter. In Heine’s account, Hegel’s manner is uneasy and anxious because he fears being understood, seemingly on this particular tricky point. Speaking privately to Heine, Hegel allegedly suggests an alternate reading of the famous proposition “all that is, is rational”; whilst the first phrase implies that being is inherently rational, the alternative suggests that this is because rationality itself demands to *be*. Hegel sees, in the very act of making rationality inevitable, the strange and powerful way in which rationality demands to *be inevitable*, and makes itself so, thus performatively undoing the very chain of causality and inevitability traditionally thought to bind the rational itself. This paradoxical move is the true St Vitus’ dance in Hegel’s viewpoint, and makes its destabilizing presence felt in what Brecht called his wink, and in what Heine called his “peculiar smile”—embodied, even unconscious gestures which constantly threaten to undo themselves in the very act of doing.

Whilst it was Georges Bataille who wrote “my philosophy is a philosophy of laughter” and Hegel would never have described his own work in this way, it is in fact Hegel—the philosopher of rationality—whose work threatens the very logic of the order it also establishes.²⁶ Whilst Bataille saw laughter as “non-knowledge” or anti-knowledge, humour in Hegel’s philosophy—and here he might be heard to have the last laugh—is both knowledge and non-knowledge, both philosophy and anti-philosophy at once, “in one and the same place!” The peculiar role of comedy in his work is not found in its association with any liberation from the law, but rather in making visible a process by which a new structural reality comes into being. The wink of St Vitus, barely concealed in Hegel’s work, is the indicator that such a reality could collapse just as easily as it emerged.

Notes

1. Special thanks are due to Mladen Dolar for inspiration for the article.
2. Berthold Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke* 14, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967) 1460-1. English translation by Mladen Dolar.
3. This is not something that Badiou would be likely to directly agree with, since laughter is far from one of the four categories of the event. The theory is explored in full in my forthcoming book *In the Event of Laughter: Psychoanalysis, Hegelianism and Comedy*.
4. Agnes Heller makes an interesting connection between Hegel and the comic novel. See *Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomenon in Art, Literature and Life* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005) 93. Alenka Zupančič dedicates a chapter to Hegelian comedy in *The Odd One In* (London: MIT Press, 2008) 11-60. Zupančič’s text has been crucial in reversing the trend of dissociating Hegel from the comic.
5. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol II, trans T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) 1200.
6. Hegel, 1202.
7. See for example Elder Olson, *The Theory of Comedy* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1968) 35-6.
8. Sigmund Freud, “Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. VIII, ed. & trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001) 3-238; 202.
9. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 161.
10. Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 14, 1401-2.
11. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 46.
12. Brecht, 1401-2.
13. Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010).
14. Slavoj Žižek, *Event: Philosophy in Transit* (London: Penguin Books, 2014) 3.

15. Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and Russell Grigg, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, XVII* (New York: Norton, 2007) 169–70. All subsequent references to *Seminar XVII* are to this edition, denoted by *S17* (where necessary) and page number.
16. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Norton, 1998) 25.
17. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H Nichols, Jr (New York: Basic Books, 1969).
18. Jacques Lacan, “The Tokyo Discourse,” *Journal for Lacanian Studies*, 3.1 (2005): 129-144; 3.
19. David Pavon-Cuellar and Ian Parker, *Lacan, Discourse, Event: New Psychoanalytic Approaches to Textual Indeterminacy* (London: Routledge, 2013) 2.
20. Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (London: MIT Press, 1994) 30.
21. Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, ed. Joan Copjec, trans. Denis Hollier et al. (New York: Norton, 1990) 16.
22. Samo Tomšič, “Laughter and Capitalism” in *S: Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique* 8 (2015): 22-38; 29.
23. Nancy, Jean-Luc, “Elliptical Sense,” *Research in Phenomenology*, 18 (1988): 175-191; 177.
24. Heinrich Heine, “Briefe über Deutschland” in *Sämtliche Schriften*, 6 vols, vol. 5 (Munich: Hanser, 1976) 197. I have used the translation of this passage given by Mladen Dolar in ‘The Owl of Minerva from Dusk till Dawn, or, Two Shades of Gray,’ in *Filozofija i društvo*, vol. 26, Broj 4 (2015): 875-890; 882-3.
25. Dolar, “The Owl of Minerva from Dusk till Dawn, or, Two Shades of Gray,” in *Filozofija i društvo*, vol. 26, Broj 4 (2015): 883.
26. Georges Bataille, “Nonknowledge, Laughter, and Tears” in *The Unfinished System of Non-knowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2001) 138.