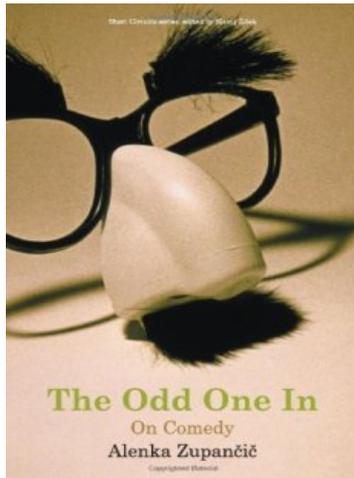


Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy (Short Circuits)*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009, 230 pp., \$21.95 (paperback).

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Like all of the books in the Short Circuits series, edited by Slavoj Žižek, Alenka Zupančič's study of comedy seeks to cross two wires—one "a major classic (text, author, notion)" and the other a "minor' author, text, or conceptual apparatus"—to produce a reading that leads "to insights which completely shatter and undermine our common perceptions" (p. ix). Comedy, the object of Zupančič's study, "is frequently used as a general name for (almost) everything that is funny, as a label that covers several different, more specific modes of comedy, such as jokes, irony, humor, and so on" (p. 9).



In the field of communication studies, the scope of the term *comedy* ranges from water-cooler humor in interpersonal and organizational studies to the ambiguous conceptions of an attitude toward history or frame of acceptance in rhetorical and critical approaches to discourse. Zupančič's reading of comedy proceeds from the short circuit that is produced by crossing the wires of representation and difference. The conception of representation Zupančič employs is inherited from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The competing conceptions of difference found in the theoretical works of Jacques Lacan and Gilles Deleuze inform the consideration of the short circuit that occurs when these wires are crossed. By crossing these wires, the study draws together three important lines of thought within communication studies: (a) The ongoing consideration of psychoanalytic theory's value and usefulness to the field; (b) critiques of the neo-Aristotelian and neo-Kantian influences on theories of comedy found in the works of Kenneth Burke and Suzanne K. Langer; and ultimately, (c) the conception of difference itself—a topic that has always been timely and vital to the study of communication, but becomes especially urgent in hyper-modern, globalizing communication ecologies.

The body of the book is divided into three main sections and an (essential) appendix. The three sections are devoted to reconsiderations of the "comical" and its representation, figuration, and conceptualization in comical expressions. The appendix returns the tracing of comedy presented in the body of the book to the map of the Real that we encounter in the three orders of the Lacanian structure of the psyche, ultimately advancing a rereading of castration in relation to Lacan's broader project. Not only does the book introduce new depth and clarity to previous conceptions of comedy that are incorporated into communication studies from philosophy, psychology, sociology, and literary criticism, it also presents an argument bearing on the utility of Lacanian and Deleuzian frameworks in critical communication studies.

Readers anticipating a detailed reading of specific comedies or a thorough cataloguing of types of jokes are likely to be disappointed with Zupančič's approach to the subject, as the discussion takes place predominantly on the level of metatheoretical critiques of previous conceptions of joking and comedy as modes of expression (though Monty Python, Charlie Chaplin, and Sacha Baron Cohen do make brief appearances in the early chapters). *Amphitryon* receives the most detailed reading in the study, serving as the foundation of Zupančič's reconsideration of the Freudian structure of the psyche and forming a bridge between Hegel's work on comedy and the Bergsonian, Lacanian, and Deleuzian insights that are central to the book's third and final section and its appendix.

Zupančič's argument can be read as an invitation to reconsider our approaches. How do producers and advertisers use comedy to target the constitutive dislocation at the heart of our identities? How does comedy induce us to consume, to vote, to enjoy in particular patterns by presenting us with the universal at work? How does a comic attitude influence the processes and products of debate and deliberation? It is the notion of constitutive dislocation, introduced by Zupančič's study, that has the potential to enrich communication scholarship dealing not only with comedy but with difference generally, each of which are essential elements of our understanding of communicative processes, practices, and products. It reveals that thinking about comedy has relied on stable categories to understand a communicative phenomenon that is, fundamentally, a destabilization of categories. Through such a lens, the influence of dialectical conceptions and cause-effect reasoning on the questions we ask about communication become clear.

On a more pragmatic level, Zupančič argues that the project addresses a problem—the emergence of "happiness" as a Master-Signifier—that is identifiable in contemporary arrangements of difference in political, economic, and cultural structures across multiple levels. Comedy's relationship to "true" happiness holds out the possibility of subverting the order that constrains freedom by imposing a stable and unified conception of happiness. According to Zupančič, it is not enough in contemporary society that we perform our roles within the capitalist machine efficiently to succeed; it is also necessary to be happy about it. Unhappiness is perceived as a sign of some more fundamental flaw in the ego that becomes a barrier to success. Zupančič argues that the line between happiness and unhappiness is spawning "a spectacular rise of racism" (which Zupančič terms "racization") wherein "(new) races based on economic, political, and class differences and factors, as well as the segregation based on these differences" (p. 6) are displacing traditional biological and cultural conceptions of race. This line of argument bears directly on another area of interest in the field of communication studies. Lacanian theory has been brought to bear on race and gender differences in particularly provocative ways. Zupančič's study offers a fresh perspective on the potential of Lacanian approaches to these questions within the field of communication studies.

If, as Zupančič argues, being happy is in the best interest of the individual, and happy individuals are in the best interest of the status quo, then it would seem to be the case that comedy plays a conservative role in the communicative processes of constituting and reconstituting the social. The steady stream of situation comedies in television programming and the humorous advertisements that interrupt them certainly seem more in line with Adorno's conception of the culture industry than with humanist-romantic conceptions of comedy as "intellectual resistance" (p. 4). Even the emphasis on comedy's

subversive potential found in some humanist and critical conceptions of comedy is, according to Zupančič, insufficient for it cannot explain how comedy can destabilize the Master-Signifier of happiness and the naturalness that it bestows upon socioeconomic relationships. According to Zupančič, the fundamental flaw in previous conceptions of comedy and happiness is a presumption of stability, conceptual unity, that misrepresents the difference at the heart of comedy—a difference that must be embraced to achieve “true” happiness (freedom). “If a truly subversive edge of comedy exists,” Zupančič argues, “it is to be sought elsewhere” (p. 5).

Reconceptualizing the subversive edge of comedy begins with the question of comic representation. The first section of the book departs from a brief comparison of the Other in Lacanian and Hegelian architectonics. This leads to a detailed discussion of the epic, tragic, and comic modes of representation in the terms of Hegel’s dialectic of the individual and the Universal. Zupančič’s read of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* includes the observation that “if the epic introduces and practices the form of *narrating* the Essence, tragedy introduces and practices the form of [*en*]acting or staging it” (p. 25). In the Hegelian conception of comedy, the author argues, we are confronted by “this very essence as physical” (p. 26) doing away with representation. It “is the moment in which substance, necessity, and essence all lose their immediate—and thus abstract—self-identity or coincidence with themselves” (p. 34). The epic hero is narrated as the Universal. The tragic hero speaks for himself, representing the Universal through the character. The comical “representation” in comedy makes the actor, for a period of time, not the representation of difference but the embodiment of the impasses and contradictions inherent in the movement of pure spirit into materiality and materiality into pure spirit. Thus, comedy comes to be seen as “the end of the mode of representation . . . [which] is in fact very close to the Lacanian conception of representation” (p. 34).

Zupančič is careful to distinguish between this Lacanian-Hegelian notion of representation and the trend in critical philosophy that “has been dedicated to various ways of undermining the metaphysics of infinity” (p. 48). The cracks this subversion has made in the edifice of transcendence have been filled in by “a *metaphysics of finitude* in which . . . finitude appears as *our* (contemporary) great narrative” (p. 48). This metaphysics of finitude corresponds to the distancing at work in romantic-humanist conceptions of comedy as subversive. Each leads to the perspective that “a human is [only] human” and “life is [only] life” (p. 49). Both Hegelian dialectics and Lacanian analysis reject this simple one-to-one correspondence: “If the human equation indeed added up so neatly . . . *there would be no comedy*” (p. 49). The “true comic spirit” can only be thought of in terms of “a ‘physics of the infinite’” (p. 50). This is because human finitude contains a contradiction in that it is a “failed finitude,” or in Zupančič’s terms, a “finitude with a leak in it” (p. 52).

From the discussion of comedy’s two-sided structure and of the “constitutive missing link” between the two sides, Zupančič moves on to the consideration of “two fundamental comic procedures which somehow make this singular kind of missing link appear” (p. 56). The first is described as a “sudden intrusion of the other side, followed by an ‘impossible articulation’ of the two sides in one and the same frame” (p. 56). In this procedure it is not only necessary for two mutually exclusive realities to be juxtaposed within the same frame but also that they be articulated in a way that—no matter how illogical or fantastic—“somehow works.” This procedure is not, and should not be mistaken as, the representation

of one side subverting the other but rather of an "impossible' joint articulation" (p. 58) between the two sides that cracks realities and exposes the Real. Temporally, this procedure can play out in a brief instant, or it can be "extensively sustained": for example the difference between a gag, joke, or gaffe on the one hand and the more expansive comic procedures found in poetry, plays, and films. The second comic procedure discussed by Zupančič is described as "comic acceleration or exaggeration" (pp. 58–59). Whereas the first involves an intrusion of one side into the other, the second procedure shows us that by taking a few "forced and strongly accelerated steps," it is possible to arrive at the other side of our original position without realizing the switch. Here again, it is the simultaneous visibility of both sides within a single frame or scene that constitutes the comic procedure. Intrusion and exaggeration are specific modes of the comical kernel underlying comedic expressions from the pun to the drama.

While the argument in the first section of the book is that comedy's two-sided structure represents the physics of the finite (our "failed finitude"), the second section of the book is devoted to an exploration of the figurations of the comic procedure. This exploration proceeds by way of the structures of identity found in Freudian conceptions of the psyche: Id/It, Ego, and Other. Out of the interactions between these structures emerge distinct conceptions of how comic figures are able to extend the short circuit that is the comic procedure from a comical instant (joke, pun, gaffe) to an extended employment (plays, poetry, drama).

The first relationship to be considered is the one between the Ego and the Id. Zupančič argues that "there is between the two a fundamental discrepancy, incongruence, disproportion" (p. 63). All comic figures reveal these discrepancies and, in doing so, delineate the fundamental difference between the happiness of the Ego and the happiness of the Id. But we can go one step further, Zupančič suggests, and distinguish between the comic figure and the comic character. Comic characters advance a specific relationship to happiness, one that emphasizes the happiness of the Id over the happiness of the Ego.

Another relationship that figures prominently in the discussion is the one between the Ego and the Ego. According to Zupančič, "this theme is actually nothing but the introduction of the Ego/I into what is called objective reality," where the ego-object is not the ego of a particular individual but of "the ego *tout court*" (p. 73). The utility of Lacan's rereading of Freud remains largely implicit in Zupančič's observations on these comic relationships.

The final sort of comic relationship considered is the one between the Other and the Other. Zupančič states that "if, by the Other, we mean the symbolic coordinates that structure our world, as well as providing its vocabulary," then the object *a* can be seen to be a point at which the "effect of the Other" maintains a connection "with the symbolic structure that generates it" (p. 100). Difference is not just a product of the comparison of self and other but a fundamental characteristic of the symbolic order itself. Each of these conceptions of Difference presents insights into the figuration of the Ego/I and to the representation of the discrepancies within what appears to be a unity.

Having discussed comic representation and the figuration(s) of the comic procedure in the Symbolic, Zupančič turns to the question of comic conceptualizations; that is, to the "concept" comically conceived. The third section of the book opens with a review of Bergson's dualistic theory of the comical:

"on the one hand automatism . . . on the other vitality" (p. 111). This conception of the comical is discussed at some length in relation to the difficulties that arose in the first two sections of the book. Ultimately, Bergson's opposition is revealed to be in line with the metaphysics of the finite and the unity of the Ego/It. Rather than illustrating the Hegelian and Lacanian senses of difference, Bergson's conception founders on the unity of the concepts within dialectic. Against this formulation Zupančič states, "My stance is different: life is not (fully) reducible to itself, which is why it does not constitute transcendence to all there is but, rather, a crack in all there is" (p. 118). This leads to a reconsideration of the oppositions between comedy and tragedy and of the temporal structures in jokes and broader comic sequences. The understanding of comedy that emerges from these discussions is one of "staccato fluidity" where the very essence of continuity is discontinuity. It is unfortunate that Burke's work on comedy and irony do not receive attention in Zupančič's study for it seems that a Burkean "humble irony" parallels the conception of staccato fluidity in some respects. However, Burke's argument that comedy and tragedy have common origins in humility stands as a point of divergence from Zupančič's discussion of comedy that requires additional consideration.

The final chapter of the body of the book delves further into this "continuity-through-interruption" by placing it in conversation with Deleuze's opposition of repetition and representation, which brings the argument of the book back to its point of departure in the tension between Hegelian and Lacanian conceptions of representation. This leads to a discussion of Deleuzian and Lacanian conceptions of the Real and ultimately to a final reconsideration of the distinctions between comedy and tragedy. The body of the book closes on Zupančič's suggestion that "things that really concern us, things that concern the very kernel of our being, can be watched and performed only as comedy . . . the impersonal in comedy is the *subject itself*" (p. 182).

The content of the (essential) appendix at the conclusion of the book is devoted primarily to a discussion of castration: First, as the central element of the comic conception of love found in the speech by Aristophanes in the *Symposium*; then as the metaphor for the gap between the subject and that person's enjoyment in Lacanian theory; and finally, as "the signifier of the very cut that marks human beings as constitutively dislocated in relation to themselves" (p. 216).

Zupančič's study presumes a familiarity, not only with the theorists whose concepts are subjected to comic reconsideration in the study but also with the comical texts and expressions that Zupančič employs, both to exemplify specific insights and as the foundations of broader theoretical arguments. While the thinness of Zupančič's treatment of comical texts and expressions can be frustrating at times, there is more than enough reward to justify the work required to fill in these gaps. Ultimately, the book delivers on what the Short Circuit series promises readers: a rereading that shatters preconceptions of comedy as a stable and unified category. The value of this rereading's insights, as they pertain to our understandings of both comedy and to the concept of difference itself, remain to be seen in the uses to which communication scholars put them. The invitation to do so has been opened and remains.