Abstraction and Comedy

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Declaration

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Abstract

The thesis, consisting of an extended artwork (*Toy Zoo*) and a theoretical text, aims to explore a concept of abstraction and relate this concept to an affect of comedy. The proposal of the thesis is that abstraction, looked at in a proper way, is funny. Abstraction is imagined not as the absence of 'content' or the generalization of form, but as a condition of language occasioned by a categorical loss, the loss of the ground that attaches meaning to a thing. The work takes this dissonance in language as its subject-matter. In a series of photographic images, representations of mental or conceptual objects whose mode of representation alters the meaning of the term, it presents abstraction not as a formal reduction or the presentation of a higher order but as the historical view of a void subject-position. Its argument is that the view from this position is comic.

The text develops a concept of abstraction from Hegel's description of 'the abstract work of art'. This 'absolute' abstraction, a condition in society to which art responds, is the premise through which various forms of abstract production, in art and elsewhere, are read. The generic forms of the epic, tragedy and comedy, as analyzed by Hegel, provide models that are applied in the context of 'real abstraction' and to certain positions in art. An analysis of value in capital aims to identify the logic of this form of production with the structure of tragedy. Against this 'ready-made' abstraction of modernity, the non-dialectical relationship of abstract necessity and the individual, the text argues for a form of comedy. Comedy, as a genre in art, proposes a subject-

position that, recognizing itself in abstraction, recognizes abstraction not, as in ‘real abstraction’, as necessity but as the condition of its own freedom.

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Preface

The following text forms part of a thesis submitted for a PhD in Fine Art at Goldsmiths, University of London. Together with the text, the thesis consists of an exhibition of artwork, images of which are included as an appendix in the present document. The thesis is practice-based and practice-led. The artwork is the motivation and present end of our research. The text, we intend, may serve to make clearer the logic of the artwork, but is not a commentary on it and does not address it directly. A separate section in the appendix describes the methods of production and material qualities of the work, and its ideas. The text is an independent piece of research; its broad field of enquiry is in large part outside the strict domain of art. Using recognized authorities and explained premises, it makes an argument and comes to a conclusion. Our artwork, on the other hand, makes assumptions and guesses whose logic may only become apparent in practice.

Our thesis is in two parts, which use different mediums and methods to make their case. It is also situated in two contexts. The first is 'fine art'; in practice our context is contemporary art, which, to differentiate this term from the totality of artworks made in the present time, we take to mean works that evidence in some way a contemporary idea of art. The prefix, if not redundant, implies a reference to a specifically different historical situation or form. Contemporary artworks in some way acknowledge or address a difference of the present time – in the situation of art at least – from a previous time. This difference, whether in medium or concept, defines their contemporaneity; it is the contemporary subject of the work. Our thesis also directly addresses the question of contemporary difference. Our artwork uses an old-fashioned

medium – large-format film photography; its concept is however contemporary. The text aims to address a specific difference of the contemporary category. A long theoretical and historical prelude supports its contemporary conclusion.

In practice, contemporary art sits in a discursive context. Contemporary artworks, aside from their formal properties, can be distinguished by the writing that supports them. A background of contemporary theory, taught in art schools, is reflected in some distillation in their form. The movement away from the aesthetic – from the primacy of formal and medium-specific concerns –is situated in the context of a discourse about what art is or can be and reflects ideas about art's function and meaning different from those of modernism or the enlightenment. A rejection of the modernist separation of art and life accompanies an engagement with particular concerns – whether political, social, cultural or personal. The discursive turn, situating art in the context of other discourses than art, locates in this engagement a critical value that separates art from simple visual pleasure or entertainment.

The present work subscribes to most of these norms. The text addresses issues in the world represented in discourses other than art. Our artwork aims to represent a specific contemporary situation. The thesis does however differ in some ways in its approach. The central chapters of the text consist of a detailed consideration of a 19th century theory of art and an examination of an aspect of capital, read directly through Marx's work. References to artworks to illustrate its argument are mainly to early 20th century modernism, and the examples of contemporary artworks it uses date from the 1960s. Its concerns do not fit easily into the categories of discourse through which political identity is frequently articulated in contemporary artworks. Both our arguments and our

artwork appear abstract. The excuse we offer for this is that it is dictated by our subject.

Our project is situated by and directly addresses 'the transdisciplinary object' of capital. 'The reproach of abstraction' articulated by Peter Osborne[1] informs both its philosophical understanding and its view that the separate discourses through which contemporary artworks may invite themselves to be read are subsumed under the category of capital. Particular contemporary categories and discourses can only recognize and represent their actual situation by taking it into account. The commodification of artworks in the market is merely a fact, separate from their use-value. The idea of a space of art separate from this situation – the romantic idea – appears now as part of the bourgeois imaginary and a fantasy produced by capital itself. The choices that capital offers are to reproduce its categories knowingly or unknowingly, or to refute them.

Our thesis is situated in two contexts – the discourse of art and the form of capital. It aims to bring one to bear on the other. The artwork presented as part of this thesis consists of a number of photographs of a consistent form. What these photographs represent is not immediately clear. Individually they represent an object, but an object that resembles a sign rather than any actual thing. Together they have the appearance of a grapheme. What appears to be a language is presented to the viewer, inviting itself to be read. The immediate subject of our text and premise of the artwork is concept of representation. The categorical determination of phenomena brings into view a critical concept of language as something that is both multiple and void. Abstraction is the actual

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[1] Peter Osborne. 'The reproach of abstraction', in *Radical Philosophy 127* (September/October 2004)

condition of language; there is no natural representation, only the play of categories and the work of their construction. The categorical void invisibly situated in every concept is what our work aims to use productively. Our text consists of an investigation of the position and effective mechanisms by which this might be achieved.

The position of the subject in the genres of tragedy and comedy gives a specific focus to a general concern with the subject's assumed position in different structures of representation. Comedy is read not merely as a different and light genre, but critically as bringing into view the same material – a categorical void and indeterminacy – from a different position. In our argument, objects become funny when they lose their normal categorical determination and reappear clothed in another category. In this transition the subject is positioned momentarily as categorically void, accepting the indeterminacy of categories and celebrating this socially in laughter. The critical value of the comic subject-position in the situation of capital is what our work aims to explore. Our artwork is an experiment in randomly engineering an affect of categorical indeterminacy both formally and conceptually. If its humour is deadpan, this is our preferred mode. Our text, unfortunately, is not funny, but aims to develop a radical concept of comedy whose relevance to a contemporary situation is made clear. The contemporary, as a recognizable category of art, came into being in the early 1960s at a moment that the text aims to locate with precision. A critical movement in the categories of thought is proposed by a single event. In its initial forms this contemporary work was frequently, sometimes literally, and in our argument essentially, comic. Our claim for comedy aims to situate the concept as an objective and rational response to an actual condition; the

appearance of a categorical void that theoretically dissolves all existing categories, including those of capital, and reveals their transience.

In the half-century since the initial explosion of the contemporary, its artworks, recuperated by capital, have lost their comic edge, becoming instead objects of value and veneration. The revolutionary energies of the 1960s appear now devoted to the production of surplus value. Contemporary art production that is critical, situated discursively in particular real life situations, articulates its opposition ethically in work that tends to the genre of tragedy. Our project is premised on the view that the enemies of art exist in practice in an economic form, of which any social or personal account is only an incomplete representation. The abstraction of capital requires that an artwork address its conditions of representation if its particularity is not to become a mere use-value recuperable in exchange. The thesis aims to take this abstraction and view it under different categories – in our case none. A categorical disinvestment that, as such, has no meaning is proposed as an effective social means of opposition in our situation. Against the discursive turn – work that in opposition to an unformulated abstraction aims to say something in particular – we offer a work that, taking the form of language as its subject, says nothing.

Ernesto Laclau, in 'Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?'[2], argues that, in trying to signify the limits of signification, and the limits therefore of the existing order, 'there is no direct way of doing so other than through the subversion of the process of signification itself'. The empty signifier is not only valuable but necessary to the position of opposition. He proposes, in effect, that

[2] Ernesto Laclau. 'Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?' in *Emancipation(s)*, Verso, London and New York, 2007, p. 39.

the different voices of opposition to the existing system can be united under the party of the empty signifier. Our images are offered as banners to this party.

1. Introduction

Our interest is abstraction in general. Particular abstractions – 'real abstraction', psychical objectlessness and, in relation to these social and individual abstractions, abstract art, 'the abstract work of art' – motivate and provide the background of this study. But these particular forms, in our argument, are manifestations and symptoms of a general abstraction. Abstraction in general – in the abstract, as it were – is prior to and necessary for the understanding of social and individual forms of abstraction and genres of art. Abstraction, concerning as it does the discourse of universals, we approach philosophically. This introduction lays out the proposed philosophical schema within which our practical and theoretical work is constructed. It then goes on to outline our specific use of these linguistic presumptions in the context of actual abstractions and how they support our position.

Abstraction, in our proposal, concerns the relation between particulars and universals; between a particular instance of a thing and the universal term – the concept or category – that describes, in general, an object of common experience. When we speak of a cat (as on a mat, for example) the reference to our particular cat is also, for the object to appear in thought or speech, a reference to the universal cat, the category of cat abstracted from any and all particular cats. Felix thus carries the universal in him. As well as being an actual cat, our cat is also an abstract cat, a conceptual cat, a categorical cat resting on a universal mat.

Abstraction, as the regulator of the relation between universals and particulars – concept and thing – concerns, in our proposal, the functioning of language – our thought of the world. Abstraction is not metaphysical, except in the sense in

which all the objects of mind are metaphysical. As a function in language – in all languages, whether composed of thought, objects or words – abstraction enables things to appear as objects in thought or speech; it establishes the relations of difference and commonality between objects and between people. In abstraction experience becomes repeatable. The generality of the concept allows it to be articulated in relation to other objects, to be a unit in a language. The uniform quality of catness, that all cats are grey in theory, allows the cat as such to be separated from the dog, and allows the cat and dog and, in the abstraction of a concept, all objects to be counted and measured, to be organized in a common space and time and articulated as objects of knowledge. Pragmatically and socially, the concept is more important – more real – than the thing.

Our concern with abstraction, which is theoretical and practical – philosophical and political – is what abstraction *is*, where it comes from and the mode in which it functions in a system of signs. What we are opposed to, in general and in the various practical forms in which it manifests itself, is 'natural abstraction', a naturalized concept of abstraction. This form is present in science (in its claim to a literal knowledge of nature), in some types of art, and operates generally in society as an ideological evasion of a political category. Natural abstraction assumes a movement from the concrete to the abstract; it proposes the abstract as a generalization from the particular. Multiple instances of cats enable the abstraction of the concept of cat. A quality or set of qualities, a certain felinity, is separated from its material support: this spirit essence, distilled from the bodies of individual cats, represents the catness of cats.

Natural abstraction is an abstraction *from*,[3] the extraction of a common concept from the mass of experience. It substitutes a form for a particular content, and taking its method of substitution as natural, it takes this form to be a natural form.

Against natural abstraction, our text proposes a different concept. In the natural schema of abstraction, knowledge conforms to objects, the concept of the object being given by the object itself. Thought is given by experience. The claim of this schema of abstraction to be a natural kind of representation, given by how things are, is what Kant's critical view overturns.[4] Kant reverses the traditional relationship between abstract categories and individual phenomena. In the critical view, knowledge does not conform to objects; objects conform to knowledge. The appearance of things itself requires, *a priori*, certain categories without which nothing can be thought. As it is inconceivable to think something that does not in some way exist in time and space, these categories, transcendental to all particular objects, are necessary for and precede the appearance of individual objects. Kant separates the noumenal – the world as it is, things in themselves – from the world of phenomena – the world as it appears to us. Phenomena therefore only separate themselves from the unknowable noumenal realm, only become objects accessible to thought, after

[3] The general idea that there are two opposing and irreconcilable concepts of abstraction is taken from Emmanuel Martineau (*Malévitch et la Philosophie: La Question de la Peinture Abstraite*, Lausanne, L'Age d'Homme, 1977) who distinguishes between abstraction *from* (*abstractio ab*) and abstraction *to* (*abstractio ad*). See sections 2.1, 2.2 and 5.3 below.

[4] Most of the ideas about the specific meaning of the word 'critical' are taken from Peter Osborne. 'The reproach of abstraction', *Radical Philosophy 127* (September/October 2004). See section 2.1 below.

having already passed through a procedure of abstraction. The concrete – actual phenomena that are perceived in experience – is the result of the abstract.

Kant's enquiry critically changes the nature of reality. The noumenal realm may be out there – the unknowable unconscious of the world – but what we perceive as natural, as phenomena, as being objective, is already structured by categories which are the properties of thought, not of things. What we know as things are representations of things. In the critical view there is no natural perception, no given in nature (except the nature now given by mind), and therefore no natural representation: all things betray the character of the categories through which they are thought. Reality – the phenomenal world – takes on the character of a language, in which things appear as operands within a system whose grammar and basis for meaning is provided by its transcendental categories. What we know are not things but a language of things. In the critical view this language becomes visible as a thing, where the validity of the world we see in it depends on the validity of its categories.

Kant's enquiry opens into question the status of the categories. In the critical view, they transcend – lie outside and beyond – the system that they govern; are not derived from the content of the system but are prior to it. They are the properties of mind, not of things. For Kant the categories are innate to the workings of mind and therefore universal – transcendental not only to their content but to categories of time and space. In this categorical transcendence critical philosophy returns to a natural abstraction – an idea of natural representation – even if this nature is located in human nature and not in the world that the categories organize. Absolute and natural categories, given by reason, confirm the transcendence of the human.

Kant's critical abstraction stands as an intermediate point between natural abstraction and the concept we aim to develop. Critically reversing the primacy of abstract and concrete, it then returns to naturalism through reason. Hegel's dialectical concept reopens the critical path. For Hegel, the concept is composed in direct opposition to a thing and is the inversion of a thing.[5] All the essential properties of an actual cat (a particular body) are absent in the concept, as all properties of the concept (a universal form) are absent in our cat. The concept is the medium of our revolt against nature and a form of culture's revenge on it – an articulation of mind (*Geist*) that organizes phenomena for its own purposes. That categories organize phenomena is given. In history as Hegel views it, however, the phenomenal world is not a unified field. *Phenomenology of Spirit*[6] is a study of the different phenomenological forms manifest in history –different forms of society and consciousness that appear not as invariants laid down by nature but a historical product of mind. Different ideas and concepts of the universal – different categories of time and space – mark out different epochs in history. Abstraction, determined in the critical view as the spatial and temporal categories that organize the appearance of phenomena, is not in history a single thing. Multiple categories, different concepts of time and space taken as universals, appear at different times and places. Universals are also particular.

The historical view of the categories substitutes historical products of mind for natural or transcendental invariants. It proposes different abstractions, and

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[5] See Robert Stern. *Hegel and the Phenomenology of Spirit*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, chapter 2 'The dialectic of the object'.

[6] G.W.F. Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit,* tr. A.V. Miller, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1977.

abstraction as the failure of universals rather than the method of their completion. If in Hegel they are resolved into a whole – as universal history – our premise in this text does not follow Hegel's progression to its end in absolute wisdom. In our argument, a particular moment in *Phenomenology*, connected with art, short-circuits Hegel's long march to absolute wisdom and cleanses *Geist* of the connotations of Spirit. The section in *Phenomenology* on 'The Religion of Art'[7] forms the basis of the argument of this text, providing the theoretical ground for a concept of abstraction in language and experience. The conditions that Hegel proposes for the emergence of 'absolute art' and his analysis of the principal genres of Greek art lead us to our conclusion. In this section Hegel describes a moment of transition when the old categories are no longer adequate to the situation, but new ones have not yet been put in place. The passing away of the ethical order is followed immediately by a time of categorical loss and evacuation. The Greek religion of art fills this categorical void. In this moment, Hegel theorizes an absolute categorical void in which the world appears as 'shapeless essence' and consciousness as 'absolute unrest'. Abstraction, which appeared previously as a specific failure in universals, is brought here to an absolute point. A moment of total abstraction – a categorical void – punctuates in history the shifting movement of categories. This moment is absolute: it is not another meaning in a changing series of meanings, but a non-meaning.

In our argument, we use the concept of total abstraction – a categorical dissolution that represents nothing – as an empty signifier whose presence

[7] G.W.F. Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit,* tr. A.V. Miller, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1977 pp. 424-453.See sections 2.3, 2.4 and chapter 3 below.

locates the function of various full signifiers – absolute categories in societies or thought. Art, for example, is looked at not in its independent existence, but as an element in a dynamic structure of crisis and recuperation. Its crisis is one of representation – a situation where the existing categories of representation are no longer adequate to a situation. The different genres of epic, tragedy and comedy appear as different forms of response to such a situation. Each, in different ways, proposes a relationship between something and nothing – meaning and non-meaning – but are differentiated by how they represent these incompatible elements and the position they occupy in relation to them.

Our reading of Hegel has been informed by Judith Butler's and Slavoj Zizek's studies of power and ideology.[8] Our argument for comedy has also been much influenced by Alenka Zupancic's Hegelian interpretation of the genre.[9] However, the Lacanian theory that underpins especially Zizek's arguments, while not actively disavowed, is not taken up in our text. In our argument there are only symbolic orders. Our reading of Hegel is of a Hegel after Derrida.[10] That there is nothing outside the text we take in its critical meaning that all we can access and think about are representations in language. The idea of access

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[8] J. Butler. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997. J. Butler. 'Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism', in J. Butler, E. Laclau and S. Zizek. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London and New York, Verso, 2000. S. Zizek. *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham, Duke University Press, 1993: S. Zizek. 'The Spectre of Ideology', in S. Zizek (ed.), *Mapping Ideology*, London and New York, Verso, 1994. See section 3.4 below.

[9] Alenka Zupancic. *The Odd One In: On Comedy*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, MIT Press, 2007. See section 3.6 below.

[10] Stuart Barnett (ed.). *Hegel after Derrida*, London, Routledge 1998

to anything else is metaphysical. All phenomena form part of a symbolic order, structured by categories that are both imaginary and necessary. Total abstraction – a categorical evacuation – is an effect of language, of the simultaneous appearance of different and incompatible categories. It does not stand in a special relation to the Real, where this term has any implication of an ontological absolute or things in themselves. Our argument is not that categorical abstraction gives access to anything outside the symbolic order. It reveals only the nature of language. Our abstraction is not a discrepancy between language and truth – between the phenomenal and noumenal – nor between representation and presentation – a discrepancy between categories and phenomena. As all phenomena are structured by categories, to be a phenomenon means to conform to category. The categorical void, in our argument, is strictly a discrepancy between categories.

Freud's economic model of the psyche, where unbound affects produce a condition of 'objectlessness', informs our concept of abstraction.[11] This problem and pathology is however situated, in our context, in language; as a disorder of language it crosses the divide between the individual and the social. Gregory Bateson, in his essay on schizophrenia,[12] proposes a specific discrepancy and incompatibility in language that, in his argument, account for a pathology. Different communication modes enable different and sometimes incompatible messages to be simultaneously received. Non-verbal media – posture, gesture, facial expression, tone and context provide a mode of

[11] See section 5.1 below.

[12]Gregory Bateson. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999)

communication which may be at variance with the verbal communication. Different languages, which comprise the communication as a whole, may present incompatible messages such that the receiver, unable to understand the mode to which they belong, is left in a 'double-bind'. Bateson's double-bind, which he relates to schizophrenia, is not a simple matter of mixed messages, but of categorical indeterminacy. Different modes of communication imply at the same time different and incompatible categories, and it is the inability to resolve this incompatibility – and a residual categorical indeterminacy – that for Bateson characterizes schizophrenia.

Our premise is of an abstraction that is an effect of an inconsistency of different categories simultaneously at work in phenomena. Visual and verbal forms, for example, may simultaneously present incompatible categories. This incompatibility is not in the words or visual image, but only in the difference between them. It is not therefore represented in words or images, and unless resolved into a concept, is felt only as affect. In Bateson's argument the incompatibility is resolved, in an aberrant form, in schizophrenia. Though the schizophrenic inadequately comprehends categories in the world, an absolute categorical concept is put in their place as the schizophrenic subject himself becomes the only valid category in a delusional and constantly threatened structure of meaning. Bateson also relates categorical indeterminacy to humour, which in his description is precisely a play of different communicational modes. Its comical effect arises when the labeling of the mode undergoes a dissolution and resynthesis. The incompatibility that in one instance results in pathology becomes in humour the basis of its comic effect.

Our concern with abstraction is preliminary to an investigation of comedy. The aim of the text is to relate these two categories. The subject of abstraction is joined with the subject of comedy by a conjunction – represented in our title by a dialectical 'and' – that is a moment of categorical dissolution. Abstraction and comedy view this common object from opposite sides. As in Bateson's example, what appears on one side as an existential threat that occasions a pathology – as tragic – appears on the other as the basis of comedy. This is not to say that madness is funny, or to suggest any equivalence between their two positions; the lunatic and the comedian, however, look at the same material in different ways. The concept of total abstraction we have laid out is used to establish a subject-position of comedy. This position is then employed in contrast and opposition to the positions of other subjects – the subject of tragedy and the subject of capital. Our text aims to bring into critical view a specific and real form of abstraction. The subject that the position of comedy opposes is capital – a concept of value in 'real abstraction' that functions in exchange as an independent subject in the process. How its categories appear to change in the face of total abstraction – the subject-position of comedy – is the question that the thesis aims to investigate. The position of comedy is contrasted with the position of the subject in the genre of tragedy. This latter position is identified in our argument with the subject of capital. Comedy, in our claim, is not merely a different genre from tragedy, the one concerned with suffering, the other with a happy ending. A simple difference and opposition allows one to be characterized as real, the other as light entertainment. The critical claim for comedy as a genre of art is that it represents the same material shorn of its particular categorical determination. As a movement beyond

representation – an assumed categorical void and abstraction – it not only changes the phenomena in question but brings into view, in their arbitrariness and transience, their categories of representation.

The concept of concept of comedy we propose situates the genre in the play of categorical indeterminacy. Formally, comedy is considered as a categorical shift. Objects in the world become funny in a movement in which they retain their objective form but reappear under different categories. A moment of categorical dissolution – expressed in jokes by the comic pause – precedes the form's reconstitution under a new category. Our argument for comedy concerns the position of the subject in this genre. We take from Wittgenstein that humour is a way of looking at the world.[13] Comedy is in the subject position of the viewer, not in an object that arrives with its categories intact. There is no comic object, only objects that become comic when reconceptualized under a different category. A formal view of comedy – as a form of representation that falls within a category – is replaced by the view of comedy as a position of the subject, assumed equally by performer and audience, whose relation is not one of identification but of commonality. This subject-position is void – momentarily categorically disinvested. Its commonality is this void – the shared recognition of the absence of categorical absolutes. It is expressed in collective laughter. The speculative argument of the present work is that this void subject-position, collectively assumed, returns comedy to its broad original meaning – a poetic story with a happy ending.

[13] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, tr. P. Winch, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980, p. 78e. See section 5.2 below.

The next chapter introduces the main concepts that form our argument. It lays out the different concepts of formal and total abstraction, relating them to practices and genres of art, and introduces our concept of comedy. It aims to outline the structure of our argument, the detail of which is given in the following three chapters. Chapter 3 is a detailed consideration of Hegel's writings on art; chapter 4 is a technical exposition of 'value', derived from a reading of *Capital*. Chapter 5 is concerned with comedy, object-loss, a modern and a contemporary moment. These disparate and apparently unconnected pieces of research only come together at the end in a clear conclusion that has the character of the fortuitous.

2. Abstraction and comedy

2.1 'Common' abstraction

Abstraction and Comedy is concerned with an uncommon concept of abstraction and an affect of comedy. The work's aim is to develop a concept of abstraction, to track its implications in practice, and to relate it to an idea of comedy. Its proposal is that abstraction, looked at in a proper way, is funny. The 'abstract work of art' realizes itself in the genre of comedy. 'Abstraction', as used here, has a different sense to the way it is commonly understood in the context of art, and we rely on Emmanuel Martineau, writing about Malevich[14], to provide a terminology in which to discuss this difference. In his terms, 'common abstraction' and 'total abstraction' define two opposed procedures and positions, in modern art and in general. The latter, which appears second, is in fact primary. The core of abstraction is total abstraction; common abstraction a vulgar procedure of methodological recuperation. 'Total abstraction', in the sense proposed in the present work, is a condition of language and thought, an ideational loss and affective presence that motivates and is made manifest in various forms of production. Its implications, we argue here, run through all art whether commonly abstract or not. They end, we propose, beyond the current state of production, in comedy.

We start with an illustration of 'common abstraction' (fig. 1). Kandinsky's *Composition V* (1911) is a typical – in its own claim prototypical – example of the common idea of abstraction in modern art – of 'abstract art' – an idea whose limitations the work demonstrates. *Composition V* forms part of a series

[14] Emmanuel Martineau. *Malévitch et la Philosophie: La Question de la Peinture Abstraite*, Lausanne, L'Age d'Homme, 1977.

(*Compositions I-VII* (1909-13)), the development of which, as Kandinsky claimed, was the beginning of abstract art. In the earlier paintings figures can still be made out, set in a Fauvish landscape. By *Composition V* (1911) such identifiable figures have disappeared, merged into a ground, that by the final paintings has ceased to resemble a real landscape but becomes some other, more ideal, space. In the development of the series, abstraction is shown as the progressive removal of identifiable, figurative elements: the marks on the canvas, no longer denoting some nameable entity, become 'abstract'. Some other space, different from that of material things and the material world, is enabled to appear. In this idea of abstraction, a loss – of representation, figuration, objects – is compensated for by the appearance of another value. Abstraction is a procedure of transfiguration rather than non-figuration, of the translation of the figure into another, 'higher' realm. The withdrawal from the representation of individual entities is undertaken in the interest of a value that the work as a whole represents.

The logic of this procedure is described in Kandinsky's writing, where the signifier that valorizes the procedure, repeated in the titles of the works, is 'composition'. The 'composition of the whole' is the principal aim of the artwork.

> 'Many objects have to be considered in the light of the whole, and so ordered to suit this whole. Singly they will have little meaning, being of importance only in so far as they help the general effect. These single objects must be fashioned in one way only; and this, not because their own

inner meaning demands that particular fashioning, but entirely because they have to serve as building-material for the whole composition.'[15]

The whole to which individual elements are subordinated, in which cause they lose their individual identity, is an aesthetic whole directed by 'inner necessity': an aesthetic that Kandinsky identifies with the spiritual. Abstraction, the subordination and suppression of individual elements, serves the representation of a 'whole composition', of a spiritual or cosmic world that exceeds the material. The representation of this world, in Kandinsky's argument, requires the use of 'pure' forms and 'pure' colours, but his aim remains to represent something. Golding writes of Kandinsky: 'when we look at his paintings, even if we cannot 'read' them in terms of subject-matter, we are still aware of the fact that we are looking at works of profound cosmic significance, at works that are *about* something.'[16] This something is precisely identified by Kandinsky: 'I calmly chose the Resurrection as the theme of *Composition V* and the Deluge for the sixth.'[17] Abstraction returns as representation in another dimension, a symbolism based on intuitive resemblance. Common abstraction, following on from Impressionism's perception of things as colour and form, methodically pursues this indifference to enable an evacuation of the subject, the merger of figure and ground into one complete, unified, compositional entity. The viewer is invited on this 'path to the absolute'.

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[15] Wassily Kandinsky. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), tr. Michael T. H. Sadler, Tate Publishing, London, 2006, p. 60.

[16] John Golding. *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich. Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2000. p. 94.

[17] Quoted in Golding 2000, p. 98.

The claim of a painting to 'profound cosmic significance' appears now risible. The humanistic hubris is based on an identification with god, long recognized as insanity. However, even without Kandinsky's identification of the aesthetic with the spiritual, a notionally immanent and pure aesthetic argument for abstraction betrays the same formal procedure. The logic of Greenberg's 'historical apology for abstract art'[18] is directed to a 'purity' achieved by the work's autonomy, its separation from anything outside itself. His Kantian immanent critique (comparable to Kandinsky's 'inner necessity') requires that the work exclude any external reference that might distract or threaten its 'aesthetic consistency'[19], that to be true to the purity of its medium it must not refer to anything outside itself, neither to objects nor to the sort of three-dimensional space in which objects might exist. 'The purely plastic or abstract qualities of the work of art are the only ones that count'.[20] In Greenberg's argument, painting abandons referential figuration to become what it purely is – paint on a surface – but also to enable the work to occupy a space all of its own and not one shared with objects in the world. The separation of the artwork is the objective disguised under the name of 'purity'. Through its forms and colours, its 'plastic and abstract qualities', it constitutes a restricted totality, a gated community of art into which everyday objects are not allowed to intrude. An abstract value, whether 'composition', 'aesthetic consistency' or simply

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[18] Clement Greenberg. 'Towards a Newer Laocoon' (1940), in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Blackwell, Oxford and Malden, Mass. 1992, p. 558. (Harrison and Wood (ed.) 1992)

[19] Clement Greenberg. 'Modernist Painting' (1965), in Harrison and Wood (ed.) 1992, p. 759.

[20] Greenberg 1940, p. 558.

'art', substitutes for a relation to the actual world, whose disorder is compensated for in this value.

Whether in Greenberg's 'immanent' or Kandinsky's 'spiritual' variant, abstraction in this understanding equals subtraction, at the level of individual representation, justified and aesthetically recuperated in the composition of a complete, unified form. It works as a spatial distribution, presenting the organization of space into a form that speaks and takes on meaning only at the level of the whole. In the establishment of a separated, absolute space in which every element, individually abstracted, contributes without remainder in the composition of the whole, the abstraction of modernity tends to totality, the absolutization of a rationality whose objective equivalent is death.

Abstraction, in the current critical perception, is associated with a discredited modernism and modernity. The 'reproach '[21] to this form of abstraction is clear: it 'strips the world of its living and flourishing reality and dissolves it into abstractions.'[22] The grey of theory replaces the green of existence, an overdetermination of form and hypostasis of categories that does not recognize the individuality, difference and vitality of the content that they govern. In modern life, already for Hegel, 'the individual finds the abstract form ready-

[21] See Peter Osborne. 'The reproach of abstraction', *Radical Philosophy 127* (September/October 2004). Osborne makes the essential point, in response to the general reproach, that the 'concrete' has always already been filtered through abstraction, the transcendental categories through whose action phenomena appear as such. Post-critical enquiry must focus on the categories of abstraction (spatial, temporal, causative etc.), the transcendental imaginary that governs any particular meaning. Any naturalized assumption of individuality remains the subject of ideology.

[22] G.W.F. Hegel. *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, Tr. B. Bosanquet, London and New York, Penguin Books, 2004, p. 60. (Hegel 2004)

made.'[23] In 'real abstraction' – Marx's characterization of capital – a form of society appears in which 'individuals are now ruled by abstractions'.[24] The critique of modernity, reflected in the 'contemporary' and 'postmodern' labels by which recent art and thought attempt to differentiate themselves from the modern, is a critique also of abstraction.

The present work readily joins 'the reproach of abstraction'. Following Peter Osborne[25], however, it sees the concrete and individual as already the wrong side of abstraction, already subject to an abstraction that functions ideologically because it is unrecognized. If the concrete is already abstract, with phenomena always already subject to transcendental categorization, the critical question in the regime of 'transcendental necessity' is which sort of abstraction. Common abstraction, the abstraction of historical modernity, of capital, is the 'transdisciplinary object', the dominant form that the present work seeks a position of opposition to. Its argument, however, is not from the position of particularity – the concrete – but from the position of a different concept of abstraction. From this position, it argues, the limitations of the common, 'modern' idea of abstraction come into view, as does the possibility of a different and more critical concept of abstraction and abstract art.

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[23] G.W.F. Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A.V. Miller, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 19. (Hegel 1977)

[24] Karl Marx. *Grundrisse: : Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, tr. Martin Nicolaus, London and New York, Penguin Books, 1993, p. 164

[25] Peter Osborne. 'The reproach of abstraction', *Radical Philosophy 127* (September/October 2004). See footnote 8 above.

2.2. 'Total abstraction'

Emmanuel Martineau, in his work on Malevich, contrasts common or vulgar abstraction ('un concept naturel, vulgaire de l'Abstraction') with an '*abstractum absolutum*' or 'abstraction totale' (total or absolute abstraction).[26] Common abstraction is an abstraction *from* (*abstractio ab*); it extracts a general form, method or system from a particular content. Total abstraction, by contrast, is not an abstraction from anything, but only an abstraction *to* (*abstractio ad*) something. It is derived from nothing. This type of abstraction, 'much as it offers itself to us as second, is in reality the first and the highest abstraction: supreme abstraction'.[27] Malevich is cited as an example of this higher abstraction. In his work, 'without any doubt', we confront a thought more conscious (*conscient*) than Kandinsky.[28] The difference, for Martineau, is between creation and reduction.[29]

Martineau borrows his scholastic terminology from Aquinas; a detour into the theological dimension illuminates his distinction. Aquinas distinguishes between *formal* abstraction and *total* abstraction. Formal abstraction (*abstractio*

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[26] Emmanuel Martineau. *Malévitch et la Philosophie: La Question de la Peinture Abstraite*, Lausanne, L'Age d'Homme, 1977, pp.32-3. Martineau's two concepts of abstraction are discussed in J-C. Marcade. 'K. S. Malevich: From Black Quadrilateral (1913) to White on White (1917); from the Eclipse of Objects to the Liberation of Space', in S. Barron and M. Tuchman (ed.). *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910-1930: New Perspectives*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1980, p. 23n.

[27] 'bien qu'elle se soit offerte à nous comme seconde, est en réalité la première et la plus haute Abstraction: l'Abstraction *suprème*'. Martineau 1977, p. 33.

[28] 'Nous nous trouvions sans aucun doute un penseur beaucoup plus conscient que Kandinsky et Mondrian…' Martineau, 1977, p. 73.

[29] Martineau, 1977, p. 15.

formalis), which belongs to the philosophy of nature, is 'the abstraction of an intelligible object of thought from the matter that surrounds its intelligibility'. Total abstraction (*abstractio totalis*), which belongs to mathematics, is 'the abstraction of a logical whole from its subjective parts. It is an abstraction common to all the sciences'.[30] Both, however, are abstractions 'according to simple apprehension'. Aquinas identifies a third degree of abstraction, which he terms *separation*. This abstraction, belonging to metaphysics, no longer a matter of 'simple apprehension', is instead an abstraction 'according to negative judgment', unsupported by nature or mathematics. In practice, Aquinas's formal and total abstractions are part of the same schema. The 'logical whole' of total abstraction is not in practice derived from its constituent parts, but precedes and explains them, provides a term and a method by which they are put in place and arranged in an order. Any individual act of formal abstraction – the translation of a thing into a concept – presupposes a pre-existing totalizing regime. This total structure is a formal structure, in that what it sustains is a purely formal arrangement between the constituent elements. It is abstract in that the term that guarantees this formal structure is supernumerary, transcendental to the constituent elements. It is precisely its lack of connection to anything else, its emptiness, that enables it to function as a total, full signifier.

[30] Edward D. Simmons. 'In Defense of Total and Formal Abstraction', in *New Scholasticism* 29 (1955) p. 428. See also John Peterson. *Aquinas: A New Introduction*. University Press of America, Lanham, Md. and Plymouth, 2008, 'Types of Abstraction', pp. 151-2.

Abstraction by negative judgment (*separatio*) is used by Aquinas to derive being – the subject of metaphysics – as something separate from predication and substantive qualities but which does not cancel them out. Being cannot be derived from what is, from phenomena, but only from what is not (negative judgment). Aquinas's concern with being comes under the regime of a Being that is separate, above and beyond any material qualities. That it cannot be derived from them denotes the necessity of faith. But negative judgment, at the entrance to being, also opens up the way to categorical loss, the collapse of knowledge, the formal-total system and its transcendental signifiers. Separation, in the medieval anxiety, was also separation from god, accidie, hopelessness, despair. Negative judgment, which in the Hegelian turn will negate its own negation in the reconstruction of the world, is an absolute abstraction that sublates the formal-total type. It introduces (by the back-door) a different temporality.

Martineau's two abstractions imply different temporalities, the common type remaining tied to the history from which it is derived: total abstraction, which is not *from* anything, points only to the future. The signifier that in Malevich's writing guarantees this temporal orientation is 'nothing'. 'Nothing influences me and "nothing", as an entity, determines my consciousness'.[31] Of the first Suprematist exhibition of 1915 he writes, 'we intend to reduce everything to zero… [and] will then go beyond zero'.[32] The zero or 'nothing' which

[31] K. Malevich. *God is Not Cast Down* (1922). Included in T. Andersen (ed.), K.S. Malevich. *Essays on Art 1915-1933, Vol. 1*, tr. X. Glowacki-Prus and A. McMillin, Copenhagen and London, Rapp & Whiting, 1969, p. 188.

[32] Malevich letter of May 1915, quoted in B. Alsthuler. *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century*, Harry N. Abrahams, New York 1994, p. 78.

predicates the artist's subject position – 'I have transformed myself *in the zero of form...*'[33] – enables the 'non-objective' consciousness in which we 'accept nothing as pre-determined – as constituted for eternity'.[34] An absolute contingency of determination – 'nothing' – aims to 'teach our consciousness to see everything in nature not as real forms and objects, but as material masses from which forms must be made, which have nothing in common with nature'.[35] In Malevich's first manifesto, the idea of nature and the history of art are linked together and both equally rejected. If the Cubists and Futurists have moved beyond nature, they are still painting modern-day Madonnas, are still tied to an aesthetic derived from and sanctioned by history. The absence of anything 'secure and unshakeable' in Malevich's 'non-objective world' re-orients the subject to the future, to forms yet to be made which are not derived from anything – cannot be counted as natural nor are sanctioned by history – but instead emerge from nothing. Hence, for Martineau, 'creation', the wit to make something out of nothing.

Malevich rejects the term 'abstraction', preferring 'non-objectivity' (*bespredmetnost*). Non-objectivity is not a condition of the work, but of consciousness and the world. It becomes a task of politics. Abstraction of this type is not the representation through phenomenological reduction of a universal – the implicit transcendental subject-position of Kandinsky. Instead, its abstraction is located in a subject-position of the artist that is evacuated to

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[33] K. Malevich. *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting* (1916). Included in T. Andersen (ed.), 1969, p. 19.

[34] Malevich *The Non-Objective World* (1927). Included in H. Chipp (ed.). *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*. University of California Press, Berkeley, L.A. and London, 1968, p. 344.

[35] Malevich (1916), (Andersen (ed.) 1969, 25).

'nothing', from which position the non-objective world, a world without categorical determination, becomes imaginable. If Kandinsky's is a view of the abstract from the position of representation, Malevich's is the view of representation – the world of signification – from the position of the abstract. The subject that comes into view from this position of non-objectivity is representation itself, the status of signs. The Black Square,[36] which at different moments in Malevich's writings stands for 'world economy', Lenin, 'non-objective feeling' and 'nothing',[37] is a sign of the arbitrariness of signs (an enlarged typographical full-stop standing for the absolute openness of the future); but also, for T. J. Clark, a sign of the times, of 'a world where the sign is arbitrary, because subject to endless social convolutions'.[38] Malevich's work emerges out of a particular context, the 'economics of the transition period', when the uncertainty of signs in the non-objective world had become objective. Malevich, addressing the question of what sort of signs come out of nothing, links the consciousness that makes this enquiry with a political programme. The non-objectivity that is the condition of his work is already represented in communism. 'Communism is already non-objective. Its problem is to make

[36] The Black Square includes *Black Square* (1915) (figure 2) and the various other versions of this sign that appear in Malevich's work.

[37] see K. Malevich. *The Non-Objective World* (1927), (Chipp (ed.) 1968, p. 343): T. J. Clark. *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism.* Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1999, pp. 225 and 251: L. Zhadova. *Malevich, Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930*, Thames and Hudson, London 1982 p. 299.

[38] T. J. Clark (1999), p. 256.

consciousness non-objective, to free the world from the attempts of men to grasp it as their own possession'.[39]

Martineau relates Malevich's position of abstraction to a movement of liberation, a liberation of a more radical kind than as commonly understood, whose object and agent is the human. The movement of the human towards freedom is limited to the extent that either or both of these terms are predetermined. This liberation, Martineau writes, requires as its precondition the liberation of the signifier 'freedom' from its own constraints.[40] The liberation of the sign is a precondition of the liberation of the human. The signifier that accomplishes this first, necessary move is 'nothing'. Malevich's pictorial abstraction 'is a liberation, that which liberates the Nothing'.[41] 'Nothing' is an instrument in '*the liberation of freedom*'.[42]

> 'Nothing in the objective world is as 'secure and unshakeable' as it appears to our conscious minds. We should accept nothing as pre-determined – as constituted for eternity. Every 'firmly established' familiar thing can be shifted about and brought under a new and, primarily, unfamiliar order.'[43]

'Nothing' is the one actual thing, not only to our conscious minds but in the objective world, that is 'secure and unshakeable'. This fulcrum of a radical abstraction 'speaks to us the name of a modernity more secret than that

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[39] K. Malevich. *Appendix From the Book on Non-Objectivity* (1924). Andersen (ed.) 1969, p. 348.

[40] Martineau, 1977, p. 33.

[41] 'L'Abstraction picturale est un libération, celle qui libère le Rien'. Martineau 1977, p. 47.

[42] Martineau, 1977, p. 33.

[43] Malevich *The Non-Objective World* (1927). (Chipp (ed.) 1968, p. 344).

designated in the expression Russian Avant-Garde'.[44] The supreme form of abstraction that Malevich demonstrates – Martineau's 'absolute' or 'total' abstraction – is a more extreme and radical idea than common, 'modern' abstraction. As its totality cannot be recuperated in a form, it remains abstract. The 'nothing' that is Malevich's master signifier, the absence of any categorical ground, is precisely what liberates the signifier, enables it to float freely in a world of signs. Russian formalism emerges from Russian nihilism. In total abstraction, Malevich envisages a society of signs, of black and red squares (and other shapes) that speak to each other, signs whose meanings are constantly being remade. Non-objectivity is a condition of the subject – of consciousness: in not seeing the world as object the subject also ceases to view itself as object, which is its liberation. Subject-matter disappears, but also crucially any defined subject-position, which, being now ruled by nothing, becomes free.

2.3. 'The abstract work of art'

A complete theory of abstraction (in the sense proposed here) is condensed in Hegel's analysis in *Phenomenology of Spirit* on the Greek 'religion of art'.[45]In describing the first work of art as 'the abstract work of art',[46] and laying out the conditions in which it emerged, Hegel proposes the conditions of abstraction. A particular disorder in society, a hole or fracture in the structure of

[44] 'que nous parlait au nom d'une modernité plus secrète que celle qui désignait l'expression d'avante-garde Russe'. Martineau, 1977, p. 73.

[45] G.W.F. Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit,* tr. A.V. Miller, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1977 pp. 424-453 (Hegel 1977)

[46] Hegel 1977, p. 425

representation, motivates the first production of art. In *Lectures on Aesthetics*[47] – the final and full exposition of Hegel's aesthetic theory – the role of abstraction in art is generalized. All art is abstract in Hegel's specific sense: it takes the abstract, the unrepresented or unrepresentable as its material and content. The failure of representation in society is the space where art operates. Hegel's account, both in the Greek context and in the broader sweep of art history, illuminates what abstraction is, its problems and pathos, and outlines different forms and genres in which art responds to it. The success or failure of different forms of art is determined, in part, by their relation to the abstract.

The first 'abstract work of art' that Hegel considers is a Greek statue – the statue of a god.[48] In practice, as *Aesthetics* makes clear, this is not the first abstract work in history, but it is, for reasons particular to the Greek situation, the first work of 'absolute art'. The differentiation of art is in a particular response to abstraction. The conditions that, in this instance, give rise to art are succinctly (if abstractly) described by Hegel: 'the passing-away of the ethical order'[49] (*Sittlichkeit*), 'the night in which substance was betrayed and made itself into subject', 'absolute unrest', and the unnamed threat of a 'shapeless essence' that threatens the individual with violence. The loss of *Sittlichkeit*, of customary society, is in general the loss of an Idea, of the spatial and temporal categories that underpin representation and structure relations in a society. The

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[47] G.W.F. Hegel. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Tr. T.M. Knox, Oxford and New York, Clarendon Press, 1988 (Hegel 1988). G.W.F. Hegel. *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, Tr. B. Bosanquet, London and New York, Penguin Books, 2004 (Hegel 2004).

[48] see figure 3 below

[49] Hegel 1977, p. 426.

categories of place and time that in traditional society provide the substance – the life-world – of the individual are shattered. It is not only that the individual has lost the substance of a life-world in which it was previously immersed without remainder; language itself has lost the means to represent this whole. Language, a structure of representation, loses the categories that stabilize meaning, loses itself therefore and collapses into non-meaning. This 'abstraction' is the condition that art seeks to represent and overcome.

The loss of *Sittlichkeit* marks a particular moment of transition. But such moments have occurred 'from all time'; history, in Hegel's sense, depends on them. The movement of Spirit is punctuated by the collapse and failure of Ideas in society, torn apart by their own contradictions, out of which some new Idea emerges. Hegel's own period, the beginning of the modern, is another such moment: '…it is not difficult to see that ours is a birth-time and period of transition to a new era'.[50] In such moments, the categories that construct meaning and order society – its representation of universals, which guarantee representation as such – come into violent contradiction with the particular circumstances of the time, such that the whole system of representation which forms that society falls apart. The antitheses that characterize this condition – 'in the abstract… the contrast of the universal and particular'[51] – have disquieted consciousness from all time; they reach a peak of 'unbending contradiction' in modern culture. Art is one means of responding to this representational loss and abstraction.

[50] Hegel 1977, p. 6.

[51] Hegel 2004, p. 59.

Hegel situates the production of art – 'absolute art' – in the context of a perennial but at moments acute crisis in the way society represents itself. It is a crisis in language therefore. Art, which responds to this crisis, is however neither the only nor the first form that responds to abstraction. The Greek 'religion of art' is first of all a religion and only later art. For Hegel, art is the middle term in the triad of religion, art and philosophy: religion is the primary form in which fear, terror, pathos and the inadequacy of language are dealt with and brought to rest; art supersedes religion, and philosophy will supersede art. These disciplines, though differentiated in various ways by medium and intention, are all equally forms of abstract production; they are disciplines that in one form or another make the abstract their subject, and attempt, through their forms of representation, to deal with it. The fracture in language and society is put back together though the terms and representations – rituals, objects and ideas – of religion, art and philosophy. Language is re-stabilized through these terms, which in different ways give an account of meaning.

Hegel's argument situates art in the context of other forms of abstract production, but it also proposes a critical difference. Art, for Hegel, is differentiated from religion and philosophy first by its medium. It represents its Idea in a 'sensuous and objective form', where these other two respectively employ 'picture-thinking' and 'the concept'. It is also however differentiated by its intention. In *Aesthetics*, the three eras of art are classed as symbolic, classical and romantic. But it is only in the second of these that 'absolute art' appears. The first work of absolute art, the Greek statue, is a religious object, but in the 'religion of art' it expresses a quality and an ambition absent in the merely 'symbolic' productions of earlier religious forms. Such productions –

the Egyptian representations of gods for example – are a synthetic and artificial recombination of natural forms: they represent the abstract, the unrepresentable and unknown, and become the signs that, in ritual and belief, bind together a society. Surpluses are devoted to their production. These symbolic representations of an abstract power, however, remain 'one-sided'. The innovation of Greek art, the Western innovation, is that it introduces, in opposition to the abstract power, an idea of the individual. The 'abstract work of art' – the first work of 'absolute art' – is 'abstract and individual'. It presents the universal – the god – in the form of an individual, as it aims more generally to reconcile the individual – the individual's consciousness of itself and its own powers – with the abstract. In the loss of *Sittlichkeit*, as well as absolute unrest and pathos, there also emerges an idea of the autonomous individual 'in the unrestricted thought of his free self'; an 'absolute levity' in the individual's consciousness of its own freedom. The Greek religion of art, 'absolute art', is distinct from earlier religion and its forms of symbolic production in that it aims to reconcile the abstract with the consciousness of the individual. In representing the abstract and universal, as earlier religious forms of symbolic production do, it does not do so only 'one-sidedly', in a representation in which the individual (artist and audience) does not recognize itself, but also attempts to represent the actual consciousness of the individual.

2.4. Abstract production

Hegel's theory proposes a clear structural picture of abstraction, the relation of its condition to a loss, and this loss and crisis to a mode of recuperation. On one side there is a primary abstraction, the 'shapeless essence', which appears as a

disturbance in society and consciousness, and is an effect of the loss of the categories – in the Greek instance the spatial and temporal conceptions implicit in *Sittlichkeit* – that establish meaning in a society. On the other are forms of abstract production, including religion, art and philosophy, that seek to recuperate from the condition of abstraction, and which through representations, objects and concepts that give shape to shapelessness aim to re-establish a meaning and basis of a social bond. The loss of an Idea is not only the loss of a particular full signifier, a ruling principle in society (*Sittlichkeit* for example), but, because this categorical break fractures also the meaning of individual terms, the loss even of the means to represent what is lost. The unrepresented becomes therefore unrepresentable. A hole in language, felt as an unrest in society and a disturbance in consciousness, is precisely in its universality invisible. Language, as constituted at that moment, cannot describe its own condition. Total abstraction, as opposed to the common idea, is not a representation of a universal, a form that has application to all forms. It is both more particular – the condition of a specific historical moment – and more general, in that it is not a form or representation, rather it is the moment of collapse of a whole system of representation.

Art, like religion and philosophy, is a response to abstraction. Art emerges out of religion, and is in the Greek world a 'religion of art' – the form that in Hegel's account follows 'natural religion' and is succeeded by 'the revealed religion'. Unlike in the earlier forms of religion, however, in the religion of art – classical Greek art – the abstract is brought into relation with the individual. The figure of the artist (*Kunstler*) appears, who is different from the 'artificer' (*Werkmeister*) of earlier symbolic production in that he, while representing the

abstract, also aims to represent his own individual consciousness. The abstraction resulting from the end of customary society is recognized in Greek art not only as unrest and 'pathos' but also as the 'levity' of an individual consciousness freed from its customary constraints. Greek art aims to reconcile these two 'powers'. In this aim, from the beginning, it fails. The first abstract work of art is 'abstract and individual', but only immediately. Though it represents the abstract and universal in the figure of a god, and also gives this figure an individual, human form, the relation between the abstract (universal) and the individual is only immediate, that is, it is not articulated. There is no mediation or reconciliation of the two. The idealized individuality it presents is not one in which the actual individual recognizes itself, nor one that represents the actual experience of the artist. Its individuality remains trapped within an abstract, ideal form. In the reconciliation that is sought of the abstract and individual, this work fails. The religious object fails as a work of art. The failure of this initial form, in Hegel's narrative, sets the work of art on a path in which, in a succession of different forms, it moves towards self-consciousness. Hegel traces the development of Greek art from its initial abstract form, through its various 'abstract', 'living' and 'spiritual' forms, to its final form – comedy. He analyses the media, workings and conceptions of these various forms and genres of art, and the basis of their success or failure. At the outset, the work represents only an abstract subjectivity: the individual remains subject to an abstract idea of the universal and is produced as a reciprocal of this abstraction. What the individual actually is remains unrepresented in the work. The progressive development of Greek art, which is also a progressive development of consciousness, is the movement from an abstract subjectivity to

an actual (*wirklich*) individuality. Actual individuality is what the work of art reveals. The movement towards the individual is not however the loss and disappearance of the abstract. In the final dialectical resolution of the antithesis of the abstract and individual, it is not that either of these two terms cease to exist, but that they exist reconciled. In the supersession of earlier ideas and representations of abstraction, a concept of abstraction appears in which the individual recognizes itself, recognizes what it actually is. The genre in which this consciousness is represented is comedy.

2.5. The epic, tragedy and comedy

Hegel's account locates the production of art in the context of other forms of abstract production – religion previously, philosophy subsequently, but also potentially other forms. It identifies a critical difference in the aims of art: unlike the other forms it aims not only to represent and deal with the abstract, but to 'represent and reveal' the reconciliation of the abstract and individual. Art, Hegel's theory suggests, proposes an idea – a particular meaning and consciousness – of the individual. This individuality is formed out of a specific concept of and relation to the abstract. The form of art, in Hegel's account, that represents and reveals the actual individual is comedy. In comedy, the individual 'stands forth in its nakedness and ordinariness, which it shows to be not distinct from the genuine self, the actor, or from the spectator'.[52] The procedure that in comedy reconciles the abstract and individual is the fulfillment of art's difference. In this final form, for Hegel, art returns to itself;

[52] Hegel 1977, p. 450.

it escapes finally from the religious, cultic and abstract functions that had overlaid it in its earlier manifestations. It reveals instead the pure position of art.

The present work aims to analyze the procedure of comedy, the conceptions of abstraction and the individual inherent in it, and to relate this procedure to a general position in art. The genre of comedy emerges in opposition to the preceding form of tragedy, in response to its contradictions and failure, in the same way that tragedy emerges from the form of the epic. The epic, tragedy and comedy are the three forms of the 'spiritual' (*geistige*) work of art, where the work enters the medium of language – a language is now 'lucid' unlike the inchoate or enigmatic language of earlier forms. Within this triad, in Hegel's analysis, the epic and tragedy appear as intermediate forms of art and of consciousness, representations of a still incomplete and abstract subjectivity. Comedy sublates – cancels, incorporates and transcends – these forms. Comedy is the radicalization and development of the epic and tragic view, a radicalization and completion of the intention implicit in art from the beginning. The epic, tragedy and comedy present three basic models of response to abstraction, three generic structures of thought and production. Theses alternative forms of response to abstraction – alternative structures and productions that deal with it – present their own concept of the individual, their own 'shapes' of consciousness. Epic and tragic consciousness is represented in art, not only in their Greek originals but in the modern day 'religion of art'. 'Comic consciousness' presents a critical view of these forms.

The argument for comedy is not only against residues of epic and tragic forms in contemporary art production. Hegel's view of abstraction and abstract

production generalizes the problem of abstraction from the restricted zone of art production into society. Abstraction, a crisis in representation, is a crisis in the social before it is individual. This social fracture and separation – the collapse of meaning – is what abstract production serves to heal. Operating in the space of the void of the Idea, religion, art and philosophy supply the terms and signifiers, the subjects, heroes and drama – in short the Idea – of a new social order. In the same way that the forms of art supersede each other, driven to evolve by their contradictions, so do the forms of society. Abstract production includes all the forms by which societies represent themselves to themselves; in practice the forms in which surplus production is disposed of. It is not only philosophy that is a form of abstract production but also, we argue, political economy. These 'real' forms, producing real subjects, conform in their structure to the forms laid down in the epic and tragedy. They employ the same procedures to achieve their narrative and dramatic power. Their transcendental categories, even where their phenomenal content is changed, retain the same form and function. A dynamic abstract shape unites the categories of art and general production.

The epic, we argue, performs the 'elementary ideological operation',[53] presenting a full signifier, a term that though itself empty binds together all other terms and therefore constructs a world that is whole and complete. It brings to rest in an ideal form the absolute unrest that motivates it. The epic narrative composes a regime of representation, where representation fulfills its

[53] S. Zizek. *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham, Duke University Press, 1993, p. 130 (Zizek 1993) See also S. Zizek, 'Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology', in s. Zizek (ed.), *Mapping Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1994) p. 23

original function of representing an ideal – exemplary – form. In this, it establishes a standard and hierarchy of values, quantified by proximity to the ideal. The epic form is a procedure of idealization, of splitting, but the heroes who represent ideal human types are in the narrative form necessarily located in the past, and now lost. The epic, a traditional form of ideology, recognizes the loss inherent in abstraction; but in idealizing this past and providing a term of continuity between it and the present, it enables an identification with the ideal that serves, psychically and socially, to overcome the disorder of the present.

The failure of the epic, for Hegel, is that the audience cannot recognize themselves in the remote ideal: '*determinate* natures cannot find themselves in this purity'.[54] The audience, afforded a temporary identification with the ideal, in the consciousness of their actual conditions of existence feels only the pathos of distance from it. Its subjectivity is located in this space of loss, not in its actual existence and powers. In the epic, the affective anxiety of abstraction is diffused through the whole world rather than made a visible term and brought to a point of recognition in an individual figure: 'an air of mourning is wafted over the whole epic'[55]. The epic therefore appears as a repressed form of tragedy, the ideological superstructure of a tragic material base. The procedure of ideological conversion, in which a 'name' or other representation 'contains' a set of dispersed, abstract affects, is, Butler writes, 'always and only tenuous'. 'The contingency that the name seeks to subdue returns precisely as the spectre

[54] Hegel 1977, p. 443.

[55] Hegel 1988, p. 1071

of the thing's dissolution'.[56] The epic form, as an implicit, inverted representation of the unrest of abstraction, gives way to the form of tragedy where the 'spectre of dissolution' is brought into the explicit content of the work.

Tragedy, emerging out of the dissolution of the epic form, is a different form of representation. Whereas the epic is a narrative, its action necessarily located in the past, tragedy (in the Greek form) is a live, dramatic performance where the characters appear in a 'real' form before the audience. And where the epic uses an idealization to cover over the loss and disorder of the present, tragedy makes the conflict of ideal and real, order and disorder, the basis of its drama. What the epic procedure implicitly accomplishes the drama of tragedy explicitly articulates. In tragedy, for the first time, an actual, credible individual appears. The drama bears the hero's name. But this idealized, exemplary figure is brought to an end by a power greater than itself, a power that is no longer, as in the epic, figured as a god, but is instead a power of 'abstract necessity'. Tragedy plays out the dramatic opposition of abstract and individual but, as the force that makes the work a tragedy, it conceives the abstract as an inescapable 'power' to which the individual is subject and in which it cannot recognize itself. The individual is idealized in its losing battle with this power.

In Hegel's classification romantic art, characterized by a turn to inwardness, is the form that differentiates modern from classical art. Romanticism brings to the fore the individual figure, the artist; it presents a dynamic movement of

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[56] Judith Butler. *Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism*, in J. Butler, E. Laclau and S. Zizek. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London and New York, Verso, 2000, p. 27 (Butler 2000).

drama and conflict, as opposed to the rest and serenity that, in romanticism's differentiation, comes to be identified with the classical. In the modern, western narrative of self-identification and self-affirmation, the classical world is elevated to the status of an epic. The epic form, a style and narrative that is serene, classical, idealized and venerates the past, becomes in the 'classical age' (the later 17th and 18th centuries) the official form of culture. Romanticism, arising in opposition to official culture and its practical consequences, opposes the static, epic form with one that is live, dramatic and individual; and where it imports idealized, epic forms these are transmuted through inwardness to a private sphere in which, in their separation, they speak the language of tragedy. The classical, splitting off into neo-classicism as the form of official culture, is represented in romanticism in the lyric, the fragment, the ruin. Modern culture, ruled by abstractions, establishes and represents its culture in epic and tragic forms. The epic-tragic nexus remains now the dominant form. The generic mass of cultural production conforms to these models, and in both of them the cultic origins of culture become apparent. That these forms are also embodied in real production – in the 'real abstraction' of capital – is the argument of the present work. The tragic character of capital, and the implication of epic structures of thought in this tragedy, situate the claim for comedy.

2.6. 'Real abstraction'

'Real abstraction' embodies the claim that '[t]he fundamental character of capitalism is revealed in the tendency to make abstract categories live as though

they were concrete… The abstract, in capitalist society, *functions concretely*'.[57] Though capital may be also divided between an ideological superstructure and a material base, real abstraction proposes that the Idea of capital is adequately represented in material forms, in commodities and money, in actual forms of production, and not merely confined to some separate ideological space. Capital, in its actual form of material production, is driven by and consists of abstract and ideal forms; capitalism is 'the culture of abstraction *par excellence*, …a society… traversed by powers of abstraction'.[58] A particular modality of social abstraction is identified as the difference between capitalism and other modes of production. The categories of thought that govern society can be derived from the act of exchange.

Real abstraction proposes a related or alternative set of abstractions built into actual production, a logic and dynamic by which in production these abstractions reproduce themselves. Real abstraction – capital – is not, however, total abstraction; it is not a complete categorical collapse or suspension and therefore freedom. Capital, which is not only a thing and a mode of production but also a social form, through the strict application of a mode of production of surplus-value reproduces the form of bourgeois society. This society is 'ruled by abstractions', a set of transcendental categories, represented in commodities and money, that lay down a structure of thought, a diagram that can be interpellated in a subject and becomes, through a strictly mechanical procedure, the means by which capital reproduces and expands itself. These categories, in

[57] Enzo Paci, quoted in Alberto Toscano, 'The Open Secret of Real Abstraction', in *Rethinking Marxism*, Volume 20 Number 2 (April 2008).

[58] Toscano 2008

real abstraction, are represented not only in ideology but in the forms of real production, in commodities and money. Capital, in the acts and objects of exchange, expresses its Idea. The question of real abstraction concerns the Idea, the particular form of abstraction that is represented in a material form in capital. The present work aims to analyze the Idea implicit in the 'value' that Marx identifies as represented, in addition to use-value and exchange-value, in commodities and money. Value is represented in its 'fully-developed shape' in money but also in a disguised form in commodities. Its substance is abstract labour. The production by value (abstract labour) of surplus-value, and the separation in capital of surplus-value from the value (abstract labour) that produced it, allows the formation of another abstract, ideal and notional value, different to and precisely separated from labour. This value, a universal power of transformation and a principle of absolute otherness therefore, is represented qualitatively and ideally in money. Capital, as the means by which money reproduces and expands its own value 'automatically', is the system that enables the material and quantitative representation of this value.

The argument from value concerns the contradictions inherent in the Idea of capital. The universal, which in capital remains abstract and merely other to any existing forms, stands in opposition to any individual form, including the form of capital itself. The logic of capital is its own end and elimination. In capital, the value of money – its abstract power of transformation – is transferred to the individual possessor of money; it becomes a subjective power of transformation. An abstract, universal power enables the 'individuality' – effective agency – of the subject of capital but it also restricts and defines this 'individual' as subject, a mere personification of capital whose forms of

expression remain abstract. The conjunction of universal and individual in this formation is unresolved. The tension between them creates its dynamic and dramatic form.

Capital, in its particular conceptions of the (abstract) universal and of the individual, and in the disposition of these two terms, conforms to the basic structure of tragedy. In Hegel's analysis, tragedy takes as its content the explicit opposition of the abstract and individual. It is the drama of this opposition, of an inherent and necessary division between them. On one side a fully individuated figure appears, the eponymous hero, individual in the sense that 'its law is only a law of its character'.[59] On the other side, opposing this first, is an abstract power, a 'universal' that is no longer, as in the epic, represented by transcendental figures, the gods, but instead as an idea of '*abstract* Necessity'.[60] Tragedy presents on the one side the individual 'as the ground and cause of everything,'[61] but on the other, as the actual agent of the hero's inescapable end, an abstract power, 'the negative power of all the shapes that appear, a power in which they do not recognize themselves but, on the contrary, perish'.[62] This basic structure of division is repeated in political economy, where money, an economic necessity, appears in the guise of 'abstract Necessity', and the subject of capital, who has the individuality and freedom that money buys but is always ultimately subject to its economic power, stands in for the tragic hero.

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[59] Hegel 1977, p. 447

[60] Hegel 1977, p. 449

[61] Hegel 1988, p. 1160

[62] Hegel 1977, p. 449

Hegel's analysis makes clear that though the drama of tragedy appears superficially as the conflict between an individual and 'abstract Necessity', this 'Necessity' is in practice the outcome of a conflict between 'one-sided' individuals. What appears in tragedy as an abstract force independent of the individuals is itself the effect of a 'collision' between a 'one-sided' individual and other equally one-sided individuals. Necessity is the view from the tragic subject-position, a subject that the system of tragedy itself produces. Its flawed and 'one-sided' individuality, unbending in its abstract idea of itself, produces its own downfall. The idea of the individual in capital – the ideological form articulated also in real production – is an inherently tragic formation and representation. Comedy marks the dissolution of this concept of the individual.

2.7. Comedy

Comedy, it is proposed, is a movement beyond representation, an effect of language, and the assumption of a particular subject-position. 'For Hegel, the passage from tragedy to comedy is about overcoming the limits of representation'.[63] To clarify this move, it is helpful to reiterate the function of representation. To represent is not to show a thing but to reference a universal. What is represented is a category, a unit in a system of representation; what is represented therefore in any speech act is 'representation' itself, a system of meaning and order of things. The universals or transcendental categories that govern a system of representation are reaffirmed in the meaning of sentences.

[63] Slavoj Zizek. *The Christian-Hegelian Comedy*, in *When Humour Becomes Painful*, ed. F. Lunn and H. Munder, Zurich, JRP Ringier, 2005, p. 54 (Zizek 2005)

The epic and tragedy represent, in different forms, the universal, and represent the subject in relation to this universal. In the epic, 'the subject narrates the universal'; in tragedy, 'the subject enacts or stages the universal'.[64] A law that stands apart from the individual is affirmed in either case.

In comedy, however, according to Alenka Zupancic, 'the subject is (or becomes) the universal, the essential, the absolute. Which is also to say that the universal, the essential, the absolute become the subject.'[65] Instead of representing the abstract (as something other than itself), the subject assumes its position. The claim of comedy here is not that the comic subject is in some way full, representative, as Chaplin's tramp is sometimes held to be, of all humanity. Instead that the comic subject is precisely abstract, assumes the position of abstraction and views (and provides a view) of representation from that position. The comic reversal is a switch in the subject between representation and abstraction; the subject moves over to the side of the void. If the previous forms of the epic and tragedy view abstraction from the position of representation and have it as their implicit or explicit subject-matter, by representing it – bringing it into a system of meaning and law – they aim precisely to deny what it is. In comedy the subject assumes the position of the void, of its own absence and subjective evacuation, and, from this disinvested position looks back at the world of representation. Comedy is the view from the void.

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[64] Alenka Zupancic. *The Odd One In: On Comedy*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, MIT Press, 2007, pp. 27-8 (Zupancic 2007)

[65] Zupancic 2007, p. 28

The void that is proposed here is a purely linguistic phenomenon. To represent it otherwise would be to return to the view of tragedy. Comedy arises in the gap between representation and presentation, the meta-language of the situation and language, the place of enunciation and what is said and seen from this place. 'Representation', distinguished from 'presentation' in Badiou's theory of appearances, corresponds to the categories that organize phenomena into objects that can be presented to consciousness and articulated as language. A 'normal' situation is the congruence of representation and presentation; the categories are adequate but not excessive to the phenomena they represent.[66] Abnormality falls on two sides. An excrescence, in Badiou's terminology, is a surplus of representation over presentation, an overdetermination of form that is not justified by the content, which are the actual phenomena that are controlled by this form. An abstract production is a signifier that is in practice empty and without content but which is represented as full, as charged with the determination of meaning. The signifiers of the epic and tragedy present examples of such excrescences, evidencing a formal abstraction that governs their production. Comedy, we propose, is a different type of abstraction, a deficiency of the categories, of representation, arising precisely in a suspension or deficiency in the rules of categorical determination. Comedy is the pratfall of universals.

Greek dramatic comedy, in Hegel's analysis, is an assault on the categories. 'The pure thoughts of the Beautiful and the Good … display a comic

[66] see Peter Hallward. *Badiou: a subject of truth* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) Chapter 4, 'Badiou's Ontology', pp. 81-106.

spectacle…'.[67] The gods, ethical maxims, specific concepts of duty, right and value are all equally subordinated to individual consciousness and are seen not as absolute powers separate from consciousness but 'mere semblance' which are secondary to and dependent on it. 'The pretensions of universal essentiality are uncovered in the self'.[68] Comedy raises the individual above the categories that construct meaning but, in the final turn that differentiates comedy from irony, turns this categorical dissolution also on itself, on the individual. In irony what is 'dissolved' and 'brought to nothing' is 'all that is objective';[69] all positive content, without distinction, is subsumed in the 'absolute subjectivity' of the I. Irony brings to nothing every category except the individual, the 'I' that remains the transcendental signifier through which all other content is produced. In comedy, the individual is equally 'nothing'. I becomes 0. The final 'transcendental' category that is dissolved in comedy is the category of the individual. Comedy is 'inwardly self-dissolving'.[70] It is 'the laughter in which the characters dissolve everything, including themselves';[71] What is comical 'is a personality or subject who makes his own actions contradictory and so brings them to nothing, while remaining tranquil and self-assured in the process'.[72] Irony appears therefore as the final subject-position of tragedy, in which, because everything objective is tragic and will be brought to nought, it justifies its own absolute subjectivity. Related to itself through an absolute negativity

[67] Hegel 1977, p. 452

[68] Hegel 1977, p. 450

[69] Hegel 1993, p. 72

[70] Hegel 1988, p. 1163

[71] Hegel 1988, p. 1199

[72] Hegel 1988, p. 1220

that requires 'the annihilation of everything specific', ironical consciousness is a 'mask' that 'has a sense of the deficiency of this abstraction'.[73] Comedy is also therefore a liberation from irony. In comedy the subject becomes nothing: the reversal of comedy is that it no longer, in whatever disguised form of representation, makes 'abstraction' its subject matter, but assumes it as its subject-position to view 'representation' from this position. The arbitrariness of the categories of thought, the appearance of things stripped of these universals, grounded instead in nothing, becomes the subject-matter presented in its subjective view.

2.8. Modern, modernity, modernism

The argument for comedy and the structural shape and subject-position proposed here – the recognition of total abstraction – touches on the question of modernity. The epic/tragic form of abstraction that comedy is set in opposition to are types of modern, formal abstraction, the structures of capital and therefore of historical modernity, or the era of capital. The subject-position found in comedy is however directly equivalent to a reflexive concept of the modern, where 'modern' is distinguished from modernism (the artistic movement that flourished, approximately, from 1863 to 1962)[74] and from

[73] Hegel 1988, p. 160

[74] Modernism, in the present argument, runs neatly from the Paris Salon des Refusés of 1863 to the New Realists exhibition in New York of 1962; the midway point of the Armory Show of 1913 allows a convenient chronological division between 'early' and 'high' modernism. Other dates for modernism are proposed, for example by T. J. Clark, who has as the first episode in his history of modernism J.-L. David's *The Death of Marat* (1793) and the French Revolution.

modernity (the historical period, the era of capital). The 'absolutely modern' is a conceptual and not a historical category. In Jameson's argument,[75] it is not that in modernity a new figure appears in history (for new forms, figures and shapes of consciousness have appeared in history many times previously), but that this figure, for the first time, has the sense of itself as new and different from all previous figures in history. In this reflexive category it is modern. The idea of an absolute beginning, epitomized in Descartes's project 'to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations',[76] marks modern consciousness. This absolute beginning implies a complete categorical collapse, the 'madness' that Derrida identifies in the Cartesian thought experiment that concludes in the *cogito*. Modernity, as illustrated in Derrida's analysis of Descartes, is a movement of crisis and recuperation. At the outset it is a categorical collapse where radical doubt and absolute suspicion taken to a point of 'madness'; this is followed by recuperation in the certainty of the *cogito*, the modern subject. This latter signifier, the foundation for a new, modern order, is however neither (as Jameson argues) a substantial entity nor is it legitimately derived from what went before. It is transcendental to its own conditions. The contradiction and tension between the two parts of the movement constitute, for Hardt and Negri, the ongoing crisis of modernity.[77] On the one hand, there is 'the discovery of the plane of immanence', the

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[75] Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essays on the Ontology of the Present* London and New York: Verso, 2002.

[76] Réné Descartes. 'Meditations on First Philosophy' (1641), in R. Descartes, *Selected Philosophical Writings*, tr. J. Cottingham and R. Stoothoff, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1988 p. 76.

[77] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000.

collapse of the existing transcendental signifiers; and on the other, in a reactive and retentive move by the existing powers, a form of transcendental recuperation. The plane of immanence is where things in the world are allowed to form their own categories; the possibility therefore of a future which may be as different from the present as the present, in modern consciousness, is different from the past. Modernity consists thus of a modern moment – categorical collapse, absolute beginning and the temporality of the new; but also, in an unresolved conflict and contradiction, of anti-modern elements – transcendental signifiers that seek to control and organize this modern world consciousness in the interest of the existing powers.

Modernism, the generality of modern art, displays both 'modern' moments (in the sense proposed here) and the retrogressive tendencies of modernity. A radical modernism that reshapes the categories of art (Malevich, Duchamp, Dada, Dubuffet) confronts a traditional modernism, which represents a traditional aesthetic in new forms (Kandinsky, Cubism, Matisse, de Kooning). Neo-classicism and romanticism are the alternative poles of this secondary modernism: the one predominant in cubism and the heirs of Cezanne and geometric abstraction; the other in Gauguin's and Van Gogh's descendants, Symbolism and Expressionism. 'The shape of the square confronts the silhouette of the amoeba.'[78] Both of these forms, we claim, operate in the epic/tragic nexus, employing the procedures of these genres – idealization and completeness on one side, the drama of division and the destruction of the ideal on the other – to achieve its effects. If modernism arose in opposition to an epic

[78] Alfred H. Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936), in Harrison and Wood (ed.) 1992, p. 363.

and idealized idea of art (the 19th century academy), in its form of opposition it tends towards tragedy. In this it resembles (and represents in a literal, mimetic way) the form of capital that reveals itself and is able to function without its 'epic' ideological superstructure.

The 'modern' (absolutely modern) in modernism has a different affect. It is impossible to recuperate Duchamp or Dada to the epic or the tragic. Already in Manet, the collapse of accepted categories (of art, of decorum etc.) coincide with an affect that is comic. *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, exhibited at Salon des Refusés of 1863, is received in Zola's fictional description in the genre of comedy.

> 'It was one long-drawn-out explosion of laughter, rising in intensity to hysteria. As soon as they reached the doorway, he saw visitors' faces expand with anticipated mirth, their eyes narrow, their mouths broaden into a grin, and from every side came tempestuous puffings and blowings from fat men, rusty, grating whimperings from thin ones, and, dominating all the rest, high-pitched, fruity giggles from the women. A group of young men on the opposite side of the room were writhing as if their ribs had been tickled. One woman had collapsed on to a bench, her knees pressed tightly together, gasping, struggling to retain her breath behind her handkerchief. The rumour that there was a funny picture to be seen must have spread rapidly, for people came stampeding from every other room in the exhibition and gangs of sightseers, afraid of missing something, came pushing their way in, shouting 'Where?' – 'Over there!' – 'Oh I say! Did you ever?' And shafts of wit fell thicker here than anywhere else. It was the subject that was the main

target for witticisms. Nobody understood it; everyone thought it "mad" and "killingly funny"…. '[79]

Escaping and challenging the genres of romanticism, neo-classicism, realism and the others, whether epic or tragic, precisely in the denial of any categorical determination, the work produces an effect that is comic. If in Wittgenstein's dictum courage is the same as originality,[80] the originality of the avant-garde is the courage of the 'aviator' who flies above the categories. Staled through repetition, the comic affect is buried beneath layers of interpretations and concepts and meanings of art that the work itself brings into production. Even the absolutely modern can in time be recuperated in culture to a timeless value. Comedy however appears as a vital affect at critical moments in modernism, in an unreconciled conflict with traditional modernism. In the return of the modern to its original meaning – the contemporary – the comic affect of categorical collapse comes to the fore.

2.9. Universal comedy

In comedy, according to Hegel, art returns to itself. Comedy does not represent the universal or view it from the position of the individual, a subject of representation, but is the assumption of the position of the 'universal' by the individual; it is the view of representation from the position of abstraction. How phenomena appear to spirit. The subject position of comedy, the effect of a

[79] Emile Zola, *The Masterpiece*, tr. T. Walton, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1999, p. 139.

[80] Wittgenstein. *Culture and Value*, tr. P. Winch (Chicago and Oxford: University of Chicago Press, 1980) p. 36.

categorical collapse from which the subject's representation of itself is not exempt, relates to the temporality of the modern – it necessarily involves the new in that 'all that is familiar is lost to sight' – but also to the position of art. The correspondence of comedy and art is not only, as Freud suggests, an equal purposelessness. A degree of subjective disinvestment and a play on the categories, norms and forms of the anterior period – in short an imagination in excess of the transcendental imaginary of the time – distinguish the critical works of art history from the generic productions of their period. The value of this work is not that it is greater than the categories and establishes a new transcendence, a new abstract order but, critically, that it is less than them. In this it is comic, even if, by dint of its axiomatic evasion, it avoids the genre of comic art. The categorical indistinction of the modern concept of art, that 'it offers something… which exceeds and ruptures the fixity of determinate judgment, in a singular and logically indeterminate manner',[81] differentiates art from other disciplines that as bodies of knowledge depend on categorical determination. In this way the idea of art is essentially modern.

The modern idea, emerging out of Kant's critical examination of the categories, appears in Hegel through the inflection of the categories by history. The modern is not for Hegel immediately a temporal category or the temporality of the new. What is modern is not the loss or introduction of any particular category, whether temporal or spatial, but the suspension of the absolute validity of all categories. The recognition that there is no natural or transcendental ground for meaning – that critically all categories that shape

[81] Peter Osborne, 'Introduction: From an aesthetic point of view', in P. Osborne (ed.), *From an Aesthetic Point of View: Philosophy, Art and the Senses*, London, Serpents Tail, 2000.

meaning are judicial, human and historical – is for Hegel the modern Idea. The product of the transcendental imagination – the transcendental imaginary – translates in Hegel into the Idea, without which any society cannot function but which evolves in history. The modern Idea is the Idea of no Idea, that there is no absolute natural or transcendental ground from which meaning can be derived. If, in Lyotard's classic determination, modernity is the era of 'grand narratives' – epic forms of thought – the idea of the modern proposed here in opposition to historical modernity is, from the beginning, the collapse of such categorical ideas. History, in Hegel's sense, is the succession of meanings that are contingent, temporary and one-sided. The modern moment, the zero-point from which history comes into view, is the universal suspicion of categories; and, in the absence of any absolute or natural ground, meanings can only be either arbitrary or arrived at through mutual recognition.

The modern recognition Hegel proposes – that there is no fundamental, either natural or transcendental, ground for meaning and no absolute authority, therefore, in language and human affairs – implies a temporality and a collectivity. The universal suspicion of categories displaces the work of making meaning from the past into the future. As what has been and what is has no general meaning, such meaning exists only in the future. The absence of any absolute ground leaves only the mutual recognition of different agents as the basis for meaning, a meaning that is partial and particular until such mutual recognition is extended to all and becomes universal. History (universal history) is the collective work of the construction of such a universal meaning, but a meaning that, because it does not and has not existed, in the present or past, is the distinctive meaning of the future. The present work is the

construction of a future meaning. Language in this moment is not organized by reference to abstract categories, to fixed and predetermined meanings that constitute its law, but is freely remade in its temporary collective situation. The collective recognition of nothing, a recognition also therefore of the individual unopposed by anything outside itself, proposes a connection and a mutual recognition that is also a collective freedom. Language returns to a pragmatically social function, articulating a still open idea of freedom and the purposelessness of its happy end. The pleasure of comedy indicates the affect of this condition of language, an affect predicated precisely on nothing, the void, and the community of their mutual recognition. The mutual recognition of 'nothing' in itself produces the collective and produces universal history in the genre of comedy. As Malevich proposes, 'Come comrade aviators, swim in the abyss'.[82]

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[82] K. Malevich. *Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism* (1919), in T. Andersen (ed.), K. S. Malevich: *Essays on Art 1915-1933, Vol. 1*, tr. X. Glowacki-Prus and A. McMillin, Rapp and Whiting, Copenhagen and London, 1969, p. 122.

3. A whole history (of art) from abstraction to comedy (Hegel)

3.1. The primal scene of art

It is in the collapse of habit – 'this happy life of custom' – that Hegel locates the emergence of 'the first work of art'.[1] Previously, 'the individual is content with the limitations of his existence and has not yet grasped the unrestricted thought of his free self.'[2] Now, with 'absolute unrest and the passing away of the ethical order' (*absolute Unruhe und das Vergehen der Sittlichkeit*),[3] the autonomous individual emerges, who frees himself from immersion in a particular life-form (family, local community, custom) and instead begins, as Zizek writes, 'to recognize the substance of his being in another, secondary community, which is universal'[4]. Hegel identifies this moment – 'the passing away of the ethical order' and the corresponding movement from a local to a 'universal' consciousness – as creating the conditions for the beginning of art. 'In such an epoch', he writes, 'absolute art makes its appearance'.[5] The loss of *Sittlichkeit* – 'the passing away of the ethical order' – opens up a new space of being. No longer immersed in a particular and local community, the individual subject gains 'the unrestricted thought of his free self', the consciousness of itself as *individual* instead of being defined and limited by the customs and

[1] Hegel's discussion of 'the first work of art' and the Greek 'religion of art' is in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (tr. A.V. Miller, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1977 pp. 424-453) (Hegel 1977). The phrase 'this happy life of custom' comes from J.N. Findlay's 'Analysis of the Text' p. 580. Quotations from this source are referenced (Findlay, Hegel 1977)

[2] Hegel 1977, p. 425

[3] Hegel 1977, p. 426

[4] S. Zizek. *The Ticklish Subject*. London and New York, Verso, 1999, p. 90 (Zizek 1999)

[5] Hegel 1977, p. 426

habits of its community. At the same time, losing the reassurance and meaning provided by custom, place and familiar relations, the individual apprehends its world as 'abstract', a 'shapeless essence' (*ungestalteten Wesen*), and as 'the power over him from which he suffers violence'.[6] It is the contradiction between on the one hand the individual's sense of its own freedom, of the 'negative power' of individuality, and on the other the sense of a 'universal', 'abstract' power opposing and threatening its particular individuality, that in Hegel's theory creates the conditions in which art comes into being. It is out of the division and conflict between the abstract universal and the individual that the first work of art – 'the abstract work of art' - emerges as an attempt to reconcile this contradiction.

This primal scene of art contains within it the basic elements of the Hegelian drama. A moment of separation (*Trennung*), the 'disseverance which snaps the bonds of communal life and love'[7] sunders an original unity (*Einsein*) and leaves in its place within consciousness and within life a fundamental contradiction and division (*Entzweiung*). The task of art and philosophy then emerges as the cancellation of division (*die Aufhebung der Entzweiung*). In *Lectures on Aesthetics*[8] Hegel describes the 'final end and aim of art' as the

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[6] Hegel 1977, p. 427

[7] G.W.F. Hegel *Early Theological Writings*. Tr. T.M. Knox, Chicago 1948, p. 186. Quoted in C. Taylor *Hegel*. Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1999 p. 58 (Taylor 1999). The description of Hegel's overall aim is taken from Taylor, esp. ch. 2 ('Hegel's Itinerary') pp. 51-75 and ch.3 ('Self-positing Spirit') pp. 76-126.

[8] G.W.F. Hegel. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Tr. T.M. Knox, Oxford and New York, Clarendon Press, 1988. (see Hegel 1988) The quotations from the introduction to Hegel's Lectures on Aesthetics have generally been taken from the translation by B. Bosanquet (G.W.F. Hegel. *Introductory Lectures on*

reconciliation of a division or opposition which appears in various different forms. 'Formulated in the abstract, it is the contrast of the universal and particular'.[9] More concretely, it appears in the antitheses of abstract law and individual phenomena, of the sensuous and spiritual, of the 'cold command' of duty and the 'warm feelings' of individual interest, of inward freedom and natural necessity, and in the antithesis 'of theory and subjective thought contrasted with objective existence and experience'.[10] It is a 'fundamental distinction and antagonism between that which is real essentially and in its own right, and that which is external reality and existence'.[11] In practice, the 'discrepancy in life and consciousness' is between an existence 'entangled in nature', as 'a prisoner in common reality and earthly temporality', and 'a realm of thought and freedom' in which man, in retaliation against the oppression and violence he has experienced in nature, 'strips the world of its living and flourishing reality and dissolves it into abstractions'.[12] 'Modern culture', Hegel writes, has forced these collective antitheses up to 'a point of most unbending contradiction'.[13] Even as modern consciousness understands the demand that the contradiction be resolved, it cannot release itself from the fixity of these oppositions, such that the solution remains 'a mere *ought*' and consciousness is condemned to 'the unrest of a perpetual to and fro, which seeks a reconciliation

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Aesthetics. Tr. B. Bosanquet, London and New York, Penguin Books, 2004) (Hegel 2004)

[9] Hegel 2004, p. 59

[10] Hegel 2004, p. 59

[11] Hegel 2004, p. 59

[12] Hegel 2004, p. 60

[13] Hegel 2004, p. 59

without finding it',[14] In such circumstances, where 'the culture of the world has fallen into such a contradiction', the task of 'the reawakening of philosophy', and also 'the reawakening of the science of art', is 'to undo or cancel it', to show that what constitutes truth is the dissolution of these oppositions and that these oppositions are self-dissolving; 'not in the sense, as may be supposed, that the opposition and its two sides *do not exist at all*, but that they exist reconciled'.[15] 'Art has the vocation of revealing *the truth* in the form of sensuous artistic shape, of representing the reconciled antitheses just described, and, therefore, has its purpose in itself, in this representation and revelation'.[16]

If 'the cancellation of division' is the aim of art, and 'truth' lies in this cancellation, a more specific and more fundamental concept of the 'division' in question is proposed by 'the first work of art', that is the 'abstract' work of art that Hegel reviews in *Phenomenology.* 'The first work of art', he writes, 'as immediate, is abstract and individual.'[17] The two contradictory terms of the division (*Entzweiung*) into which the original unity (*Einsein*) breaks down and which art attempts to bring together are 'abstraction' and 'individuality'. These two terms appear as prior to and more fundamental than the various antitheses that Hegel enumerates in *Lectures on Aesthetics*. They can be immediately derived from the 'passing away of the ethical order' which in Hegel's account gives rise to the conditions for the emergence of art. 'Abstraction' – in its 'absolute' meaning – and the 'individual' – whose meaning art is a continual

[14] Hegel 2004, p. 60

[15] Hegel 1988, p. 55

[16] Hegel 2004, p. 61

[17] Hegel 1977, p. 427

attempt to locate – are the two basic terms, the zero and one of a binary system, that motivate and constitute the conceptual elements of the first work of art and explain its subsequent history.

The 'passing away of the ethical order' denotes not just the collapse of a social situation, the loss of the 'substance' in which the subject is immersed, but also the loss of a system of representation and structure of meaning derived from that social order. In the passage from *Sittlichkeit* ('the ethical order') to *Moralität* (individual morality), a structure of meaning, derived from what is customary (*sittlich*) and from custom (*Sitte*), disappears.[18] A system of representation based on habitual and familiar relations, a sense of place and the established and unquestioned connections between an individual and its world, which define its sense of self, comes to an end. The structure of custom which holds together and gives meaning to the individual shapes that appear disappears. In place of this dense, 'full' network of connections, an empty, 'abstract' space opens up, which is without definition or shape (*ungestalteten*) and undetermined by established rules of representation, since it is outside the meaning defined by custom and familiar relations; it is outside representation

[18] '*Sittlichkeit*: 'almost = morality in the English sense. It means the habit of virtue, without the reflective aspiration after goodness as an ideal'. Hegel stresses the derivation of the word, and of the adjective *Sittlich*, from *Sitte*, 'custom'. Hence he gives it the flavour of '(conformity, conforming to) customary morality'. (Bosanquet, in Hegel 2004, p. 137) See also the entry for 'ethical life and custom' in M. Inwood. *A Hegel Dictionary*, Oxford and Malden, Ma., Blackwell, 2003, pp., 91-93. '*Moralität* is individual morality, arrived at by one's own reason, conscience or feelings. *Sittlichkeit* is the ethical norms embodied in the customs and institutions of one's society.' In Hegel's *Natural Law* (1802) '*Moralität*, as private, bourgeois morality, is assigned to the commercial and wealth-producing class, while *Sittlichkeit* is the preserve of the ruling, warrior class'. (Inwood 2003, p. 92)

and meaning as such. 'Abstraction', the first condition to which the artwork responds, is what falls outside 'representation'. In its 'absolute' sense it implies not just the loss of individual representations or objects within a field of vision, but the loss of the system of rules, conventions, habits and relations that create the overall field of representation and define the relations and meaning of objects within that field. It is not the loss of objects but the loss of the meaning of objects derived from their determined relation to others. The 'absolute unrest' that follows the passing of the ethical order is a scene without any fixed determinations, a void in which the loss of the structure by which things are represented leads to the disappearance of those appearances. The abstraction that results is not one whose meaning can be understood in its difference from the structure that preceded it but is now lost, for differential meanings appear within a structure of representation and this is precisely what has been lost. In this sense it is 'absolute'.

In Hegel's analogy this moment of passage is 'the night': 'the night in which substance was betrayed and made into Subject'.[19] 'the fathomless night of self-consciousness in which the ethics of custom are betrayed'.[20] The individual wakes up alone in this night of abstraction, even in the daytime, and finds himself in this state of loss. As the existing system of representation does not apply in this space of abstraction, the individual who experiences it has no means to represent, describe, understand or know it; it is merely felt as an unbound affect without any corresponding ideational content. 'Abstraction', in its opposition to the 'individual' or to any other 'positive' term, is of a

[19] Hegel 1977, p. 426

[20] Findlay, Hegel 1977, p. 580

different order to the antitheses that Hegel lists in *Lectures on Aesthetics*. The distinctions between 'sensuous' and 'spiritual', 'duty' and 'interest', etc. are between two terms existing as opposites within a certain system of understanding; their opposition is the function of a set of rules and relations that determines their antithetical meaning. They act, in effect, as the nodal points of a system of meaning. Hegel proposes, in place of the system of understanding which determines them as antithetical, a different and 'universal' system of Reason, in which they no longer appear as opposites but are reconciled at a higher level of meaning. However the division that 'abstraction' establishes is not the difference between two terms within a system of representation, but the division between a system of representation as such and what is external to that system. The division between 'abstract' and 'individual' is not like that between 'universal' and 'particular'; it is not a division between two antithetical meanings, but between a meaning and non-meaning.

In Hegel's narrative, the first 'abstract' work of art makes this abstraction and the 'pathos' that the artist feels in the face of it the material and content of the work. The work of art, Hegel writes, 'is essentially a question'.[21] This question is posed by what is in experience but not in knowledge, by what cannot be comprehended within an existing structure of meaning or articulated within an existing discourse. The 'shapeless essence' that arises at the point where a certain structure of meaning comes into question is the first subject of the work.

Art, in Hegel's theory, is not the only means of responding to the experience of abstraction. '(I)n its content, art stands on one and the same ground with

[21] Hegel 1988, p. 71

religion… and philosophy'.[22] Art, religion and philosophy all have the same 'content'; they address the same abstract 'absolute'. What differentiates them is the forms in which they respond to this problem and the means by which they 'bring home to consciousness their object'.[23] Art has the form of 'sensuous intuition'; it apprehends the 'absolute' in 'an immediate and therefore sensuous knowing', and presents it to consciousness 'in the form and shape of the sensuous and objective'.[24] Religion has the 'subjective' form of 'pictorial thinking', whereas, in 'the third and last' form, philosophy unites the objective form of art and the subjective form of religion in the concept, 'the *free* thinking of absolute spirit'.[25] At the outset, Hegel writes, religion and art were identical, as the form of expression of religion was 'sensuous and objective' representation: 'the earlier stages of religion were a religion of art and its sensuous representation'.[26] This identity persists in the Greek 'religion of art'. Artists create the forms in which the gods were worshipped. However Greek art represents a vital break from the 'symbolic' productions of the 'natural religions' that preceded it. It is this difference that leads Hegel in *Phenomenology* to write of 'the first work of art', 'absolute art' and to describe it as the work of the 'artist' (*Kunstler*) and not, as with the previous forms of production, the 'artificer' (*Werkmeister*). Within the classification of *Lectures on Aesthetics* it represents a new category, the 'classical', differentiated from the 'symbolic' form that preceded it. The earlier 'symbolic' production has

[22] Hegel 1988, p. 101

[23] Hegel 1988, p. 101

[24] Hegel 1988, p. 101

[25] Hegel 1988, p. 101

[26] Hegel 1988, p. 104

abstraction as its content; it aims to represent 'the 'shape' of 'shapelessness''.[27] But this earlier work displays 'the merely *abstract* intelligibleness of the form'.[28] It remains 'indeterminate' and 'one-sided' in that 'it does not yet possess in itself that individuality which the Ideal demands; its abstraction and one-sidedness leaves its shape externally defective and arbitrary'.[29] It is abstract but it lacks individuality. The vital difference of Greek art is that, taking as its primary condition and content the 'shapelessness' of abstraction, it brings into play as a counterposing term to this abstraction a concept of the individual. It is 'free and complete', and no longer 'one-sided', in that it aims to represent both abstraction and individual self-consciousness; to represent the abstract in an individual form.

The individual appears against the background of abstraction. In 'the night in which substance was betrayed' - the collapse of *Sittlichkeit* – what is lost is 'that tranquil immediate trust in the substance'.[30] With the disappearance of the network of connections between objects, the set of relations that describe their place and meaning, the void of abstraction that opens up leaves the objects that appear isolated in an open, infinite space, separated from any others. In this division they become 'individual', independent of others and no longer determined in the sense of their being by these others. The former 'immediate' (unreflective) trust in the substance 'turns back into trust in oneself and the

[27] Hegel 1977, p. 419

[28] Hegel 1977, p. 421

[29] Hegel 1988, p. 76

[30] Hegel 1977, p. 425

certainty of oneself'.[31] In the epistemological void that follows the loss of representation, the only object that can be relied on with certainty is the thought of the self-conscious self, the individual. In the space of 'division' only the 'individual' is undivided. The subject becomes 'essence'. 'Since, then, its trust is broken, and the substance of the nation bruised… [it] has now stepped forth as an extreme, that of self-consciousness grasping itself as essence'.[32] The individual 'has withdrawn into itself'; it 'has dissolved within itself all the formerly established distinctions of its stable existence and the spheres of its organically ordered world'.[33] It recognizes 'the principle of pure individuality of self-consciousness, who now grasps 'the unrestricted thought of his free self'.[34] The distinction of Greek art, and its differentiation from previous forms, is the self-consciousness of the individual, of its own self as an 'essence' and 'the negative power', and in this of its freedom. That this individual is both created by the condition of abstraction but also opposed by it is the contradiction that, in the reconciliation of these two terms, Greek art aims to cancel and undo.

3.2. The question, how?

The two terms, 'abstract' and 'individual', which are not transcendental but the effect of a social change, the loss of 'substance', and which are apprehended as opposing each other, comprise the raw material and content of the artwork. On

[31] Hegel 1977, p. 425

[32] Hegel 1977, p. 426

[33] Hegel 1977, p. 425

[34] Hegel 1977, p. 425

one side – abstraction – is an unrepresented, 'unbound' affect, which in so far as it cannot be represented shades into anxiety, terror, 'pathos', the sense of an 'alien' and threatening 'power'. On the other side is a sense of the self-conscious individual, which 'being perfectly sure of itself' (if nothing else), attains to 'unrestrained joyfulness (*schrankenlosen Freudigkeit*) and the freest enjoyment of itself'.[35] Absolute freedom – 'the absolute levity of the ethical Spirit which has dissolved within itself all the firmly established distinctions of its stable existence'[36] – stands opposed to the terror of abstraction – 'the power over him from which he suffers violence, as his 'pathos', by giving himself over to which his self-consciousness loses its freedom'.[37] The two terms in their opposition comprise the 'what' of the work, that is the material of which it is composed. The work, Hegel proposes, aims to reconcile them, to 'undo or cancel' this division.

The question for the work of art within Hegel's framework is how? How to 'represent and reveal' the 'reconciliation' of this former antithesis in a 'sensuous and objective' form? In the first form of the 'abstract' work of art, 'the artistic product (the statue of the god) stands out as individual on the universal background that surrounds and houses it'.[38] The abstract is a subjective entity in form like the power that the individual takes itself to be, but alien, a 'universal' power that 'stands over' the individual. This 'abstract' subject – the god – is given an 'individual' human form, but one which as an

[35] Hegel 1977, pp. 425-6

[36] Hegel 1977, p. 425

[37] Hegel 1977, p. 427

[38] Findlay, Hegel 1977, p. 581

ideal, in its perfection, remains removed (abstracted) from individual existence. The work represents the abstract in individual form: the 'shapeless essence' is converted into a shape that, as 'individual', is on the same level as and can be recognized by the individual subject. In this ideal form, 'an admiring crowd reveres it as the spirit which is their essence'.[39] 'The restless variety of actual individuals is brought to peace in the idealized individuality of the sculptured god'.[40] But this work, the artist recognizes, does not represent an actual individual self-consciousness, the 'troubled' consciousness of the artist, who 'could impart perfection to the work only by emptying himself of particularity, depersonalizing himself and rising to the abstraction of pure action'.[41] It represents 'not the dark, but the peaceful night, the night after sunset, not before dawn'.[42] It is only 'abstractly individual'. The union between the 'abstract' and 'individual' remains within the realm of the abstract – not of actual 'thought and freedom' – and therefore fails in the aim of dissolving and reconciling the antithetical categories. The work must move on, towards self-consciousness.

That this first work of art fails in this reconciliation, and achieves only an unsatisfactory 'synthetic' union of the abstract and individual, propels the artwork on a restless movement where in a succession of different forms it repeatedly attempts and repeatedly fails to reconcile the abstract and individual. Hegel describes seven 'forms' that the work of art assumes in Greek art, and

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[39] Hegel 1977, p. 429

[40] Findlay, Hegel 1977, p. 582

[41] Hegel 1977, p. 429

[42] Findlay, Hegel 1977, p. 582

divides them into three categories. The two forms of the 'abstract' work of art (the statue and the hymn) are succeeded by the forms of the 'living' work of art (the Bacchic mysteries and the ideal athlete); and finally by the three forms of the 'spiritual' (*geistige*) work of art (the epic, tragedy and comedy). The symmetrical pairs of the forms of the 'abstract' and 'living' works of art represent the abstract/individual alternatively at rest and in motion, in the static form of a body and as the movement of a language: 'in 'the determination of the Thing' and as 'pure activity'.[43] After the failure of the first 'abstract' work of art – the statue – to represent and reveal 'actual' individual self-consciousness, the work, in its migration towards self-consciousness, enters the 'higher element' of language. In this form 'it is pure thought, or the devotion whose *inwardness* in the hymn has at the same time an *outer* existence'.[44] But the language of the hymn is not the articulated language of self-consciousness: both 'sublime' and 'trivial', it remains 'the language of an alien self-consciousness'.[45] Even as the individual, participating in the collective action of the hymn, renders itself one with a collective and externally represented abstraction, it loses its actual individual self-consciousness in a 'universal individuality'.[46]

In the 'living' work of art two similarly related forms are presented at a further level of development. The cult of the Dionysian mysteries enters into an abstract language of bodies; like the participants in the hymn, the participants in

[43] Hegel 1977, p. 430

[44] Hegel 1977, p. 430

[45] Hegel 1977, p. 430

[46] Hegel 1977, p. 430

the cult experience an abstraction of consciousness. Inspired in origin by 'the divine Light of the risen Sun', which 'enters into the objective existence of the fruit', and through 'the fruit' (as wine) into actual self-consciousness, the work of the mysteries 'attains to genuine reality' in an actual abstraction of consciousness.[47] The Bacchanalian revel is 'True', but a truth that persists only so long as it remains in motion.[48] It is the consciousness only of 'absolute [i.e. abstract] Spirit, which is this simple essence, not Spirit as it is in its own self'.[49] 'This undisciplined revelry… must bring itself to rest as an *object*'.[50] The final form of the 'living' work of art echoes the first 'abstract' form: 'as in the previous form the statue confronts the artist; as a work, moreover, that is equally complete, but not, however, as an intrinsically lifeless, but as a *living*, self'.[51] In the ideal figure of the athlete, the abstract perfection of the statue returns, but this time in the form of an actual individual: 'here we have the *abstract* moment of the *living* corporeality of essence'.[52] The ideal athlete, 'an inspired and living work of art that matches strength with its beauty… [is] the highest bodily representation among the people of their essence'.[53] But this 'work', even if it has a 'non-spiritual clarity', has no 'inwardness'; it lacks true self-consciousness.

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[47] Hegel 1977, p. 437

[48] 'The True is thus the Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk; yet because each member collapses as soon as he drops out, the revel is just as much transparent and simple repose'. (Hegel 1977, p. 27)

[49] Hegel 1977, p. 438

[50] Hegel 1977, p. 438

[51] Hegel 1977, p. 438

[52] Hegel 1977, p. 438

[53] Hegel 1977, p. 438

All of these forms fail in the aim of reconciling abstraction with the actual individual. They are 'one-sided', 'still not equally balanced against each other'.[54] Taking as their subject 'abstraction' – the 'alien power' – and the 'pathos' of the division between this abstraction and actual individual existence, they aim to 'subdue' the alien power, to 'master' the 'pathos', by representing the abstract in an individual form, either as an object to which the individual stands in reverent identification (the 'Apollonian'), or as an actual individual experience of abstraction (the 'Dionysian'). In either case, and whether unbalanced on the side of the 'abstract' or the 'living', the representation remains alien, abstract and removed from the actual experience of the self-conscious individual. The work expresses the 'pathos' but does not articulate it or reintroduce it to self-consciousness.[55] It remains within the domain of 'picture-thinking', presenting a 'synthetic', abstract image or idea of the union of abstract and individual, but not an actual reconciliation. The work, in the ambition of its aim, must therefore continue its migration towards self-consciousness.

In the final 'spiritual' (*geistige*) category, the work of art returns to the medium of language, '(t)he perfect element in which inwardness is just as external and externality is inward'.[56] This is no longer the inchoate language of 'the emotional hymn' nor 'the meaningless stammer of the Bacchic frenzy', but an

[54] Hegel 1977, pp. 438-9

[55] The distinction between expression and articulation – language as 'fulfilment of purpose and clarification of meaning' - is explained by Taylor as the difference between on the one hand realizing desire in speech or action, and on the other, through speech or action clarifying and making determinate to myself and others what that desire is. (Taylor 1999, p. 16)

[56] Hegel 1977, p. 439

'imaginative language' (*vorstellenden Sprache*) whose content is 'lucid' (*klaren*) 'because the artist has worked his way out of the initial enthusiasm, originating wholly from substance, into a [definite] shape'.[57] The category of the 'spiritual' work of art, representing the developed consciousness of Greek art, not only expresses but also articulates the content of the work. The relation of the abstract to the individual is not only '*implicitly* accomplished' but is '*presented* to consciousness'.[58] In the final three forms of Greek art that Hegel considers – the epic, tragedy and comedy – distinct modes of response to the problem of abstraction are presented, different structural approaches by which an attempt is made to reconcile the 'individual' to 'abstraction'.

From the failure of the first work of art to achieve art's aim, the restless succession and development of new forms is driven by the failure of preceding forms to reconcile the abstract and individual. In Hegel's narrative this movement is also a progressive, evolving development, as the work moves towards self-consciousness. The epic represents the culmination, in lucid and imaginative language, of the 'ideal' mode, in which a perfect, 'full' signifier is used to fill the gap – the chasm rendered in the social fabric – caused by the ending of the 'objective' ethical order. But this form fails as the earlier forms of 'abstract' and 'living' work failed; in its representation of the abstract in an 'ideal' form it fails to represent the actual effect of abstraction on the individual. Tragedy, born out of the first part of the epic, corrects this defect. Overcoming the 'one-sidedness' of the earlier forms, it moves beyond the simple ideal of the epic, presenting not only the 'ideal' and individual shape of

[57] Hegel 1977, p. 439

[58] Hegel 1977, p. 441

the hero, but against this an opposing power of '*abstract* Necessity', 'the negative power of all the [individual] shapes that appear, a power in which they do not recognize themselves but, on the contrary, perish'.[59] Tragedy takes as its content the explicit opposition of the abstract and individual, linked together in a relationship of necessity. It is the drama of this opposition. If the earlier forms of art implicitly expressed the failure of the reconciliation of abstract and individual, tragedy explicitly articulates this failure. In the opposition of 'powers and persons', tragedy is the structure of failure, the impossibility of the ideal or the fullness of representation, and the necessity of ruin. It articulates this failure not as the accidental feature of a particular mode of representation or the inadequacy of an individual representation, but, in the character that it gives to the abstract, as Necessity.

Hegel analyses in detail the first six forms that the work of art assumes. The passage through a succession of different forms – 'abstract', 'living' and 'spiritual' with each transformation born out of the failure of the previous form, but ending in its own failure, is a necessary prelude to establishing the 'unrestrained joyfulness' of art's eventual homecoming. In the last form that in Hegel's analysis the work of art assumes – comedy – it finally, after a long odyssey, finds its way home. In the form of comedy, Hegel proposes, the ambition that has motivated art since the beginning is finally fulfilled. 'In it, the religion of art is consummated and has completely returned to itself'.[60] Comedy accomplishes the reconciliation of abstraction and the individual that art has sought throughout its history. The absolute power, the abstract universal, 'has

[59] Hegel 1977, p. 449

[60] Hegel 1977, p. 452

lost the form of something presented to consciousness, something altogether separate from consciousness and alien to it'.[61] The abstract is 'dissolved' in individual consciousness, at the same time as the 'individual' is dissolved by abstraction. 'The self… stands forth in its own nakedness and ordinariness, which it shows to be not distinct from the genuine self, the actor, or from the spectator'.[62] In the work of comedy, artist and audience, no longer divided, achieve 'a state of spiritual well-being and of repose therein, such as is not to be found anywhere outside of this Comedy'.[63] In this final form, where 'Fate is now united with self-consciousness',[64] art achieves its end and its own dissolution.

3.3. Hegelian comedy

Comedy is a form of dissolution. It 'dissolves' abstraction, revealing the individual at a new level of being by a 'comic turn', which is a reversal of the procedure of the earlier forms of art. of tragedy, the epic etc. Where these previous forms sought to 'master' or 'subdue' the 'alien power' of abstraction by making a representation of it and containing it within the determination of a 'shape' or form, comedy moves beyond the limits of representation. 'For Hegel, the passage from tragedy to comedy is about overcoming the limits of

[61] Hegel 1977, p. 452

[62] Hegel 1977, p. 450

[63] Hegel 1977, p. 453

[64] Hegel 1977, p. 452

representation'[65]. Comedy does not 'represent' abstraction; rather, in comedy the absolute power 'has lost the form of something presented to consciousness, something altogether separate from consciousness and alien to it, as were the statue, and also the living beautiful corporeality, or the content of the Epic and the powers and persons of Tragedy'.[66] In comedy, individual consciousness dissolves abstraction, but not in the sense that abstraction does not exist for it, that it eliminates, denies or forecloses abstraction; it dissolves the determinate representations of abstraction only as it itself is equally dissolved by abstraction.

The form of comedy demonstrates a movement in the relationship between the individual and 'abstraction' which has several valences. Comedy, in Hegel's 'universal' description, is more than comic. For the specific procedure of comedy – the movement of the 'comic turn' – is characteristic not only of a genre of art, but is a displacement of the position of the individual in relation to both 'abstraction' and 'representation' that, Hegel's theory suggests, is the essence of art. Comedy is a genre of art, but also, according to Hegel, its last form, where art fulfils its 'final end and aim', where it overcomes the 'one-sidedness' and failure of the preceding forms and accomplishes the ambition which has motivated it since the beginning. In comedy art 'returns to itself'; it becomes what it is. Comedy, as Hegel understands it, is therefore more than another genre of art, but demonstrates an approach, a procedure and a way of being, 'represented and revealed' in the work, that is essential for the fulfilment

[65] S. Zizek. *The Christian-Hegelian Comedy*, in *When Humour Becomes Painful*, ed. F. Lunn and H. Munder, Zurich, JRP Ringier, 2005, pp. 52-58. (Zizek 2005)

[66] Hegel 1977, p. 452

and success of art. What is 'absolute' in art, and differentiates it from the merely generic, and from religious or ideological production, is an element of the comic reversal.

The 'consummation' of art is also a development of consciousness. Hegel's narrative in the *Phenomenology* of the successive forms of art, which culminates in the form of comedy, is also a narrative of the development of individual consciousness. Each of different forms of Greek art represent and reveal, in 'sensuous and objective' form, successive stages in the development of consciousness, different 'shapes' of consciousness. There is an 'epic' and 'tragic' consciousness, as there is, as Hegel writes, a 'comic consciousness'. In this last, as comedy accomplishes the fulfilment of art, consciousness realises the 'absolute levity' which is its own 'return to itself'. In this it is a consciousness which is no longer 'abstract', no longer the subject of abstraction, but instead 'actual'. The 'genuine self' of the individual steps forth 'in its own nakedness and ordinariness'.[67]

The fulfilment of 'absolute' art in the procedure of comedy and the emergence of an 'actual' individual consciousness are both related to an escape from a certain ideological structure. In the earlier forms of the 'religion of art' Greek art remains within a structure of ideology and within the 'picture-thinking' that is the mode of representation of religion. Its procedures are the procedures of ideology. It represents abstraction as an 'Absolute, Other Subject',[68] an abstract Subject to which the individual, as the reciprocal of this other Subject, remains

[67] Hegel 1977, p. 450

[68] L. Althusser. 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York, Monthly Review Press, 2001 p. 121 (Althusser 2001)

subject. Within these forms, 'individuals are 'abstract' with regards to the subjects which they always-already are'.[69] In comedy the forms of art transcend the forms of ideology: 'the gods, as also their moments… vanish'.[70] These representations of abstraction, and generally those powers which previously assumed for consciousness 'the form of essentiality over against it', are dissolved in an individual self-consciousness. In this movement, art escapes from the ideological structure which previously contained it, and 'actual' individual consciousness, freed from 'abstract' subjectivity and subjection, emerges into being.

As a reordering of the relationship between the individual and abstract, the scope of Hegel's idea of comedy extends not only in the general dimension of art but also into those of individual consciousness and the ideological structuring of society. It connects them through an idea of freedom. In the 'universal' form that Hegel articulates, the theoretical import and practical application of 'comedy' is not only in aesthetics and the practise of art, but also in psychology and politics. It points towards an idea of an 'absolute' art distinct from generic forms of cultural production, but an idea which in its relation to the other two dimensions is not only 'abstract' but 'entangled in an actual existence'.[71] It concerns an actual and not imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.[72] This is the 'value' of the procedure of comedy, a value opposed to those 'powers and persons' which seek to 'master'

[69] Althusser 2001, p. 119

[70] Hegel 1977, p. 452

[71] Hegel 1977, p. 450

[72] cf. 'Ideology Is a 'Representation' of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to Their Real Conditions of Existence'. (Althusser 2001, p. 109)

abstraction within the confines of a political economy. What this procedure consists of, the movement that constitutes in this definition 'comedy', its differentiation from the previous ideological and 'subjective' forms, its specific idea of 'abstraction' and the consequences of this for the individual – now recognised 'in its universality and its commonness'[73] – can be articulated by first considering, in terms of the relationship they establish between 'abstraction' and the individual, in the dimensions of ideology, consciousness and art, the forms of the preceding 'epic' and 'tragic' regimes.

3.4. The elementary ideological operation

'A set of fears and anxieties emerges, a name is retrospectively and arbitrarily attached to those fears and anxieties: suddenly, that bundle of fears and anxieties becomes a single thing, and that thing comes to function as a cause or ground of whatever is disturbing. What first appeared as a disorganized field of social anxiety is transformed by a certain performative operation into an ordered universe with an identifiable cause.'[74] Judith Butler's summary description of Zizek's 'elementary ideological operation'[75] outlines the basic procedure of ideology but also the basic procedure of the 'religion of art'. In this 'performative operation' there is at the outset an undefined, unspecified,

[73] Hegel 1977, p. 451

[74] J. Butler. 'Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism', in J. Butler, E. Laclau and S. Zizek. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London and New York, Verso, 2000 pp. 26-7 (Butler 2000)

[75] S. Zizek. *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham, Duke University Press, 1993, p. 130 (Zizek 1993)

'set of fears and anxieties', 'a disorganized field of social anxiety'; by virtue of a 'name' being attached to them 'in an act of purely formal conversion', these 'free-floating, inconsistent fears' are anchored by being 'reified' into 'a single thing'.[76] The 'elementary ideological operation' takes a pure affect to which no ideational content is attached and which is therefore 'abstract', attaching to this affect some ideational content in the form of an image or name. This representation makes the object of fear visible; it fixes it at a specific location within the social field rather than it being dispersed inconsistently throughout it; it brings it into language and into an organised structure of meaning. The representation contains the abstract, both in the sense that its content is abstraction, but also in that the dispersed, 'inconsistent' affects are held in a determinate place within the confines of a form. The abstract, nameless fear is thereby 'anchored' and made stable, given an identity by which it can be incorporated within a system of individual or social meaning; it is 'organised' under the sign of the representation.

In this conception, ideology works and is exposed within the relationship between 'abstraction' – the undefined 'set of fears and anxieties' – and its 'representation' – the signifier that stands in for and covers over the abstract affect. Ideology works in the space 'between visible and non-visible, between imaginable and non-imaginable'.[77] The ideological signifier, the representation into which the 'non-visible' abstraction is converted in 'the elementary

[76] Zizek 1993, p. 149

[77] S. Zizek. 'The Spectre of Ideology', in S. Zizek (ed.), *Mapping Ideology*, London and New York, Verso, 1994, p. 1

ideological operation' is 'precisely empty, without content'.[78] It 'is not the container of a presence, but the place-holder of an absence'.[79] But this 'empty signifier', in the function it fulfils, is also 'full'. Taking as its material and content a hole in the system of representation that is the social order, the ideological operation converts this abstraction into a 'positive' representation that fills the void and is itself the element around which the social order is reconstructed. The empty/full ideological signifier 'comes to function as a cause or ground'; the 'abstract' representation is a subject that underlies and guarantees the thought of 'an ordered universe'.

The work of the 'religion of art' that Hegel describes performs this elementary ideological operation; the conversion of an 'empty' abstraction into a 'full' representation. Constructed out of the 'absolute unrest' of the void that opens up with 'the passing away of the ethical order', and the 'pathos' that is the relation of the individual to this non-meaning, the first 'abstract' work of art – the statue of the god – acts as the full signifier. It is the 'single thing' that re-establishes the collective identity of the community, the 'admiring crowd' who 'reveres it as the Spirit which is their own essence'.[80]This work represents abstraction, 'the shapeless essence', in an individual form, as a thing which the individual can recognise and in which it can recognise itself. It is 'abstract' in that it does not represent an actual individual, but an ideal one. As an 'ideal' form – in its perfection – it remains 'abstract', removed from actual existence, and as an ideal it represents not the individual existence but the collective

[78] Butler 2000, p. 27

[79] Butler 2000, p. 33

[80] Hegel 1977, p. 429

aspiration of the crowd. Occupying the negative space of abstraction, it 'fills' this space, representing abstraction as a subject, an 'absolute, other Subject' to which individuals can relate and through which they relate to each other. It is in their relation to this absolute, abstract Subject – the god – that the crowd of separate individuals is re-established in the collective identity of a social order.

The 'ideal' ideological signifier, which occupies the place of abstraction and fills it, becoming itself the abstract element or value which reconnects the social order, re-establishes a system of order at the cost of the individual, who is converted by the ideological operation into a 'subject' that is itself abstract. Althusser identifies the 'decisive central term' of ideology, the determinate place at which all its various names come to rest, and the field in which ultimately it always operates. This place is the 'subject'. The category of the subject, he writes, 'is the constitutive category of all ideology' in that 'all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects'.[81] The 'subject' is the individual transformed by ideology, in this transformation surrendering actual individuality, the consciousness of itself and its real conditions of existence, and substituting instead an 'abstract individuality' – an imaginary relationship to its real conditions of existence and a representation of itself which is structured and imposed by an external, 'alien' and abstract power. The 'name' under which the abstract subject of ideology is constituted is 'you'. In Althusser's 'theoretical theatre', the basic ideological act of hailing or interpellation ('Hey, you there!') provokes a response in which the individual, recognising that 'the

[81] Althusser 2001, p. 116

hail was 'really' addressed to him'[82] – in recognising himself in the 'you' – becomes a subject. The individual is born into and exists in ideology, has 'always-already' been interpellated as a subject. Thus it is that 'individuals are "abstract" with respect to the subjects which they always-already are'.[83] Althusser emphasises the ambiguous, doubled nature of the ideological subject, which is formed in the 'speculary' mirror-structure of ideology. The interpellation of the individual as subject pre-supposes the 'existence' of another (capitalised) Subject, a 'Unique, Absolute, *Other Subject*',[84] in whose Name the individual is interpellated as a subject. Individuals become subjects in their subjection to the Subject, in the recognition of themselves in the Subject. That subjects 'work by themselves' is explained in the ambiguity of the term 'subject', which means both 'a free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions', but also 'a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission'.[85] The ideological subject is a reflection in the 'duplicate mirror structure of ideology'[86], caught between subject and Subject, active subjectivity and the pathos of subjection, divided also between the individuality of its 'name' and the abstraction of its content.

The ambiguity that Althusser identifies in the 'subject', between passive subjection and active subjectivity, between abstraction and the expression of an

[82] Althusser 2001, p. 118

[83] Althusser 2001, p. 119

[84] Althusser 2001, p. 121

[85] Althusser 2001, p. 123

[86] Althusser 2001, p. 122

individual form, is already implicitly present in the 'ideal' ideological signifier. As 'ideal' it is abstract, that is, removed from actual existence. But while retaining this implicitly abstract being, the ideological operation converts the abstract negation of the 'shapeless essence' – re-presents it – in the form of a 'positive' signifier. The ideal Subject represents the absolute inverse of actual abstraction, an absolute power of transformation, a 'positive power' whose function is the overcoming of actual abstraction. The individual subject is constituted as the reciprocal of this ideal Subject and, within the 'doubly speculary' structure of ideology, reproduces its implicit ambiguity in the consciousness of its own being. For Althusser, as for Marx, the paradigm and original form of ideology is religion.[87] The first 'abstract' work of the religion of art demonstrates in an 'ideal' form the ideological operation. In this instance it remains however within the restricted context of religion: the community that is reconstructed through the ideological signifier is limited to the religious congregation or the cult, and the attitude of the congregation is one of passive 'reverence', the rituals expressing in 'objective' form this reverence. It is only in the first form of the 'spiritual' (*geistige*) work of art – the epic where the ideological signifier is no longer divine but human – that the function of the work becomes fully 'ideological'. In the epic, the 'middle term' that mediates between abstraction and actual individual existence is, Hegel writes, 'the nation in its heroes'.[88] The epic is first of all a national epic. Its purpose is 'to give

[87] 'As the formal structure of ideology is always the same, I shall restrict my analysis to a single example, accessible to everyone, that of religious ideology, with the proviso that the same demonstration can be produced for ethical, legal, political, aesthetic ideology etc.' (Althusser 2001, 120) 'Apropos of religion (which for Marx, was ideology par excellence)…' (Zizek 1994, p. 9)

[88] Hegel 1977, p. 441

shape to a specific world', the world of 'one specific people'.[89] Following the loss of the 'life of custom' it recreates a collective identity in the idea of a nation. This ethical order acquires its 'objective' existence 'in and through the actions and character of individuals'.[90]

The epic, like the first 'abstract' work of art, presents an ideal form, but here the ideal is not merely the abstract perfection of a divine being, but of a 'world'. The epic world is 'a world perfect in itself… a world distinct from dispersed actuality'.[91] It is 'universal… in the sense of completeness'.[92] The 'actions and character' of the individual heroes and the values they represent, constitute not merely an ideal subject, but the substance of an ideal world whose fullness and ethical order is placed in distinction with 'dispersed actuality'. The ideal world is constituted out of the actions of the heroes and the assertion of their individual subjectivity. As the representation of an ideal through human action, rather than in the inert form of the statue of a god, the epic proposes to its audience a relation not of passive reverence but active emulation. The epic forms 'evoke an awareness that what is of intrinsic worth must be regarded as a human duty'; its ethical aim is 'warning, teaching and summoning to an inherently sterling moral life'.[93] As an instructive example it demands the response of an active subjectivity, of a 'heroic' action by which 'a world perfect in itself' can be recreated. But even as the epic, in the image and example of the hero, creates the demand in the individual subject for action,

[89] Hegel 1988, p. 1056

[90] Hegel 1988, p. 1052

[91] Hegel 1988, p. 1087

[92] Hegel 1977, p. 440

[93] Hegel 1988, pp. 1041-2

this action, Hegel insists , is not 'individual' but is subordinated to an abstract idea.

The contradiction that Althusser identifies in the term 'subject', between active subjectivity and passive subjection, is present in the epic, but only implicitly. 'The content is an *action* of self-conscious essence'.[94] This action is the expression of 'the free self of the individual'.[95] But the active individuality which is the explicit content of the work is implicitly contradicted by its form. The epic takes the 'objective' form of a narrative, but the narrator, 'the *actual* individual', 'keeps himself outside and is lost in his performance'.[96] '(T)he poet as *subject* must retire in the face of the *object* and lose himself in it'.[97] He is 'the organ that vanishes in its content'.[98] The artist himself is denied the active subjectivity that the work promotes. And while the work proposes to the audience a 'heroic' action that is capable of creating an ideal world and is therefore oriented to the future, the form of the epic, as narrative, necessarily locates this action and this ideal in the past, existing only as memory. The 'pathos' of the epic, Hegel writes, is 'Mnemosyne' (memory), 'the remembrance of an essence that formerly was present'.[99] The 'ideal', which appears in the content as a possibility realisable through individual ethical action, is implicitly, in the form of the work, placed out of reach as something belonging only to the past, in contrast to which the actual situation of the

[94] Hegel 1977, p. 441

[95] Hegel 1977, p. 442

[96] Hegel 1977, p. 443

[97] Hegel 1988, p. 1046

[98] Hegel 1977, p. 441

[99] Hegel 1977, p. 441

present is experienced as a fall and with a sense of loss. As a result, 'an air of mourning is wafted over the whole epic'.[100] The ideal, which in its 'epic' form presents the possibility of overcoming 'abstraction' through 'moral life' and action, also contains within its own form 'abstraction', that is a removal from and critique of the actual individual.

3.5. The higher language of tragedy

The procedure of ideological conversion, in which a 'name' or other representation 'contains' a set of dispersed, abstract affects, is, Butler writes, 'always and only tenuous'. 'The contingency that the name seeks to subdue returns precisely as the spectre of the thing's dissolution'.[101] In the epic this 'spectre' remains in the background, implicit only in the past tense of the narrative form, but unrepresented in the 'ideal' content. The epic represents abstraction in a ideal form, the representation of an idea of 'a world, perfect in itself'. Even as this ideal representation is used to establish a collective identity in the 'nation', the actual individual 'vanishes in its content'. In the (individual) representation of abstraction – the abstract ideal – actual abstraction passes over to the side of the individual. The actual individual is dissolved by the 'spectre', the 'ideal' that can exist only as 'past' and in the absence of presence that is memory. In psychoanalytic terms the ideal ego becomes the superego, the critical agency that suppresses the actual individual. But at the stage of the epic

[100] Hegel 1988, p. 1071

[101] Butler 2000, p. 27

the ‘abstraction’ that is practiced is still only implicit, implied by the form in which the individual shapes are made visible. The ‘childlike consciousness of a people’[102] – which still retains the memory of a time when all action was the subject of another and there was no thought of freedom – remains within the domain of ‘picture thinking’, satisfied with ideal images which conceal their actual abstraction.

The ‘higher language’ of tragedy brings the ‘spectre of dissolution’ into the explicit content of the work. Where the epic represented abstraction as a ‘single thing’, in the ‘positive’ form of the ideal, and its actual ‘negative’ aspect only returned implicitly in the form of the work, in tragedy both of these elements form part of the work’s content. Tragedy presents on the one side the individual hero and the principle of ethical action, and on the other, an opposing abstract power: ‘the negative power of all the shapes that appear, a power in which they do not recognize themselves but, on the contrary, perish’.[103] In the hero, it represents abstraction in a ‘positive’, individual form that has the ethical and ‘ideal’ character of the epic hero; but this abstraction is also simultaneously represented in an ‘abstract’ form, not as a subject – an ideal or ‘single thing’ – but as the ‘negative power’ to which Hegel gives the name ‘*abstract* Necessity’.[104] The form of tragedy consists precisely in the depiction of this division and opposition, in the representation both of the ‘hero’ and the ‘abstract’ power which leads to the hero’s destruction, of both the ‘thing’ and the ‘thing’s dissolution’; it presents both the ‘positive’ representation and the

[102] Hegel 1988, p. 1045

[103] Hegel 1977, p. 449

[104] Hegel 1977, p. 449

ethical meaning invested in it, as well as the abstract force that is the 'necessary' undoing of this meaning.

These two opposing 'powers' that make up the content of tragedy, though set in opposition to one another, are not strictly separate but are held together in a relationship of necessity. That the 'negative power' in which the individual shapes that appear perish is one of 'abstract Necessity' makes their destruction not merely accidental or contingent but necessary. But this 'necessity' is not only on the side of the abstract, but also of the individual, as its 'tragic flaw'. The individual – as it appears in tragedy – produces abstraction, as it itself is produced by it. The hero of tragedy, like that of the epic, represents an ethical aim, but where in the epic that aim is consistent with the interests of the 'nation' and the individual is subordinated to that collective interest, the tragic hero is properly 'individual'; 'its law is only a law of its character'.[105] In tragedy the self-conscious individual emerges 'as the ground and cause of everything'.[106] The ethical aim of the individual in tragedy is 'one-sided'. That this aim is 'one-sided' and individual is the effect of abstraction. The 'ethical bond', which in the epic held together individuals in the unity of the 'nation', has been snapped. Abstraction produces the consciousness of the individual and its 'one-sided' ethical aims. Equally the individual produces abstraction. The basis of tragic drama - 'the prominent point on which the whole thing turns'[107] – is, Hegel writes, the '*collision'* of an individual, 'one-sided' ethical aim with the other equally 'one-sided' aims of other individuals. What appears in tragedy

[105] Hegel 1977, p. 447

[106] Hegel 1988, p. 1160

[107] Hegel 1988, p. 1168

as a force independent of the individuals and as abstract is itself the effect of this 'collision' between 'one-sided' individuals. Abstraction and tragic individuality produce each other. The structure of tragedy is this cycle of reproduction, in which abstraction produces 'one-sided' individuals, whose actions then produce more abstraction in a self-sustaining cycle, the necessary outcome of which is the abstraction whereby individuals 'do not recognize themselves but, on the contrary, perish'.

The 'signifier' of tragedy is neither the individual hero nor the abstract power, but the logic of division, a division and contradiction in which these two 'opposing' terms exist in a relationship where they mutually reinforce each other. The division is not only between these terms but within them, and is itself as present in the 'individual' as it is in the inherent separation of abstraction. The consciousness of tragedy is that of 'an amphibious animal', living 'in two contradictory worlds at once, so that even consciousness wanders back and forth in this contradiction, and, shuttlecocked from side to side, is unable to satisfy itself *as* itself on the one side as on the other'.[108] The division of tragedy is present in and between the character, the actor, and the spectator. The character 'finds himself … in the antithesis of knowing and not-knowing'; 'this knowing is, in its principle, immediately a not-knowing, because *consciousness*, in its action, is in its own self this antithesis'.[109] For the hero, 'the distinction through and in which actual consciousness exists has its basis in that inner being that destroys it; … the clear conscious *assurance* of *certainty*

[108] Hegel 2001, pp. 59-60

[109] Hegel 1977, p. 446

has its confirmation in *forgetfulness*'.[110] In the epic narrative the 'actual individual' - the narrator - is invisible and 'vanishes in its content'. In the dramatic form of tragedy the characters 'exist as actual human beings who impersonate the heroes and portray them, not in the form of a narrative, but in the actual speech of the actors themselves'.[111] At this level of the form of the work the division of the characters is repeated. 'The hero who appears before the onlookers splits up into his mask and the actor, into the person in the play and the actual self'.[112] The division that is the logic of tragedy, expressed at the level of the character who is caught between 'knowing and not-knowing', in the split between character and actor, is reflected also in the spectator. 'Spectator-consciousness' is itself divided. On the one hand it identifies with the hero, participates vicariously in the action and has a knowledge of the outcome denied even to the character; on the other 'it is conscious only of a paralysing terror of this movement, of an equally helpless pity, and as the end of it all, the empty repose of submission to Necessity'.[113]

The 'elementary' operation of ideology, as Butler and Zizek describe it, converts 'abstraction' – an undefined set of fears and anxieties – into an individual representation, 'a single thing' or 'full signifier' that fills the space of abstraction and serves to re-establish the social order, the loss of which the original abstraction marked. The ideology utilises and puts to work the abstract fears and anxieties; its power derives from the power of these affects. In the

[110] Hegel 1977, p. 448

[111] Hegel 1977, p. 444

[112] Hegel 1977, p. 450

[113] Hegel 1977, p. 443

elementary form, the 'ideal' signifier represses and covers over abstraction; it protects against its disturbance, even if the price of this protection is the suppression of actual individuality. The form of tragedy moves beyond this elementary mode. In its presentation of both an ideal individual form and a form of 'abstraction', it reproduces in the signifiers that make up its content the structure of ideology. These two terms are identified and placed in relation to each other in a form in which they dynamically operate on each other. The representation of abstraction in its negative, destructive form creates anxiety and stimulates the demand for an 'ideal' form that protects against this disturbance. But the ideal form of tragedy is an individuality whose 'one-sidedness', in its collision with others, itself produces 'actual' abstraction. This structure of self-reinforcing division is instituted not only in the public signifiers of society, but in the 'subject'; in the character divided between 'individual' knowing and 'abstract' not-knowing; in the 'mask' of the active character, who is divided from the actor subordinated to his role; and in 'spectator-consciousness'. The dynamic structure of ideology is constituted in individual subjects who, in the effectiveness of the tragic ideology, 'work by themselves'.[114]

The 'childlike consciousness' of the epic, remaining within the confines of 'picture-thinking', substitutes an imaginary relationship with an ideal representation for its own real conditions of existence. The imaginary identification with an ideal power covers over its own actual passivity and powerlessness. This 'feudal' form of ideology is superseded by the 'tragic' form, where an active and individual subjectivity appears, but where the

[114] Althusser 2001, p. 123

assertion of this subjectivity serves only to create the 'abstraction' that is the condition of the individual's subjection. Althusser highlights this contradiction: 'the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject… in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection'[115]. This tragic structure of division, in its broader social dimension, is, Hegel implies, specifically a modern phenomenon. The antitheses implicit in it may have 'from all time' preoccupied and disquieted human consciousness, but it is 'modern culture' that has 'forced them up to a point of most unbending contradiction'.[116] It is modern culture that 'strips the world of its living and flourishing reality and dissolves it into abstractions'.[117] 'In modern times… the individual finds the abstract form ready-made'.[118] Abstraction exists here not only in consciousness but in culture; it has an 'objective' and actual existence and is itself manufactured as part of an ideology that in its structure can only be described as 'tragic'. Abstraction no longer represents the breakdown of the social order but is part of the social order.

The problem of abstraction in both its actual and ideal forms, is that it dominates and suppresses the actual individual, subjugating its individuality in the name of an abstraction, and substitutes an abstract subject, subject to 'abstract Necessity', for this individual shape. Modern tragedy makes an 'actual' representation of abstraction, existing as an active and 'living' force in society so that the 'abstraction' of an imaginary relationship to the real

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[115] Althusser 2001, p. 123

[116] Hegel 2001, p. 59

[117] Hegel 2001, p. 60

[118] Hegel 1977, p. 19

conditions of existence is supplemented by a real relation to imaginary conditions of existence. Hegel's analysis of the form of tragedy suggests a secondary problem in the condition of a tragic ideology; as the tragic structure 'contains' its opposition, the opposition to abstraction is complicit in what it opposes. The ethical opposition to 'abstraction', and in particular an ethics based on a concept of the individual, itself forms part of an ideological structure whose effect is to promote and extend the power of abstraction. In Butler's words, 'we think we have found a point of opposition to domination, and then realize that that very point of opposition is the instrument through which domination works, and that we have unwittingly enforced the powers of domination through our participation in its opposition'.[119] As the epic form is implicitly 'tragic' in its temporal impossibility, a tragedy raised to the status of an ideal only by a 'childlike consciousness', an effective opposition to tragic and actual abstraction is no more to be found in an epic 'fullness' than it is in the 'one-sided' ethos of the individual. In the face of this impasse, comedy proposes an alternative identity and structure of relation between the abstract and individualin individual consciousness and its ideological relation to power.

3.6. Art's return to itself

Hegel's theoretical narrative begins with 'the abstract work of art' and ends with comedy; the story of 'the religion of art' concludes in a comic reconciliation. Comedy succeeds, Hegel proposes, where the previous forms of art have failed; it achieves the reconciliation of the abstract and individual that

[119] Butler 2000, p. 28

art has sought since its beginning. These categories are dissolved, and are shown to be self-dissolving; not that 'they do not exist at all, but they exist reconciled'. In the form of comedy, 'art is consummated and has completely returned to itself'.[120] It becomes what it is, escaping from its original context of religion as in it 'the gods, as also their moments… vanish'.[121] In the 'rational *thinking'* of comedy what in the previous forms had appeared as absolute is revealed in 'its contingent shape'. The 'universal' forms of the gods are reduced to 'the bareness of their immediate existence; they are clouds, an evanescent mist'.[122] The ethical maxims, laws and 'specific concepts of duty and of right' that constituted the ethical order lose 'the absolute validity previously attached to them' in the emergence of 'the consciousness of the dialectic contained in these maxims and laws'.[123] 'The pure thoughts of the Beautiful and the Good thus display a comic spectacle … they become empty, and for that reason the sport of mere opinion and the caprice of any chance individuality'.[124] In the self-consciousness of comedy, 'whatever assumes the form of essentiality over against it, is instead dissolved in it'.[125]

In comedy 'the gods, as also their moments… vanish' in a comic movement in which the 'individual self' is 'raised above such a moment'. In this movement 'abstraction' – as previously represented in the form of gods, ethical maxims and laws, specific concepts of duty and right – are viewed below the position of

[120] Hegel 1977, p. 452

[121] Hegel 1977, p. 452

[122] Hegel 1977, p. 451

[123] Hegel 1977, p. 451

[124] Hegel 1977, p. 452

[125] Hegel 1977, p. 452

the individual self, and from this position recognized in their 'contingent shape'. They and their 'absolute validity' are 'dissolved' in individual consciousness. Previously, abstraction, 'the absolute power', took 'the form of something *presented to consciousness*, something altogether *separate* from *consciousness* and alien to it'.[126] As something 'separate from consciousness' and 'presented to consciousness' this abstraction has the form of a representation. The abstract was brought over to the side of representation. Now, with the movement in which the 'individual self' – 'the actual self [who] does not have such an abstract moment for its substance and content'[127] – is raised above such moments, they lose their essential, 'universal' necessity. 'The pretensions of universal essentiality are uncovered in the self'.[128] Raised above such 'a single property', the individual 'proclaims the irony of such a property wanting to be something on its own account'.[129] The individual self 'dissolves' abstraction, recognizing the 'contingent shape' of such representations as 'the statue, and also the living beautiful corporeality, or the content of the Epic and the powers and persons of Tragedy'.[130] In the 'vanishing' and disappearance of the abstract forms and moments variously represented in the previous forms of the religion of art, the 'individual self' does not lose itself in 'the emptiness of this disappearance but, on the contrary, preserves itself in this very nothingness, abides with itself and is the sole actuality'.[131]

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[126] Hegel 1977, p. 452

[127] Hegel 1977, p. 450

[128] Hegel 1977, p. 450

[129] Hegel 1977, p. 450

[130] Hegel 1977, p. 452

[131] Hegel 1977, p. 452

The general principle of comedy, as Hegel explains it, is the movement in the relative position of individual self-consciousness and abstraction. Previously abstraction was represented as something that stands over the individual. The individual remains 'subject' – the subject and creature of gods, ethical maxims, 'Necessity', or some other absolute Subject. Now, in comedy, the individual, who 'does not have such an abstract moment for its substance and content', is 'raised above' such abstractions. From this positions the representations of abstraction appear in their 'contingent shape', as 'semblance' and not in the truth of abstraction. 'Fate', which had previously appeared as the will of gods, as 'Necessity' etc., 'is now united with self-consciousness'.[132] Comedy is to assume a position from which the contingency of these 'universal' abstractions becomes apparent.

Comedy, as Hegel proposes it, dissolves the 'absolute validity' that was previously attached to 'universal' and essential forms. 'The pretensions of universal essentiality are uncovered in the self'.[133] But Hegel's comedy does not in this eliminate or dispose of abstraction. It is in its abstraction that it retains its true, subversive force. Alenka Zupancic, in her analysis of Hegelian comedy,[134] makes a distinction between false 'conservative' comedy and true 'subversive' comedy. The former views comedy as the insistence on the concrete, on the material finitude of corporeal existence, over the claims of the abstract or universal. Comedy, in these terms, is 'the return of the physical into

[132] Hegel 1977, p. 452

[133] Hegel 1977, p. 450

[134] Alenka Zupancic. *The Odd One In: On Comedy*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, MIT Press, 2007 (Zupancic 2007)

the metaphysical'.[135] But this view of comedy, by separating out the concrete, 'the Real of human limitations and deficiencies', from the abstract, and ascribing the comic moment to the 'human' side of this duality, in practice leaves abstraction 'not only untouched, but also reinforced'.[136] 'This kind of comedy remains caught in an abstract dualism of the concrete and the universal and, much as it may emphasize the side of the concrete, this concrete remains but one element in the constellation of the universal and the concrete, which is purely abstract.'[137] This 'modern' form of comedy, or modern interpretation of comedy, which keeps the comic safely on the side of the concrete and leaves the 'abstract' untouched, functions within and reinforces a structure that is essentially tragic. It is, Zupancic writes, 'irresistibly driven towards pathos'.[138]

Paralleling Zupancic's distinction between conservative and subversive comedy, Hegel makes a clear distinction between the false geniality of ironic consciousness and the movement of true comedy. Irony, 'taken in the abstract, borders closely on the principle of comedy; but yet within this affinity the comic must be essentially be distinguished from the ironical.[139] The distinction between mere irony and the principle of true, subversive comedy is in the final iteration that consciousness, and the work of art, takes. It is in the fate of the 'individual self'. In the first movement of comedy 'the Subject' is raised above

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[135] S. Critchley. *On Humour*. London and New York. Routledge 2002, p. 44 (Critchley 2002) Critchley's book is generally representative of what Zupancic describes as the 'modern' (and essentially conservative) view of comedy.

[136] Zupancic 2007, p. 31

[137] Zupancic 2007, p. 31

[138] Zupancic 2007, p. 47

[139] Hegel 1993, p. 73

the abstract moments and properties, and 'clothed in this mask it proclaims the irony of such a property wanting to be something on its own account'.[140] Individual consciousness becomes that which 'dissolves' these abstract representations to reveal that they are 'mere *semblance'* and not 'true and real'. But as these abstract representations are the 'full signifiers' around which the architecture of the whole symbolic order is constructed, the reduction to 'mere semblance' of these representations reduces to semblance the whole system of representation. In dissolving 'abstraction' it dissolves representation. Representation becomes abstract. In the ironic consciousness all representations are rendered equal and equally worthless. But this irony that reduces to 'semblance' all representations retains one absolute abstract representation that is exempt in the general dissolution. In irony the 'I' is established as 'the absolute principle of all knowledge', in which 'every content is negated'.[141] Every positive matter is annihilated by absorption into the 'abstract freedom and unity' of the 'I'. 'Whatever is, is only by favour of the I, and what is by my favour I am in turn able to annihilate'.[142]

> 'Now, if we abide by these utterly empty forms which have their origin in the absoluteness of the abstract I, then nothing has value in its real and actual nature, and regarded in itself, but only as produced by the subjectivity of the I. But if so, it follows that the I is able to remain lord and master of everything, and in no sphere of morality or legality, of things human or divine, profane or sacred, is there anything that would not have to begin by

[140] Hegel 1977, p. 450

[141] Hegel 1993, p. 70

[142] Hegel 1993, p. 70

> being given position by the I, and that might not, therefore, just as well be in turn annihilated thereby. This amounts to making all that is actual in its own right a mere *semblance*, not true and real for its own sake and by its own means, but a mere appearance due to the I, within whose power and caprice it remains, and at its free disposal. To admit it or to annihilate it stands purely in the pleasure of the I which has attained absoluteness in itself and simply as I.'[143]

In irony 'the Subject' is raised above the abstract moments and 'preserves itself in this very nothingness'. But it preserves itself as the one abstract representation, the only thing there is that counts for anything and on which everything else is dependent. In this position it acquires a 'God-like geniality, for which every possible thing is a mere dead creature, to which the free creator, knowing himself to be wholly unattached, feels in no way bound, seeing that he can annihilate as well as create it.'[144] But this absolute I is 'utterly abstract and formal', empty of content because for it all content is contingent and it itself is the only necessity. Divided in itself between the enjoyment of its freedom and the unhappiness of its conscience, or its 'craving for the solid and substantial', the 'I' of ironical consciousness remains at a point of view where 'all appears to it as nothing worth and as futile, excepting its own subjectivity, which thereby becomes hollow and empty, and itself mere conceit'.[145]

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[143] Hegel 1993, pp. 70-1

[144] Hegel 1993, p. 72

[145] Hegel 1993, p. 72

The distinction between irony and comedy is first what it is that is 'dissolved' and 'brought to nothing' in individual consciousness. In irony it is 'all that is objective';[146] all positive content, without distinction, is subsumed in the 'absolute subjectivity' of the I. The comic, by contrast, 'must be limited to bringing to nothing what is itself null, a false and self-contradictory phenomenon'.[147] Irony, and what Hegel describes as 'ironical artist life', is indiscriminate in what it annihilates because the subject's sense of himself – 'the absolute negativity in which the subject is related to himself'[148] – requires 'the annihilation of everything specific and one-sided'; not only 'what is inherently null and manifests itself in its hollowness, but equally everything excellent and solid'.[149] It is in 'annihilating everything everywhere' that the individual self preserves itself in the idea of itself as absolute. But this idea is abstract, and the 'God-like geniality' of this ironical consciousness is a 'mask'; 'it will not let itself go in actual action and production, because it is frightened of being polluted by contact with finitude… [and] has a sense of the deficiency of this abstraction'.[150]

In comedy the individual 'shows itself to be entangled in actual existence, and drops the mask because it wants to be something genuine. The self plays with the mask which it once put on in order to act its part; but it as quickly breaks out again from this illusory character and stands forth in its nakedness and ordinariness, which it shows not to be different from the genuine self, the actor,

[146] Hegel 1993, p. 72

[147] Hegel 1993, p. 73

[148] Hegel 1988, p. 160

[149] Hegel 1988, p. 160

[150] Hegel 1988, p. 160

or from the spectator.'[151] The 'genuine self' (*eigentlichen Selbst*) breaks out in comedy, whose being as actor is no different from its being as spectator. Where previously the individual was 'subject' – in its active subjectivity wearing the mask of the absolute Subject, but also always simultaneously in its actual self the passive subject and spectator of this other Subject – now the individual is no longer subject to this Subject nor wears its mask. The difference of comedy from the previous forms, from the 'abstract' work of art, the epic, tragedy and indeed irony, is that in these forms 'abstraction' was represented as areal and absolute Subject to which the individual was subject and in whose image he was represented. In irony the individual, recognizing the abstraction of these previous representations of the absolute Subject, is raised above these representations and takes the individual self as the absolute Subject. In the movement of comedy, instead of 'abstraction' being brought over to the side of the individual in being represented as a subject, the individual passes over to the side of abstraction. Not, as in irony, that it itself becomes the absolute abstract Subject. Irony annihilates all subjects except its own individual self which is 'preserved in this very nothingness' as the active principle of everything and the only subject. In comedy the individual self is itself annihilated. As abstraction is 'dissolved' in individual consciousness, so the individual is dissolved in abstraction. Comedy completes the third movement of the 'sublation' (*aufhebung*) of the 'individual self', in which, having been 'raised' above the previous abstract moments, 'preserved' in this nothingness, it finally 'cancels' itself.

[151] Hegel 1977, p. 450

Comedy is 'inwardly self-dissolving'.[152] It is 'the laughter in which the characters dissolve everything, including themselves';[153] its 'ruling principle the caprice and contingency of subjective life'.[154] Where in the previous forms an attempt had been made to convert the inherent emptiness of abstraction into a full signifier and to identify in its non-meaning an absolute meaning, in comedy the individual recognises abstraction for what it is and recognises itself in this abstraction. The 'absolute freedom of spirit' to be found in 'this world of private serenity'[155] is the tranquil acceptance of its own annihilation. This is not, as in tragedy, 'the individuality of the hero who … feels his life is broken and sorrowfully awaits an early death'.[156] In comedy the annihilation of the individual has already happened. Recognising that the individual is 'the negative power' (*die negative Kraft*), and a principle of 'infinite absolute negativity', it is in the negation of itself and its own aims that the individual discovers his own freedom. What is comical 'is a personality or subject who makes his own actions contradictory and so brings them to nothing, while remaining tranquil and self-assured in the process'.[157] The individual no longer represents abstraction but is abstraction;[158] this nothing is its 'genuine self'. Its

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[152] Hegel 1988, p. 1163

[153] Hegel 1988, p. 1199

[154] Hegel 1988, p. 1180

[155] Hegel 1988, p. 1221

[156] Hegel 1977, p. 443

[157] Hegel 1988, p. 1220

[158] '…in the epic, the subject narrates the universal, the essential, the absolute; in tragedy, the subject enacts or stages the universal, the essential, the absolute; in comedy, the subject is (or becomes) the universal, the essential, the absolute. Which is also to say that the universal, the essential, the absolute become the subject. (Zupancic 2007, pp. 27-8)

contentedness and ‘complete loss of fear’, as it passes over to the side of a ‘history without a subject’, is ‘a state of spiritual well-being and of repose… such as is not to be found outside of this comedy’.[159]

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[159] Hegel 1977, p. 453

4. The (surplus) value of abstraction (Marx)

4.1. The question of value

'All beginnings are difficult'[1], but the particular difficulty with which *Capital* begins is the question of value. What is 'value' in capital? The value-form 'is very simple and slight in content', but a mystery that has eluded the human mind for 2,000 years.[2] 'Value' appears in commodities ('its particular or, so to say, disguised mode') and in money ('its general mode'), but is separate from either of those things. If capital, as the general formula M-C-M represents, consists of the conversion of money into commodities and of commodities into money, both commodities and money function only as 'different modes of existence of value itself'. [3] In the circulation of capital, value changes from one form to the other 'without becoming lost in this movement: it thus becomes transformed into an automatic subject'.[4]

Capital begins with an investigation of value. In an ascent from the concrete to the abstract (whose purpose is to reveal the flow in practice in the opposite direction), different types of value (use-value, exchange-value and 'value') are identified. The commodity is analyzed in terms of the values it represents, in terms eventually of the 'value', abstract and unrelated to its form and function,

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[1]' *Aller Anfang ist schwer*.' Preface to the First Edition of K. Marx. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One* tr. B. Fowkes, London and New York, Penguin Books, 1990, p. 89 (Marx 1990). K. Marx. *Selected Writings* ed. D. McLellan, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2000 p. 460). (Marx 2000).

[2] Marx 1990, p. 90.

[3] Marx 1990, p. 255.

[4] Marx 1990, p. 255.

through which the commodity becomes something that speaks its own language, relating socially in exchange with other commodities, without reference to any use-value. Actual commodities appear finally, in practice, as abstract. In the universal commodity – money – value assumes its 'fully-developed shape', casting off the disguise of use-value and the satisfaction of wants to assumes an abstract, universal form. In the transformation of money into capital – the valorization process and the formation of surplus-value – value is revealed as the means by which capital produces and reproduces itself. This valorization process is a process also of self-valorization, whereby capital becomes an 'automatic subject'. 'Value', as central to 'the mystery of money'[5], is the abstract substance by which capital is reproduced, the value-form the 'economic cell-form' of bourgeois society. Concerning the question of value, Marx writes, 'All understanding of the facts depends on this.'[6]

A certain ideal and abstract value, as it appears in capital and in art, is the subject of the present chapter. Value in capital (labour and labour-time) and value for capital (surplus-value, the valorization process) can be productively separated. The first is an actual substance and magnitude of value, whose value is the transformation that labour effects (the work), and which, if it results in a use-value and satisfies a want, may be recuperated in exchange; the second an ideological restatement of value, an 'ideal and notional' form that is

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[5] Marx 1990, p. 139.

[6] 'The best points of my book are: (1) the twofold character of labour, according to whether it is expressed in use-value or exchange-value. (All understanding of the facts depends on this.) It is emphasized immediately, in the first chapter; (2) the treatment of surplus value independently of its particular forms as profit, interest, ground rent, etc.' Marx to Engels, 24 August 1867. Included in K. Marx. *Selected Writings*, ed. D. McLellan, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2000 (Marx 2000), p. 564.

represented in commodities and money, but whose ‘fully developed shape’ is the money-form. The latter value, emerging as it were mysteriously and automatically, in the valorization process, enables the appearance of capital as an independent subject and an autonomous movement capable of endlessly reproducing itself. The aim of the present chapter is to explore the workings of a value that is precisely abstract; a power or idea of transformation independent of any specific content. The concept of art, historically, represents this value. Artworks are both commodities within a system of circulation and instruments of labour in an idea of transformation that, taken to an absolute point, capital makes its own. The work of art, in representing value and the imaginable limit point of the power of transformation, becomes an ideal commodity – the ‘ultimate product’ of surplus-value in the form of a commodity. How in practice it resists this form, resembling money but going beyond it, is the question that an analysis of value preludes.

4.2. Abstract value

Commodities and money circulate in capital in a ‘restless never-ending process’; economic activity, the ‘general formula for capital’ (M-C-M), consists of the conversion of money into commodities and the conversion of commodities into money; the fruits of capital, an ‘immense collection’ of commodities is simultaneously represented in its totality in the ‘ideal and notional form’ of money. Both commodities and money, however, function only as ‘different modes of existence of value itself’; in the money-form in ‘its general mode’, and in the commodity-form in ‘its particular or, so to say,

disguised mode'.[7] In the circulation of capital, value changes from one form to the other 'without becoming lost in this movement: it thus becomes transformed into an automatic subject'.[8] Value is something independent of the forms of the commodity and of money; it is the 'subject' of the process of circulation that drives the process and a subject that is 'automatic' in that it functions by itself, apparently without the intervention of any outside agent. The capitalist as much as the worker is 'no more than the *instrument* of the *valorization process*', enslaved by its 'highly impoverished and abstract content'.[9] 'Value' is the 'secret' of capital and fundamental to understanding its workings; it is the 'elementary element' of capital. The value-form is the 'economic cell-form' of bourgeois society, relating to it as the cells in the body relate to the body as a whole. Like the cells of the body it is both more fundamental and more difficult to analyze than 'more composite and complex forms': despite its elementary nature 'the human mind has sought in vain for more than 2,000 years to get to the bottom of it'.[10] And where the biologist, in analyzing the cells of the body, has access to such tools as microscopes and chemical reagents, in the analysis of the cellular value-form, Marx tells us, 'the power of abstraction must replace both'.[11]

Value in capital, Marx makes clear, is abstract, and this abstraction accounts for the difficulty of the concept. The 'method of ascent from the abstract to the

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[7] Marx 1990, p. 255.

[8] Marx 1990, p. 255.

[9] Marx 1990, p. 990.

[10] Marx 1990, p. 90.

[11] (*die Abstraktionskraft*) (Marx 1990, p. 90)

concrete'[12] takes as its starting point the commodity as the elementary 'cell' and initial abstraction, unfolding from its abstract value the concrete material implications that affect the total economic organization of society.[13] In the elementary form of a commodity Marx first identifies the different values of use-value, exchange-value and 'value', the last being the substance whose 'form of appearance' is exchange-value. These categories 'are absolutely fundamental to everything that follows. They are the pivot upon which the whole analysis of capital turns.'[14] The method of ascent proceeds from use-

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[12] The methodological basis of Marxist analysis consisted of the singling out of commodity as the elementary "cell" and initial abstraction on which investigation could be built. From The Great Soviet Encyclopedia (1979) http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com

[13] '*Capital, as* is well known, begins with a most thorough and detailed analysis of the category of value, i.e., of the real form of economic relations that is the universal and elementary form of the being of capital. In this analysis, Marx's field of vision encompasses a single and, as we have already noted, extremely rare, in developed capitalism, factual relation between men – direct exchange of one commodity for another. At this stage of his inquiry into the capitalist system, Marx intentionally leaves out of account any other forms – money or profit or wages. All of these things are as yet believed to be non-existent.

Nevertheless, analysis of this single form of economic relations yields, as its result, a theoretical expression of the objectively universal form of all phenomena and categories of developed capitalism without exception, an expression of a developed concreteness, a theoretical expression of value as such, of the universal form of value.

The elementary type of the existence of value coincides with value in general, and the real actually traceable development of this form of value into other forms constitutes the objective content of the deduction of the categories of *Capital.*'

Evald Ilyenkov *The Dialectics of the Abstract & the Concrete in Marx's Capital*, tr. S. Kuzyakov, Progress Publishers 1960. Chapter 5 – 'The Method of Ascent from the Abstract to the Concrete in Marx's *Capital*.'

http://www.marxists.org/archive/ilyenkov/works/abstract/abstra5a.htm

[14] David Harvey. *The Limits to Capital*, Verso, London and New York, 2006. (Harvey 2006, 1). Harvey's assessment follows Marx's own. 'The best points

value to exchange-value, a progressive abstraction and identification of a process of abstraction. Value represents the abstraction of a substance. From this specific content of an actual commodity, Marx traces value as it is represented in the abstract form of money, and then, in the valorization process, as abstract money acting as capital produces value out of itself, lays golden eggs, to the point where value produces value, valorizes itself out of the power of itself, and enables capital to become fully automatic. In a finally abstract form, whose implications are wholly material, value appears as the value of capital, the value of value for capital. It is through the value of this abstraction – the value of capital, that is money to the power of itself – that it becomes a universal leviathan dominating all.

Value is both initially, as represented in the cell-form of a commodity, and finally, as it signifies the end and purpose of capital, abstract. This abstraction is the representation of an absolute, seductive power and value, which appears in a fragmentary form in the commodity, disguised by use-value but also itself becoming a use-value, since it satisfies a want, albeit a want formed in the subjectivization of capital. If capital appears in a sphere separated from human wants, it appears in a sphere of its own wants. Commodities speak their own language and engage in exchange among themselves in a sphere animated by money to which both capitalist and worker are enslaved. It is as the use of value, to capital, that value appears in its most abstract form, an abstraction that

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of my book are: (1) the twofold character of labour, according to whether it is expressed in use-value or exchange-value. (All understanding of the facts depends on this.) It is emphasized immediately, in the first chapter; (2) the treatment of surplus value independently of its particular forms as profit, interest, ground rent, etc.' Marx to Engels, 24 August 1867. Included in Marx 2000, p. 564.

also, we argue, contains the contradiction of capital and its subjects. To arrive at this abstract value, which is a corruption and perversion of utility represented in money and in art it is as well to retrace the ascent from the concrete starting point of use.

4.3. Use-value, exchange-value and value

The commodity, Marx writes, is first of all 'a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination [*der Phantasie*], makes no difference.' The usefulness of a commodity – the way in which it satisfies some want or other – makes it a use-value, and this use-value is conditioned by the physical properties of the commodity. A clear line is drawn from a material form, a use derived from that form and a value of that use in the satisfaction of a want. The nature of that want is immaterial. It may be a material want (arising from the stomach, for example), or may not. A whim is equally a want. Central to Marx's historical understanding is that there is no fixed category of human wants or use-values. History is the formation of new use-values, of new wants that become part of the 'socially necessary' cost of labour reproducing itself. Even in use-value, Marx establishes a clear line from the material to the immaterial, from the concrete to the abstract, before proceeding to the particular abstraction of capital.

Separate and distinct from use-value is another value; that which appears in the quantitative relation in which commodities of one kind can be exchanged for commodities of another kind. This value changes constantly, is 'something

accidental and purely relative' and therefore distinct from an intrinsic value; 'an exchange-value that is inseparably connected with the commodity, inherent in it, seems a contradiction in terms'.[15] Exchange-values express something equal, 'a common element, of which they represent a greater or lesser quantity'. 'This common element cannot be a geometrical, physical, chemical or other natural property of commodities. Such properties come into consideration only to the extent that they make commodities useful, i.e. turn them into use-values. But clearly, the exchange relation of commodities is characterized precisely by its abstraction from their use-values.'[16] 'As use-values, commodities differ above all in quality, while as exchange-values they can only differ in quantity, and therefore do not contain an atom of use-value.'[17] Though commodities all represent different use-values – otherwise there would be no purpose to exchange – what is represented in exchange-value, for them to be exchangeable, is a common substance of which they merely represent different quantities.

The commodity, Marx writes, has a 'dual nature': on one side (for the consumer) it is a use-value; on the other (for capital) it is an exchange-value. Capital itself, as a mode of production, appears as a parallel system; it produces commodities with their attendant use-values, but commodities are merely a 'disguised' form that value assumes to achieve its own ends. Use-values are 'the material content of wealth', but 'in the form of society considered here', in capital, 'they are also the material bearers (*Träger*) of… exchange-

[15] Marx 1990, p. 126.

[16] Marx 1990, p. 127.

[17] Marx 1990, p. 128.

value.'[18]'Use-values must therefore never be treated as the immediate aim of the capitalist'.[19] 'Use-values are produced by capitalists only because and in so far as they form the material substratum of exchange-value, are the bearers of exchange-value.'[20] The dominance in capital of exchange-value over use-value, and the fact that production is not driven by the satisfaction of human wants, which are only incidental to the purposes of capital and serve its ends, makes it 'a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite'.[21] Capital appears therefore as an 'automatic subject' and the products of labour as 'autonomous figures, endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race'.[22] 'If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-values may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-values.'[23]

The common element that Marx identifies in commodities is that they are all products of labour, 'congealed quantities of homogenous human labour'.[24] The substance that exchange-value is the 'form of appearance' (*Erscheinungsform*) of is labour. But just as in identifying exchange-value it is necessary to abstract from the material constituents and forms that make a commodity a use-value,

[18] Marx 1990, p. 126.

[19] Marx 1990, p. 254.

[20] Marx 1990, p. 293.

[21] Marx 1990, p. 175.

[22] Marx 1990, p. 165.

[23] Marx 1990, p. 177.

[24] Marx 1990, p. 128.

so with ‘value’ it is necessary to abstract from the different concrete forms of labour. These different forms produce different use-values. With the disappearance of use-value these different forms also disappear. ‘They can no longer be distinguished, but are all together reduced to the same kind of labour, human labour in the abstract’.[25] Commodities, in their exchange-value are ‘congealed quantities … of human-labour power expended without regard to the form of expenditure’. A useful object has value only because ‘abstract human labour is objectified or materialized in it’.[26] The magnitude of value is measured by means of the quantity of the ‘value forming substance’, the average, ‘socially necessary’ labour-time expended in its production. Marx concludes: ‘Now we know the substance of value. It is labour. We know the measure of its magnitude. It is labour-time.’[27]

4.4. Money

Value appears in its ‘fully developed shape’ in money. Money is for commodities an ‘ideal and notional form’[28] that ‘serves only in an imaginary or ideal capacity’[29]. In the basic form of gold, money is another commodity, with a value corresponding to the labour-time of its production, but it is a commodity that by separating itself from all others can act as a universal

[25] Marx 1990, p. 128.

[26] Marx 1990, p. 129.

[27] Marx 1990, p. 131.

[28] Marx 1990, p. 189.

[29] Marx 1990, p. 190.

equivalent, and a measure therefore of their value to each other. It is a power 'always ready to be used'.[30] 'Gold is, in the hands of the commodity-owner, his own commodity divested of its original shape by being alienated... Gold, as we saw, became ideal money, or a measure of value, because all commodities measured their values in it, and thus made it the imaginary opposite of their natural shape as objects of utility, hence the shape of their value'.[31] Money therefore appears as a shapeless form of value, without a use-value of its own (excluding its aesthetic use, a form of hoarding),[33] and it is precisely in this paucity, in its 'highly impoverished and abstract content', that it stands for a universal power, in any and all exchange. 'Just as in money every qualitative difference between commodities is extinguished, so too for its part, as a radical leveller, it extinguishes all distinctions.'[34] Gold, in sufficient amount, 'will make black, white; foul, fair; wrong, right; base, noble; old, young; coward, valiant.'[35]

Value remains what it is in money. But whereas in other commodities value takes a particular form in the shape of the commodity, in money value is abstract. Commodities propose a particular transformation effected by labour power, while money is a pure principle of transformation in which any individual form of labour is made abstract. 'Qualitatively… money is independent of all limits (*schrankenlosen*), that is, it is the universal representative of material wealth because it is directly convertible into any

[30] Marx 1990, p. 229.

[31] Marx 1990, p. 204

[33] see Marx 1990, p. 231.

[34] Marx 1990, p. 229

[35] Marx 1990, p. 229n.

other commodity'. At the same time, any actual sum of money is limited in amount, and therefore limited in the efficacy of what it can purchase. ' This contradiction between the quantitative limitation and qualitative lack of limitation of money keeps driving the hoarder back to his Sisyphean task: accumulation. He is in the same situation as a world conqueror, who discovers a new boundary with each country he annexes.'[36]

'It is in the world market that money first functions to its full extent as the commodity whose natural form is also the directly social form of realization of human labour in the abstract. Its mode of existence becomes adequate to its concept.'[37] Money is produced by the circulation of commodities. Disregarding the material content of this circulation and the exchange of use-values, and considering 'only the economic forms brought into being by this process, we find that its ultimate product is money. This ultimate product of commodity circulation is the first form of appearance of capital.'[38] If money is the ultimate product of the circulation of commodities, capital, in the form of circulation that is its own, iterates the value of money, transforming it into an independent power. The difference between 'simple' or 'direct' circulation (C-M-C) and the form of circulation of capital (M-C-M) is in the relative position of money and commodities. In simple circulation, money serves as a medium of exchange of commodities, enabling the 'social and general' exchange of use-values. In capital, the value of money becomes separated from use, and a value in itself, serving only its own reproduction. Capital is the independent subject that,

[36] Marx 1990, p. 231.

[37] Marx 1990, p. 241.

[38] Marx 1990, p. 247.

producing money out of money, produces itself as a value: money to the power of itself. If capital is the domination of this abstract (universal) value, its 'ultimate product' contains the contradiction of capital.

4.5. The value of money

Gold, we observed, 'will make black, white; foul, fair; wrong, right; base, noble; old, young; coward, valiant.' Money represents a general power of transformation. Through its ability to be converted into any commodity or any use-value, and to satisfy therefore any want, it is a universal power and the 'absolutely social form of wealth'. In its value it represents abstract labour and the work of material transformation by which use-value and value are created; not any individual labour or individual transformation, but any and all actual and possible transformation that labour can bring about. It represents an abstract and universal power of transformation. The commodity in itself is an object that through labour has undergone a material transformation to become a use-value: but as a use-value, it satisfies a human want, and in this satisfaction it effects a subjective transformation in the user of the commodity, from hunger to satiety, cold to warmth, dissatisfaction to satisfaction. Money, as the universal commodity convertible into all others, represents the total of all possible material and subjective transformation, the abstract possibility of transformation. This power that it possesses it transfers to its owner.

> 'What I have thanks to money, what I pay for, i.e. what money can buy, that is what I, the possessor of money, am myself. My power is as great as the power of money. The properties of money are my – (its owner's) –

properties and faculties. Thus what I am and what I am capable of is by no means determined by my individuality. I am ugly, but I can buy myself the most beautiful women. Consequently I am not ugly, for the effect of ugliness, the power of repulsion, is annulled by money. As an individual, I am lame, but money can create twenty-four feet for me; so I am not lame; I am a wicked, dishonest man without conscience or intellect, but money is honoured and so also is its possessor. Money relieves me of the trouble of being dishonest; so I am presumed to be honest. I may have no intellect, but money is the true mind of all things and so how should its possessor have no intellect? Moreover he can buy himself intellectuals and is not the man who has power over intellectuals not more intellectual than they? I who can get with money everything that the human heart longs for, do I not possess all human capacities? Does not my money thus change all my incapacities into their opposite?'[39]

Money is not only a means of acquiring specific use-values, but a vehicle of personal transformation. In acquiring food, my hunger is transformed into satiety; equally, any other 'incapacity', the want or lack of beauty, mobility, virtue, intellect or any other human faculty can be overcome by a transformation that money enables. It represents the sum of human faculties, 'the externalized capacities of humanity'[40].

Money, in this idea, is no longer the representative of wealth because it is convertible into any commodity, but is the bearer of a wholly abstract power of

[39] Karl Marx. 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts' (1844), in K. Marx. *Selected Writings*, ed. D. McLellan, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2000, p. 118. (Marx 2000).

[40] Marx 2000, p. 118.

transformation, with any individual amount of money representing a fraction of this abstract aggregate. It represents in the abstract the power of transforming anything into anything else, the absolute transformation of the individual who is the possessor of money. This power is not limited to actual, existing 'human and natural qualities'. As Marx emphasizes, it is also, beyond this, the power to alter the nature of reality, to turn what is merely imaginary into reality and reality into mere imagination. It crosses the boundary between thought and being.

> 'If I long for a meal, or wish to take the mail coach because I am not strong enough to make the journey on foot, then money procures the meal and the mail coach for me. This means that it changes my wishes from being imaginary, and translates them from their being in thought, imagination and will into a sensuous, real being, from imagination to life, from imaginary being to real being. The truly creative force in this mediation is money.'[41]

A demand that is not supported by money 'is simply an imaginary entity that has no effective existence'; it 'remains unreal and without an object'. Money is the difference between a demand that is effective and one that is ineffective – 'the difference between being and thought, between a representation that merely exists within me and one that is outside me as a real object.'[42] As the 'truly creative force' in the mediation between thought and being, money is the 'universal means and power… to turn imagination into reality and reality into mere imagination. Similarly it turns real and human natural faculties into mere abstract representations and thus imperfections and painful imaginings, while

[41] Marx 2000, pp. 118-9

[42] Marx 2000, p. 119

on the other hand it turns the real imperfections and imaginings, the really powerless faculties that exist only in the imagination of the individual, into real faculties and powers'.[43]

4.6. Absolute wealth

Money, Marx's early writings propose, represents a generalized power of transformation, a power that is qualitatively unlimited. It is the sum of what can be imagined and made a reality – 'the externalized capacities of humanity'. As a power that is transferred to its possessor, it is a power of subjective transformation. It belongs to the subject: that is, the idea and value of an absolute transformation is a property of the subject of capital. 'The properties of money are my… properties and faculties'. The value that money represents – abstract labour, the material and subjective transformations that labour can bring about – undergoes its own transformation in capital. If money represents a general power of transformation, capital alters this value both quantitatively and qualitatively. Value, as surplus-value, in the system of capital, belongs no longer to labour but to capital. While any actual material or subjective transformation is in practice only the result of labour, this value appears in capital as a property of money. A power of transformation, which is in practice the power of labour, takes on the appearance of a power that belongs to money. With money, any possible subjective transformation can be achieved precisely without labour. Money therefore represents a weightless power of

[43] Marx 2000, p. 119

transformation, a movement and change freed from material labour. Money is made out of money.

The process of capital reinforces this representation. Surplus-value, which is the product of surplus labour, appears through the valorization process as a value produced by value, the 'occult ability' by which money makes money out of itself. Surplus-value is the determining purpose of capital. The capitalist is the 'instrument' of the valorization process, in his actions functioning as 'capital personified and endowed with consciousness'.[44] The process of producing surplus-value appears as an 'occult ability' in which capital, the 'dominant subject' (*übergreifendes Subjekt*) of the process, 'brings forth living offspring, or at least lays golden eggs'.[45] In Marx's strictly materialist account, value – abstract labour – labour that as abstract is itself a commodity, provides the mechanism for the production of surplus-value. As the value of a commodity is the average labour time necessary for its production, abstract labour, itself a commodity, has a value that is the labour time necessary to sustain and reproduce it. The necessary labour of labour is the time necessary to reproduce itself. Labour is a commodity however capable of producing value greater than the value of itself (its own cost of reproduction). It possesses the specific use-value 'of being a source not only of value, but of more value than it has itself'.[46] Capital, purchasing labour-power along with the other commodities necessary for production, extends the working day beyond the time necessary for labour to reproduce itself; this surplus labour produces

[44] Marx 1990, p. 254.

[45] Marx 1990, p. 255.

[46] Marx 1990, p. 301.

surplus-value. Surplus-value is simply more value, the value created by labour in excess of its own value as a commodity, this latter being the labour-time necessary for labour to sustain itself. This value, the quantitative excess of labour, is owned by the purchaser of labour-power, and alienated by capital.

> 'By turning his money into commodities which serve as the building materials for a new product, and as factors in the labour process, by incorporating living labour into their lifeless objectivity, the capitalist simultaneously transforms value, i.e. past labour in its objectified and lifeless form, into capital, value which can perform its own valorization process, an animated monster which begins to 'work', 'as if its body were by love possessed'.'[47]

Though money represents in principle an absolute power of transformation 'without limit', in practice any actual sum of money is limited and can produce only a limited transformation. Capital is the work of correcting this deficit. If money qualitatively represents an unlimited power of transformation (limited only by imagination), capital, approaching a quantitative equivalence of this essence – 'absolute wealth' – approaches an actual, 'absolute' power of transformation. In simple circulation the process is completed and comes to an end 'in a final purpose (*Endzweck*) which lies outside it, namely consumption, the satisfaction of definite needs'[48]. The circulation of capital by contrast is endless, 'an end in itself, for the valorization of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement.' [49] The production of surplus-value is 'the

[47]Marx 1990, p. 302.

[48] Marx 1990, p. 252.

[49] Marx 1990, p. 253.

determining purpose, the driving force and the *final result* of the capitalist process of production',[50] its movement therefore 'limitless', a 'restless never-ending process', for 'at the end of the movement, money emerges once again as its starting point'.[51] Capital, in Aristotle's distinction cited by Marx, is not strictly an economics, concerned with definite, material aims, but chrematistic, in that 'there are no bounds to its aims, these aims being absolute wealth'.[52] 'Absolute wealth', an absolute power of transformation that is no longer merely an ideal power, an abstract value represented in money, but an actual power, appears as the goal and endpoint of capital.

3.7. Tragedy

Value, an abstract power of transformation, is changed in capital into a universal value, both through a quantitative increase as capital approaches its end-point of an absolute power of transformation ('absolute wealth'), and through a qualitative transformation. In the ideological shift that attributes this power to capital it appears as weightless, without labour, as a power that expands itself automatically. A power of transformation is represented in commodities, the material transformation that they have undergone and the subjective transformation that as use-values they enable. The conversion of value in capital – that is its abstraction – gives rise to the idea of an absolute, effortless transformation, a new form of social wealth, in turn giving rise in this to a new abstract want and use-value. Human wants, use-values, are not for

[50] Marx 1990, p. 976.

[51] Marx 1990, p. 253.

[52] Marx 1990, p. 253n

Marx a fixed category. Human history is the expansion of use-values, where ideas, technologies and forms of production both create and satisfy human wants. In capital, an absolute, abstract want is added to the sum of human possibilities and desires, which capital itself provides the technology to satisfy. An idea of subjective power assumes an economic form. This value, historically represented in money, is now represented also in commodities. Where in simple circulation, money represents commodities, and is an abstraction of specific use-values, in capital commodities represent also the abstract value of money. No longer primarily objects that have undergone a specific material transformation to satisfy a specific want or to effect a specific subjective transformation, they become instead representations of an abstract transformation, the abstract want of a subject to be other than it is. They become symbols of otherness. Capital creates the want satisfied by this value, forming in its own image the subject whose subjectivity demands its own transcendence.

The sum of possible transformations, 'the externalised capacities of humanity', appear as if projected on to the screen of capital. Any possible want of fantasy or imagination is made real in its projection on the screen where, within only the limits of imagination and identification – and the suspension of disbelief – any subjective transformation is enabled. The screen is the ultimate product for the representation of value, a metonym and instrument for the spectacle. In itself nothing, devoid of content and therefore abstract, it is capable of assuming any imaginable form and satisfying any want of fantasy. Projected on to the screen of capital, the spectacle in general gives the abstract a concrete

form: its 'manner of being concrete is, precisely, abstraction'.[53] The abstract power that money in capital represents appears in the spectacle as a series of weightless transformations in a total technological theatre in which all production – which now includes the production of consumption, and therefore producers, products and consumers acting as one – collectively participates. The genre of this production is the issue we question.

As the screen on which all transformations are projected, capital itself remains constant. In itself it is abstract and without content, a blank canvas on to which any fantasy can be projected; this content, in the symbolic structure of capital, is imaginary while only capital is real. The contradiction of capital, within the terms of its own value, is that for all the power of absolute transformation it holds as a value, it itself always returns to the same place. If it enables any imaginable story to be projected on to the screen, in practice the same film is always showing – 'Capital'. The actual social form that value reproduces in capital, which is the ultimate product of the valorization process, and what surplus-value produces and reproduces, is the social formation of capital: class division. As surplus-value, appropriated by the owners of constant capital, is returned as capital to the production of more surplus-value, in a process repeated *ad infinitum*, it mechanically reproduces and expands the social division between capital and labour. 'Capitalist production is the production and reproduction of the specifically capitalist relations of production'.[54] It

[53] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle.* tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith, New York, Zone Books, 1995, p. 22.

[54] Marx 1990, p. 948.

produces and reproduces as its final product the form of bourgeois society. Universal value returns to a specific form.

In the process in which value creates value, capital becomes an ‘automatic subject’, the ‘dominant subject’ of the process. Value, as it is transformed in capital, an absolutely weightless power of transformation, is the abstract term that takes an individual form in the subject of capital. This subjectivity is an unreconciled opposition of abstract and individual, and is transferred through the interpellations of ideology and real abstraction to the subjects of capital, that is, to the capitalists who are its personifications. The bourgeois idea is to be other than it is. The contradictions that abstract value produces in these individual forms (the social formation of capital, the actual individual who is the subject of capital) are inherent in the concept of value that, in capital, is represented in money. The ‘universal’ value of money is destroyed when it is used; absolute wealth, absolute transformation, logically entails the destruction of the individual forms that are the bearers of it (capital itself, the individual who is its subject). The relation of capital to actual production and the immense surplus labour time engaged in an endless, universal material transformation, appears as that of the ironic subject. Its ‘geniality’ is precisely that the ceaseless work of material transformation appears as abstract and two-dimensional, counting for nothing other than its relation to the subject. Every positive content is annihilated by absorption into the ‘absolute freedom and unity’ of the ‘I’. The contradiction of value is resolved by displacing abstraction, an absence of real content, into the world, which becomes imaginary except as it reinforces the value of the subject. This ‘I’ (the individual subject of capital) is however ‘utterly abstract and formal’ and without content because for it all content is

contingent and it alone is the only necessity. In its abstraction, like the ironic subject, it has a 'craving for the solid and substantial'. The principle of value, of transformation, requires that it make itself into something real, and this realization entails its own destruction.

The superficial drama in tragedy, in Hegel's analysis, is the conflict between a concept of the individual and an opposing power of abstract necessity. In practice, this 'necessity' is the product of a one-sided individuality that, taking itself as the ground and cause of everything, can find no reconciliation with other equally one-sided individuals. The collision and conflict between individuals is in practice a symptom and outward manifestation of a conflict that takes place within the individual who is the hero of this form of drama. Revealed in soliloquy – the subject talking to itself – a conflict (brought in Hamlet to a point of paralysing indecision) is the dynamic from which all the action flows. This conflict takes several forms: between opposing laws, agency and passivity, knowing and not-knowing, the mask and the actor. Represented in the opposition of (economic) necessity and the individual, opposing laws and values, a competition between nations and between individuals, these conflicts are in the tragic idea concentrated in the subject. It is a division and conflict, we suggest, between meaning and non-meaning.

The individual subject of capital repeats the contradiction inherent in the value of capital. Shot through with an abstract possibility of being, the individual can find itself only in what it is not. Its own subjective transformation, or what it is as an absolute condition of possibility, it owes to money. The value that it has, its freedom, is a function of capital; it is simultaneously therefore both subject (in the sense of an independent agent, free in the idea of itself) and subject (the

passive subject of an Other Subject). Divided in itself, the abstract (universal) confronts the individual on both sides. As the possessor of a universal power of transformation and the ability to be anything, it confronts the fact that it is one thing, and can only be anything by ceasing to be itself. Its freedom necessitates its own destruction. On the other side, the possibility of absolute transformation appears to the individual as a principle of absolute otherness, as an abstract demand that it cannot recognize or recognize itself in. From both the side of the individual and the abstract, the other appears as alien, as something in its divided consciousness that is both part of itself and other, an alien internal object that itself constitutes the subject.

For capital, content is abstract in that capital is indifferent to the particular forms that are produced: the function of production is to produce abstract value. In this it suffers a loss of language: content and differential terms no longer mean anything, they all say the same thing which is their exchange-value. Equally, language loses its function as the practical and social relation between people. As commodities, objects relate to each other. The loss of language, that all that any sentence says is 'I', an abstract capitalized subject, reproduces a new condition of abstraction in language. This inability to articulate its own conditions of existence or to realize itself in this way is the frustration and violence of the subject. It cannot realize itself as other; it cannot even realize itself as itself. The value of capital, of absolute transformation, in the absence of the language and imagination to articulate another form of being, can still realize its value in absolute destruction. 'The bomb', as the actual possibility of absolute destruction, stands above money and the spectacle in the triad of forms through which the 'Empire' of capital represents itself. The end of the world

appears as the limit point of capital and the only alternative to the endless reproduction of its own form. 'It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism'[55]. Fisher's citation points directly to the alternative capital proposes: the end of the world or the end of capital. The logic of value dictates the transformation of the specific form of capital. Its logic requires its own extinction. The contradictions inherent in the form, where the abstract and individual render each other void, are resolved only in the destruction of the subject. The material form that satisfies its abstract want, that represents its value, is death. As its value is other than what it is, it is only capable of becoming real, of realizing its value, in its own extinction.

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[55] Mark Fisher. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books, Ripley, 2008 p. 1.

5. Comedy

5.1. Freud's joke

Comedy, which begins in abstraction, begins therefore in loss. Abstraction, as we have defined it, is a socially determined condition, a loss of *Sittlichkeit* or whatever the then familiar structure of the social is. Freud renders this loss in the microcosm of the family and individual psychology. Object-loss, a central event in Freudian psychology that is implicit in all repression, neuroses and fixations, presents an economic model of abstraction and the attempted forms of recuperation from it. 'Objectlessness' is the condition that whether through normal or neurotic channels the binding instinct of *eros* seeks to overcome. In the distinction Freud makes between normal object-loss (mourning, the death of a love object) and the situations that give rise to the pathological condition of melancholia, different responses to abstraction are illuminated. Mourning provides a model for a normal situation of loss, and Freud lays out the pathways for a normal recovery. It is other situations, not necessarily involving an actual death, but some other loss and betrayal – 'those situations of being slighted, neglected or disappointed'[1] – that in Freud's narrative give rise to the condition of melancholia, 'An object-choice, an attachment of the libido to a particular person, had at one time existed; then, owing to a real slight or

[1] 'In melancholia, the occasions which give rise to the illness extend for the most part beyond the clear case of a loss by death, and include all those situations of being slighted, neglected or disappointed, which can import opposed feelings of love or hate into the relationship or reinforce an already existing ambivalence'. S. Freud. 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XIV*, tr. James Strachey, London; Hogarth Press, 1957, p. 251

disappointment coming from this loved person, the object-relationship was shattered'.[2] Object-loss in its generality is not that some love-object has died or no longer exists, but that a former relationship with an object, an attachment and investment of psychic energy bound up in an object (which may be an abstraction as much as an actual person) is 'shattered'. 'The object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love'.[3]

Freud specifies the psychic mechanism that takes place in object loss, the 'withdrawal of cathexis'. A quota of affect, of psychic (or libidinal) energy is detached from the idea (object) to which it was previously attached. Affect is separated from idea or object (which may be either or both a psychic or a real object) and circulates unattached to any object and unbound. The desire for a object, in economic terms, is this surplus. All withdrawals of cathexis induce an unbinding, a condition of objectlessness characterized by a feeling of helplessness, a dissolution of the ego's boundaries, the experience of symbolic death. The fate of unbound energy is anxiety; but this anxiety, in the first instance, is not attached to an object (a phobia), for it is precisely the lack of connection to an object that causes it. It is free-floating, dispersed throughout the social field. The character and fate of this unbound affect determines a normal or pathological condition. In the separation of the affect from any ideational content, from any representation or object to which it relates, it is abstract. Anxiety emerges in the absence of social context.

Repression (the pathological part of the unconscious, where there is resistance to it becoming conscious) is the product of loss. The withdrawal of cathexis,

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[2] Freud (1917) p. 249

[3] Freud (1917) p. 245

Freud writes, is what all repression has in common.[4] In the case of melancholia what is lost is not merely an object, but the ability to represent what is lost. In this instance something in addition to the object is lost; 'there is a loss of a more ideal kind'[5] It is however not immediately clear, either to the analyst or to the patient, what this is. 'This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to the melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him' (Freud 14. 245). This additional 'unknown loss', which is 'withdrawn from consciousness' is not the loss of a 'whom', of a person (an object), but a loss of a general kind, a loss of love and a loss in language.

Object-loss, motivated by anxiety, is driven to forms of recuperation. Unbound energy is re-attached either (in the case of a normal recovery from mourning) to other people, or to other real or ideal objects. In the particular pathology of melancholia the unbound affect is attached to an internal object that substitutes for and takes the place of the lost object. In this case, 'the free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. There, however, it was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object. Thus the shadow of the object falls on the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object.'[6]

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[4] Sigmund Freud. 'Repression' (1915) *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XIV*, tr. James Strachey, London; Hogarth Press, 1999, pp. 154-5. 'the mechanisms of repression have at least this one thing in common: *a withdrawal of the cathexis of energy*'

[5] Freud (1917) p. 245

[6] Freud (1917) p. 249

The ego and its character is determined by loss.[7] The motivation for this movement is a desire to hold on to and preserve the lost object. 'By taking flight into the ego love escapes extinction'.[8] In this movement, the substitution of a narcissistic, purely internal object relation for an external (anaclitic) one, an interior world takes precedence over an external one. The character of this world is determined by the manner of the subject's loss and its mode of recuperation. The vicissitudes of the instincts, searching for and thwarted by objects, produce a subject that reproduces itself and its loss in the world.

In the event that conditions melancholia, that is the betrayal in which the object-relation is 'shattered', the circumstances of the loss provokes and brings to the fore an affective ambivalence – 'opposed feelings of love and hate'[9] – in the relation to the object. The libidinal energy invested in the object turns round

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[7] Judith Butler argues that the ego is the object that replaces the lost object; that melancholic loss produces the ego. 'The turn from the object to the ego produces the ego, which substitutes for the object lost. This production is a tropological generation and follows from the psychic compulsion to substitute for objects lost. Thus, in melancholia not only does the ego substitute for the object, but this act of substitution *institutes* the ego as a necessary response to or "defense" against loss.' Judith Butler. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection,* Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997, pp. 168-9. Freud accords a more structural position to the ego, but concedes that its character is determined by this loss. 'An object which was lost has been set up again within the ego – that is, that an object-cathexis has been replaced by an identification… this kind of substitution has a great share in determining the form taken by the ego and … it makes an essential contribution towards building up what is called its 'character'.'[7] 'The character of the ego is a precipitate of its abandoned object-cathexes and … it contains the history of those object-choices.' S. Freud. 'The Ego and the Id' (1923) *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XIX*, tr. James Strachey, London; Hogarth Press, 1961, p. 28

[8] Freud (1917) p. 257

[9] Freud (1917) p. 251

into its opposite, and the quota of affect detached from the object is as much aggressive and hostile as it is libidinal or loving. The ambivalence of affect, attached to the ego, accounts for the division of the subject, the *Ambivalenz Konflikt* being, if not resolved, dealt with by the 'splitting'[10] of the internal object and, by projection, external objects into good and bad objects. On one side, a good object, stripped wholly of its negative determination, an ideal and absolute of love, whose idea assumed by the subject through identification and projected as an actual object in the external world: on the other, the critical, destructive tendencies, whose emanation from the subject is repressed,. A system of values and a morality of objects, comes into play.

The melancholy subject's mode of being is identification. The internal object, formed as a way of 'clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis'[11] assumes the form and character of the lost object and the manner of its loss. The object-relationship in all its ambivalence is internalized, and reappears as the relation the subject has with itself and as a relation incorporated into the structure of the ego. The narcissism of the subject is its sufficient relation with itself: I = I. Formed out of identification with the object and its loss, it now identifies only with what is like itself. Having made itself an object, it seeks to give this object an objective form, to recreate it in the world and thus to create a world it can recognize itself in. But this object, the subjects own ego formed in the conditions of its loss, is clouded with

[10] 'an idea that has a contradictory – an ambivalent – content becomes divided into two sharply contrasting opposites'. S. Freud. 'A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis' (1923 [1922]) *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XIX*, tr. James Strachey, London; Hogarth Press, 1961 p. 86

[11] Freud (1917) p. 244

ambivalence. The work of love is also a work of (repressed) hate and destruction. The death that the subject – as one who loves itself – fears is in practice the abstraction and objectlessness incorporated in the ego in an event that has already occurred. As something that is incorporated in the subject, and which the subject identifies with, in seeking to represent itself and to create an objective form that it can form a narcissistic identification with, the subject works towards its own death.[12]

In the description of melancholia, Freud presents the mechanism of the formation of a tragic subject. A withdrawal of cathexis, a state of objectlessness, is followed by the formation of an internal object that, having 'lost a world', is itself both ego and inhibition. The ego here is not simply an agency that inhibits or represses another agency (the id), but one that in itself, through its own particular structure of substitute objects, is repressed. What is repressed is its own unbound, free-floating energy, and an unconscious that is contradictory, immoral and lacking in sense, which under the constitution of the ego cannot articulate its actual self but bypasses inhibition through its (mis)representation in the symptom, in dreams, everyday slips and jokes. These last three are normal, non-pathological means of overcoming repression. Though treated by Freud as equivalents in their psychic value, each of these forms is objectively different. Dreams are, by their nature, private; a space of coded fantasy withdrawn from the social. The psychopathological slips of everyday life, though taking an objective form in word or gesture, remain

[12] Freud's insight that death (in the mind of the subject) is really loss is in S. Freud, 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death' (1915) (SE 14) Its implication alters the view in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920) (SE 18). The death drive becomes the specific formation of the melancholic subject.

invisible as part of a social unconscious (until brought to light by Freud). Jokes, however, do not merely bypass repression or operate when the censor of consciousness is either asleep or otherwise engaged. They are a direct, public and social assault on repression. The joke represents a rebellion against authority, 'a liberation from its pressure'[13]. The repression that the joke overcomes is social, the renunciation of instinctual life that is the product of 'civilization and higher education'[14], , but is also that of the internal object, the repressive structure of the subject's own substitute investments and identifications. This overcoming of repression takes place not in the subject's removal to a withdrawn space of dreams or fantasies, but in a return to the social.

The economic explanation of laughter is made clear: 'laughter arises if a quota of psychical energy which has earlier been used for the cathexis of particular psychical paths has become unusable, so that it can find free discharge'.[15] 'In laughter therefore… a sum of psychical energy finds free discharge'. [16] '…the cathected energy used for the inhibition has now suddenly become superfluous and has been lifted, and is therefore now ready to be discharged by laughter'.[17] The mechanism at work here is the same mechanism – the withdrawal of cathexis – that is found in a situation of loss. In the melancholic situation,

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[13] S. Freud. 'Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious' (1905). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume VIII*, Hogarth Press, London, 1960, p 105. (Freud 1905)

[14] Freud 1905, p. 101.

[15] Freud 1905, p. 147.

[16] Freud 1905, p. 148.

[17] Freud 1905, p. 149.

however, the loss of the love object that brings into being 'objectlessness', sets in train the formation of the ego in its substitute objects and repressed ambivalence. In the instance of jokes and comedy, it is this melancholy structure that is itself lost as an object. The process is reversed. The ego and its system of objects are what the quota of affect is withdrawn from. The subject returns to a state of objectlessness. This objectlessness, abstraction or momentary 'absence' is the precondition of the joke and the objective form through which the subject returns to the social. No longer in isolation, but through the shared object of the joke (the signifier of a light and harmless objectlessness) the subject returns to the collectivity of comedy.

5.2. Bergson's grace

Bergson demurs from imprisoning the comic spirit in a definition. 'We regard it, above all, as a living thing.'[18] It has, however, a logic of its own. Bergson's emphasis is on one condition of the comic, the appearance of something mechanical encrusted on the living.[19] The mechanical is situated against life, against the vitality that is 'the very principle of our intellectual and moral life',[20] whose 'fundamental law' is 'the negation of repetition'.[21] The philosophy of our imagination sees in every human form 'a soul which is

[18] Henri Bergson. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, tr. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell, Macmillan, London, 1935, p. 2.

[19] Bergson 1935, p. 37.

[20] Bergson 1935, p. 50.

[21] Bergson 1935, p. 32.

infinitely supple and perpetually in motion, subject to no law of gravitation, for it is not the earth that attracts it.'[22] When a human form is encountered whose attitudes, gestures and movements remind us of a machine, the effect is comic. A lack of elasticity, absence of mind or physical obstinacy, a rigidity that gives the human the appearance of a puppet – in this it is automatism that makes us laugh. Physical comedy – the incongruity between the lofty aspirations of the soul and the low accidents of the body – produces its effect as a result of a mechanical inelasticity in the living. What is comic is also a mental inelasticity, 'the rigidity of a fixed idea'[23].

> 'Suppose, then, we imagine a mind always thinking of what it has just done and never of what it is doing, like a song that lags behind its accompaniment. Let us try to picture to ourselves a certain inborn lack of elasticity of both senses and intelligence, which brings it to pass that we continue to see what is no longer visible, to hear what is no longer audible, to say what is no longer to the point: in short, to adapt ourselves to a past and therefore imaginary situation, when we ought to be shaping our conduct in accordance with the reality which is present. This time the comic will take up abode in the person himself…'[24]

What applies to body and mind applies also to society, which, as we are both in it and of it, we cannot help treating as a living being.

> 'Any image then, suggestive of the notion of a society disguising itself, or of a social masquerade, so to speak, will be laughable. Now, such a notion is

[22] Bergson 1935, p. 28.

[23] Bergson 1935, p. 14.

[24] Bergson 1935, p. 11.

> formed when we perceive anything inert or stereotyped, or simply ready-made, on the surface of living society. There we have rigidity over again, clashing with the innermost suppleness of life.'[25]

Bergson's argument here concerns the comic object, whether this object is body, mind or society. The appearance of the mechanical is on its own insufficient to explain comedy (a person performing a mechanical operation is not in itself funny), as the object is insufficient to explain laughter. The mechanical is contrasted with the living, but this 'living' is of a special quality. In considering the comic in relation to ugliness (in caricature), Bergson concludes that to define the comic in relation to its opposite it should be contrasted with gracefulness more than with beauty. 'It partakes rather of the unsprightly rather than the unsightly, of rigidness rather than of ugliness.'[26] The comic, then, is a certain combination of mechanical rigidity and grace (in a purely material sense). The distribution of these two qualities, within the comic object and between the object and the subject who laughs, accounts for the comic both in terms of incongruity and superiority. The difference between what is de jure and de facto comic depends on the subject-position of the observer. Where things are funny in theory (de jure), but not in practice, it is because, 'the continuity of custom having deadened within them the comic quality'[27], the viewers apprehension of the object is as 'mechanical' as the object. It has no more grace than the object. The grace that is necessary to perceive the object as mechanical, and comic, may come from the object itself,

[25] Bergson 1935, p. 44.

[26] Bergson 1935, p. 29.

[27] Bergson 1935, p. 39.

which combines the graceful and the mechanical, but the viewer identifies with the former in order to laugh at the latter. Spontaneous jokes as well as physical comedy may present this form. To the extent that the audience, through identification, borrows and assumes the grace of the comedian, he laughs not only at the object but also his former, rigid self from which he is temporarily released.

Bergson's concept of the mechanical, extended along the axis that runs from grace to the mechanical – the former encompassing lightness (of weight, touch or thought) and the latter a form of repetition or rigidity – accounts for comedy in terms of incongruity (the graceful and the mechanical), of superiority (the assumed graceful subject position of the viewer versus the mechanical, rigid quality of the object) and of release. Laughter is the response of the subject's unexpected release from its own former rigidity, from the repression that is its normal condition. The art of the comedian is to engender the feeling of grace, of the suspension of repression. 'Freedom produces jokes and jokes produce freedom.'[28] For Bergson, the comic 'oscillates between art and life'. Life, in this instance, is characterized by the repetition that occurs whenever economy comes into play, and of a mode of perception subsumed to instrumental action. Art, for Bergson, 'has no other object than to brush aside the utilitarian symbols, the conventional and socially accepted generalities, in short, everything that veils reality from us, in order to come face to face with reality itself'. If comedy is situated between art and life, this is not only in that it deals with generalities, with types rather than individuals, and makes this its subject

[28] Jean Paul Richter, quoted in Freud (1905), p. 41.

matter, but that, unlike tragic art, which sets itself apart from social life, it engages with these forms and has the intention to correct and instruct.

Laughter, in Bergson's account, is a form of social critique. The comic expresses 'a special lack of adaptability to society',[29] an inelasticity in respect of society's demands. This first appears as the critique by society of the individual who 'goes his own way without troubling himself about getting on with his fellow beings. It is the part of laughter to reprove his absentmindedness and wake him out of his dream.'[30] The individual, Bergson suggests, is sanctioned in the confined space of (tragic) art, but where it appears in life, in a non-threatening form, in gesture rather than in action, laughter is the gestural response that corrects this deviation. Beyond this conventional comedy, representing the prejudices of groups in society, comedy also functions in the reverse direction, acting as a critique of the social and the accepted generalities it entails. This critique is not from the position of the (tragic) artist, that is an individual withdrawn from society – but from a position that, though individual, imagines a society of individuals. It remains a critique of unsociability, but in this case a critique of the unsociability of society, of the rigid and mechanical in the accepted generalities that govern perception and behavior, of society's substitution of gesture and form for action and thought. It functions through the presentation of a subject-position of greater grace. Two opposing directions of comedy are allowed for in Bergson's theory. At issue in the distinction between them is the distribution of grace and

[29] Bergson 1935, p. 133.

[30] Bergson 1935, p. 134.

the mechanical between the comic object and subject-position, the level at which the meaning of the comic object is attacked.

In the distinction Zupancic makes between conventional comedy and subversive comedy,[31] the former – of which the typical Hollywood rom-com is an example – uses as its material the accidental, rigid or mechanical impediments – the base materiality – that the characters encounter, but leaves in place the categories that govern the story and its resolution. Love, as conventionally conceived, is not questioned; indeed, in that it survives and persists through the accidents that befall it, the concept is reinforced. In this way, repetition, rigidity and persistence of a concept remains part of the comic object: for all the variation of character or incident, the form of resolution of the narrative is always the same. At the end of the work the abstract universal remains in place and strengthened. Subversive comedy (true comedy for Zupancic) is an assault on the categories, on the abstract universal that itself becomes the comic object. When, in the archetypal comic incident, the toffee-nosed baron slips on a banana peel, the comedy is not the intrusion of the material into the ideal – the revelation that the baron is also human, a body subject to accident and gravity like anyone else. It is the abstract universal that comes a cropper, his 'baronness' that, through the device of the banana skin, becomes the comic object.[32] True comedy, the comedy of grace, entails a categorical shift, an absence or failure of repetition on the part of the categories governing the situation. Where there is repetition or rigidity, it is not on the side

[31] Alenka Zupancic. *The Odd One In: On Comedy*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, MIT Press, 2007, pp. 30-34. (Zupancic 2007)

[32] In the case of Heraclitus, it is 'philosophy' that falls in the well.

of the categories but of phenomena, words or incidents that are repeated or reappear in a different light through a categorical shift. Comic repetition 'reactivates the ground or presupposition of a given structure, and makes it appear as an object'.[33]

If jokes do not bear repetition, the repetition to be avoided applies also to the idea of what a joke is. Comedy, Bergson and Wittgenstein agree, is by definition resistant to definition. For if comedy, in the avoidance of repetition, negates all categories, it also dissolves the category of the comic, which therefore evolves, not in a predictable or rule-based series but as a succession of surprises. Bergson describes comedy as characterized by an absence of feeling, though in practice the sharing of humour engenders its own feeling as a particular warmth in the connection between people. Comedy is better characterized by an absence of investment, the suspension of the attachment of affect to objects, not least the object that is the subject's own ego. In Freud's account of the formation of the joke, there is a momentary 'absence' before the joke appears, as if fully formed.[34] According to Herbert Spencer, laughter is the indication of an effort that suddenly encounters a void.[35] Bergson quotes Kant's similar statement: 'Laughter is the result of an expectation which, of a sudden,

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[33] Zupancic 2007, p. 178.

[34] 'A joke has quite outstandingly the characteristic of being a notion that has occurred to us 'involuntarily'. What happens is not that we know a moment beforehand what joke we are going to make, and that all it then needs is to be clothed in words. We have an indefinable feeling, rather, which I can best compare with an '*absence'*, a sudden release of intellectual tension, and then all at once the joke is there – as a rule ready-clothed in words.' Freud (1905) p. 167.

[35] See Bergson 1935, p. 85.

ends in nothing'.[36] In Spencer's view the comic consists of a 'descending incongruity', a bathetic fall. The 'baron's' fall onto the pavement is for the viewing subject a fall into a void – into 'nothing' – which, because there is no hard landing in a void but only a release from gravity, provokes laughter. For Freud, looking at the issue from the position of the one making a joke, the void precedes the joke, establishing the subject-position from which the joke becomes visible as already there. 'Humour', Wittgenstein writes, 'is not a mood but a way of looking at the world.'[37] It entails a particular subject-position. As a point of maximum grace, the comic in general – the position from which the comic, in whatever form, becomes visible – has no structure or arrangement of objects and investments through which it constitutes itself. In itself it is nothing. In jokes, Freud writes, 'what at one moment seemed to have meaning, we now see is completely meaningless'.[38] The bathetic fall of comedy is a movement from meaning to meaninglessness. Laughter is an expression of 'pleasure in nonsense', where nonsense means not silliness but the absence of 'good' sense. Assuming momentarily a position of 'nothing', the comic subject encounters an objectlessness and absence of meaning that in the comic world is in no way a meaningful event.

5.3. Malevich's 'nothing'

[36] Bergson 1935, p. 85.

[37] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, tr. P. Winch, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980, p. 78e.

[38] Freud (1905), p. 12.

If Malevich's work does not appear obviously comic, the situation of the time of its production – the great war, October 1917, the period of war communism – may be a sufficient explanation. Malevich was from the beginning (the Black Square) a social realist, and neither the realities of the time nor the utopianism with which they were countered readily lend themselves as comic material. Malevich proposed and presented a particular version of abstraction – 'non-objectivity' (*bespredmetnost*) – an objectlessness found in 'the non-objective world' (the real world, to be sure) and articulated a subject-position in the work that, we propose, is akin to the comic. In this subject-position comedy and the modern show their affinity.

Malevich's 1915 tract, *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting*[39], is critical of 'the rubbish-filled pool of Academic art',[40] but also of impressionism, cubism and futurism. Even as these latter artists 'cast off the robes of the past' and open themselves to the new in modern life, making their subject-matter planes and automobiles rather than saints and madonnas, in their mode of representation they remain tied to the ideas of the past, to 'the forms of utilitarian reason'.[41] Malevich, conventionally, opposes 'intuition' to instrumental reason – the latter the source of the failure of those futurist pictures where construction 'is calculated to achieve an impression' and whose appeal is limited to 'aesthetic taste'. It is where intuition comes from that defines the position from which this critique is made. 'The intuitive form

[39] K. Malevich. 'From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting' (1916). Included in T. Andersen (ed.), K.S. Malevich. *Essays on Art 1915-1933, Vol. 1*, tr. X. Glowacki-Prus and A. McMillin, Copenhagen and London, Rapp & Whiting, 1969, p.38.

[40] Malevich 1916, p. 19.

[41] Malevich 1916, p. 30.

comes from nothing'.

The first Suprematist exhibition of 1915, '0. 10', which Malevich's text accompanied, takes its title from the artists' intention: 'we intend to reduce everything to zero… [and] will then go beyond zero'[42]. This zero – the absence of presumption, the void in which the work appears – is first the subject-position of the artist. 'I have transformed myself *in the zero of form...*'.[43] Not merely the presumption of a fresh start and a disavowal of a particular history, Malevich avers a positive nihilism, translating the zero of form or 'nothing' into a positive entity. 'Nothing influences me and "nothing", as an entity, determines my consciousness'.[44] Malevich's 'target of destruction' is 'the world of objects', 'the circle of things'[45] from which the artist has escaped. In the passage to the non-objective world the artist 'should abandon subject and objects', abandon itself as subject in a disinvestment from not simply individual objects, but the object world as such. 'The contours of the objective world fade more and more and so it goes, step by step, until finally the world – "everything we have loved and by which we have lived" – becomes lost to sight'.[46] The object-world is dissolved: not, obviously, that such things as planes and

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[42] The full title of the exhibition was *0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Pictures*' (Poslednyaya futuristicheskaya vystavka kartin). The '10' referred to the original number of participants (subsequently expanded to 14). The statement 'we intend to reduce everything to zero...' comes from a letter of May 1915, quoted in B. Alsthuler. *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century*, Harry N. Abrahams, New York 1994, p. 78

[43] 'I have transformed myself *in the zero of form* and dragged myself out of the *rubbish-filled pool of Academic art.* ' (Malevich 1916, 19)

[44] K. Malevich. 'God is Not Cast Down' (1922). Included in T. Andersen (ed.) 1969, p. 188

[45] Malevich (1916), p. 19.

[46] Malevich 'The Non-Objective World' (1927). (Chipp (ed.) 1968, 342).

automobiles, and even saints and madonnas, cease to exist, but that the consciousness that sees the world as a set of objects, connected by a set of other objects – concepts and rules that can be understood through a method – is replaced by a consciousness that is 'non-objective'. 'Nothing in the objective world is as 'secure and unshakeable' as it appears to our conscious minds. We should accept nothing as pre-determined – as constituted for eternity. Every "firmly established" familiar thing can be shifted about and brought under a new and, primarily, unfamiliar order'.[47] An absolute contingency of determination – 'nothing' – aims to 'teach our consciousness to see everything in nature not as real forms and objects, but as material masses from which forms must be made, which have nothing in common with nature'.[48]

Emmanuel Martineau distinguishes in Malevich a different procedure of abstraction, one that is 'absolute' or 'total', and is contrasted with the common (*vulgaire*) concept and procedure of abstraction.[49] The latter is an 'abstraction from' (*abstractio ab*), a methodological reduction that removes the individuality of entities and instances, abstracts from them, to arrive at general concepts and forms. This procedure is sanctified by a method that it attributes to nature but is in fact already complicit in the construction of what nature is. Malevich's opposition to method is an attempt to 'disengage the essence of art from its vulgar interpretation as power (*pouvoir*), *können*, which places this power

[47] Malevich 'The Non-Objective World' (1927). (Chipp (ed.) 1968, 344).

[48] Malevich (1916), (Andersen (ed.) 1969, p. 25).

[49] E. Martineau. *Malevitch et la Philosophie*, Lausanne 1977, pp. 15-61. Cited in J-C. Marcade. 'K. S. Malevich: From Black Quadrilateral (1913) to White on White (1917); from the Eclipse of Objects to the Liberation of Space', in S. Barron and M. Tuchman (ed.). *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910-1930: New Perspectives*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, MIT Press, 1980, p. 23n.

under the rule of a knowing how (*savoir faire*)'.[50] Common abstraction remains beholden in its method to a concept of nature and natural representation, or a form of representation that reveals the truth of nature. In the same way, the Futurists, even as they moved beyond natural objects as their subject-matter and aimed to depict pure movement, remained in a naturalized form of representation, in the 'nature' of painting or sculpture. It is not in fact nature, but history, that is embedded in this form of abstraction. An idea of tradition is the hidden term in its purported rationality – a universal lawgiver the repressed term of its universal laws. In Martineau's distinction between common abstraction and the absolute abstraction of Suprematism, a different temporality is at work. 'Total abstraction' is not *from* anything but only an abstraction *to* (*abstractio ad*) something, which, starting with nothing, opens itself only to the field of possibility, to the future. In the non-objective world 'life itself, indeed, is already futurist'[51], as the meaning of things is always yet to be constructed.

The black square[52] is a sign with variable meanings. In Malevich's writings it stands at different times for 'world economy', Lenin, 'non-objective feeling' and 'nothing'.[53] If Malevich's work is 'haunted by the dream of painting at last

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[50] Martineau 1977, 28.

[51] K. Malevich. *The Non-Objective World* (1927). (Chipp (ed.) 1968, 339)

[52] Including Malevich's 1915 painting, the later versions of this work, the appearance of the sign in the works of his followers (Lissitzky), in publications, and as the shoulder and lapel badges of UNOVIS delegations

[53] 'The black square as the whole field was the first form in which non-objective feeling came to be expresses. The square = feeling, the whole field = the void beyond feeling.' K. Malevich. *The Non-Objective World* (1927). Included in H. Chipp (ed.). *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*. University of California Press, Berkeley, L.A. and London, 1968, p. 343. (Malevich 1927) In 1924 Malevich submitted a proposal for a monument to Lenin consisted of a pedestal composed of machinery on top of which was a simple cube. When asked, 'But where's Lenin?' Malevich pointed

leaving the realm of convention behind, of attaining immediacy',[54] this is not the immediacy of the auratic object or 'truth to materials' (for the sign appears in different contexts and materials) but of a signification 'the contents of which are not known to the artist'. The black square, in its various manifestations, is a sign of the arbitrariness of signs; a sign of the times, of 'a world where the sign is arbitrary, because subject to endless social convolutions'.[55] The crisis of representation and the general collapse in 'confidence in the sign', Clark writes, affected 'capitalism's most precious means of representation, money. [Nestor] Makhno as usual saw the point. The money he issued in the anarchist republic had printed on it the message that no-one would be prosecuted for forging it.'[56] Malevich's abstraction is not the absence of signification or representation, but about signification, an attempt to represent a 'non-objective world' where things are visible as having the arbitrariness of signs.

For Martineau, Malevich uses 'nothing' as an instrument of 'the liberation of freedom'.[57] Malevich, in the period of UNOVIS, linked the program of non-objectivity with a political program. 'Communism is already non-objective. Its problem is to make *consciousness* non-objective, to free the world from the

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to the cube. T. J. Clark. *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism.* Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1999, p. 225. 'The black square is the mark of world economy'. UNOVIS leaflet, quoted in L. Zhadova. *Malevich, Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930*, Thames and Hudson, London 1982 p. 299. 'Black = death = matter = nothing.' (T. J. Clark, 1999, 251)

[54] T. J. Clark (1999), p. 253.

[55] T. J. Clark (1999), p. 256.

[56] T. J. Clark (1999), p. 257.

[57] '*libération de la liberté*'. E. Martineau. *Malévitch et la Philosophie: La Question de la Peinture Abstraite*, Lausanne, L'Age d'Homme, 1977, p. 33. 'L'Abstraction picturale est un libération, celle qui libère le Rien'. Martineau 1977, 47.

attempts of men to grasp it as their own possession'.[58] The surrender of the self, transformed in a zero of form, was part of a general dissolution of all objective categories into the desert of feeling, now put to the service of an actual political transformation. 'The self must be annihilated, in the name of unity, in the name of coming together'.[59] 'I' is to be replaced by 'we': 'We, as utilitarian perfection'.[60] The scope of the transformation that was heralded – a total transformation of thought – is brought into direct contrast with the paucity of the material out of which the transformation is to be made. 'From our point of view, what matters is simply the extraordinary being-together in 1920 of the grossest struggle with the realm of necessity and the grandest (or at least most overweening) attempt to imagine necessity otherwise. Imagining otherwise was for a while actually instituted as part of the state apparatus. Some might say it was what the state did best – the one realm in which production propaganda really had results.'[61] Clark refers to Malevich's 'manic assertions' and 'mad rant'. In a period where an 'economics of the transition period' is called for, it seems perfectly reasonable. The contingency of signs and that there is no natural object as there is no natural language for representing objects, marks a moment in consciousness – a deferring of meanings and perceptions, a shuttling between spaces, kinds of materiality and narrative construction – that is not only historically modern. If, Clark writes, this is what it would be like to live in

[58] K. Malevich. *Appendix From the Book on Non-Objectivity* (1924). Andersen (ed.) 1969, p. 348.

[59] K. Malevich. 'Concerning the 'ego' and the collective'. *UNOVIS Almanac 1*, quoted in A. Shatskikh, 'Unovis: Epicentre of a New World' in *The Great Utopia. The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932*. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1992, p. 56.

[60] Title of a UNOVIS publication announced in 1920 but never published. Quoted in T. J. Clark, 1999, p. 264.

[61] T. J. Clark, 1999, p. 245.

a world where the sign was arbitrary, 'it is not a world we shall live in without the revolution taking place'[62]. The undecidability of the Black Square – 'at once the strongest instance of the new belief-system and its *reductio ad absurdam'* – qualifies it as a sign of this modern consciousness. 'Among its many other undecideables – is it figure? is it ground? is it matter? is it spirit? is it fullness? is it emptiness? is it end? is it beginning? is it nothing? is it everything? is it manic assertion? or absolute letting-go? – is the question of whether it laughs itself to scorn. (And even if it does, laughter and scorn could well be Nietzschean positives as Duchampian nay-saying. They might lead the way to the Nothing that is.)'[63]

4.4. A singular modernity

In *A Singular Modernity*, Jameson considers the various attempts to locate modernity as a historical period. Modernity 'always means setting a date and positing a beginning'.[64] Recapitulating the various dates and events ascribed to modernity's inception – an array of theories about the beginning of the period of modernity: the Protestant Reformation, the discovery of the Americas, the Cartesian break, Galileo, the French and Industrial revolutions, the Enlightenment etc. – he concludes that modernity must be considered less a historical period than an idea, in so far as the idea of distinct and differentiable

[62] T. J. Clark, 1999, p. 256.

[63] T. J. Clark, 1999, 254

[64] Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essays on the Ontology of the Present*, Verso, London and New York, 2002, p. 31. (Jameson 2002)

historical periods is itself a modern conceit. The 'grand narrative' which discerns the 'essence' of an age is itself part of a way of looking at the world that is characteristic of modernity. It is only from within the conceptual framework of modernity that we can think of modernity as a distinct historical period. What is important in the concept is not that in modernity a new historical figure emerged on the historical stage, for new figures had emerged throughout history, but that the modern figure thought of itself as new. 'Modern', in its first usage, simply means 'now' or 'the time of the now'; but in the concept, as it is transferred from individual experience to a collective sense of the age, there is the idea of a decisive break, a forceful separation of the past from the present. Jameson cites Schelling: 'There can in fact be no past without a powerful present, a present achieved in the disjunction [of our past] from ourselves. That person incapable of confronting his or her own past antagonistically really can be said to have no past; or better still, he never gets out of his own past, and lives perpetually within it still.'[65] In this 'unique moment', 'the past is created by way of its energetic separation from the present; by way of a powerful act of dissociation whereby the present seals off its past from itself and expels and ejects it; an act without which neither present nor past truly exist, the past not yet fully constituted, the present still living on within the force field of a past not yet over and done with.'[66]

If modernity, for Jameson, is to be considered 'a unique kind of rhetorical effect, or, if you prefer, a trope',[67] it is one wholly different in structure from

[65] Jameson 2002, pp. 24-5.

[66] Jameson 2002, p. 25.

[67] Jameson 2002, p. 34.

the traditional figures that have been catalogued since antiquity. As a collective idea of its own difference, the trope of modernity brings the modern into being by its own articulation. Its appearance 'signals the emergence of a new kind of figure, a decisive break with previous forms of figurality, and it is to that extent a sign of its own existence, a signifier that indicates itself, and whose form is its very content'.[68] Its content is the 'now' (distinct from the then), 'the time of the now that is also, because it distinguishes itself from history, everything that comes before the new-time (*Neuzeit*). The temporality of the new, dispelling and excluding the past into history, is first of all a distinction of tenses, of past and present (whose futural dimension will become clear), but which when attached to personal pronouns also changes the meaning of these shifters. The modern idea here, articulated by Descartes (writing in the first person) is 'to demolish everything and start again right from the foundations':[69] to demolish therefore all the categories of experience and knowledge, to reduce the individual to an essence from which anything becomes possible. This modern moment, in general experience, is felt as a break, 'a perturbation of causality as such… the moment in which the continuities of an older social and cultural logic come to an incomprehensible end'[70]. A categorical loss of this type, the fall of the Roman empire and a consequent age that is still dark, is implicit in the *modernus* that Cassiodorus refers to, here still freighted with melancholy.[71] In the modern usage of the term (apparent already, according to Jameson, in the

[68] Jameson 2002, p. 34.

[69] Descartes, Réné, 'Meditations of a First Philosophy' in *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, tr. J. Cottingham and R. Stoothoff, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 76.

[70] Jameson 2002, p. 27.

[71] See Jameson 2002, p. 18.

various Renaissances of the 9th to 15th centuries), it has a positive valency.

The idea of a decisive break between past and present – the effect of an older social and cultural logic coming to an end – has in the modern idea turned round into a situation that is now affirmed. Far from a melancholy loss, it is the positive affirmation of the new as a time reborn and the recognition of possibility arising in the demolition of the old order. The narrative trope, 'for the first time', Jameson writes, has a libidinal charge and is 'the operator of a unique kind of intellectual excitement not normally associated with other forms of conceptuality'[72]. The temporal orientation of this modernity – to the future – begins with nothing. Modernity here is an actual way of experiencing the world, requiring a total suspension of the customary categories. A flaw in them has widened to extend across the social field. The libidinal or psychic charge released in this situation derives from an openness of possibility and a future dependent only on the decision. What had appeared as objects, invested with an unchangeable status appears now only as 'material masses' out of which the forms of the future are to be made: the modern work. The assembly of 'material masses' – phenomenological experience – into forms becomes the energetically charged work of the present, its energy derived from a polemical hostility to the past (a past that is still present) turned round into the formation of a different future.

Jameson's characterization of modernity isolates a moment – a moment of isolation that is an absolute break (in thought) between past and present with the loss and suspension of the customary and familiar categories. Modernity, as a social thought-experiment, is a procedure of abstraction – the total abstraction

[72] Jameson 2002, p. 34.

that starts with nothing and orients its work to the future. The absolutely modern moment is therefore itself nothing, abstract and without content for there are as yet no categories to shape the noumenal into content. Without the reifying suffix that turns the modern into modernity – a self-conscious and self-valorizing period – the modern is restated as an aspiration whose future realization is the work of the present time. Nothing that is is yet modern. The modern world is not to be found in the world, but only to be made. The modern insight, as it appears in Hegel, is that there is no natural or transcendental ground for meaning. There are no categories that are absolute, but only the successive ideas that in history have been placed over the void. History is the evolution of these ideas. The modern moment, Hegel's moment, is this awareness, this absolute form of knowledge. If the modern, because the collapse of categories opens up an absolute possibility determined by the subject, is equivalent to 'absolute freedom', an absolute categorical transformation, and therefore of terror arising in the failure of the will to recognize anything other than itself, this temptation, however, is pure negation and not the negation of negation. For if there is no natural or transcendental ground for meaning, no categorical absolute, then the only basis for meaning is agreement, an agreement that is only free and actual – agreeable – when predicated on mutual recognition and the suspension of the categorical in the view of the other. Objects become visible as nothing more than a means of mediating a relation between people: the nature of this relation determines what sort of objects there are. Objects in a relationship of mutual recognition are necessarily shared, as this recognition is of the objectlessness of the other from a position of objectlessness, with the object coming into being only in their recognition of each other through it. The object is made together in the moment. This object, for Hegel – the manifestation of spirit – is history.

History in the modern moment is not a time expelled into the past and devalued relative to a time that declares itself modern, but a history that is in the making, still awaiting its evolution. The meaning of objects in a relationship of mutual recognition, in love for example, is experienced in consciousness; but to the extent that this recognition is partial and retains a categorical distinction between what it is and what the world is – what it does and does not recognize itself in – it is one-sided and remains unfulfilled. Thus romantic lovers, separated from the world, are doomed. History (for Hegel) is the work of creating universal meaning, the object world that exists when mutual recognition is universal. The one-sided world of the master, the tragic hero enslaved to 'necessity', exceptionalism and an absolute freedom that fails to recognize its identity to terror, give way in a collective categorical collapse to the form of comedy.

5.5. Contemporary in 1962

The modern, modernism and modernity, have now become historical categories in contemporary art and theory, no longer modern in the sense of 'now'. If post-modern, post-modernism and post-modernity are the obvious signifiers that differentiate the time of the now from the time of modernism and modernity, art suffices with the general signifier 'contemporary'. – invested with the 'now' meaning that originally belonged to 'modern' – to differentiate itself from the (modern) art of the past. Some break is posited, whether the end of grand narratives *tout court* (the loss not only of an Idea but the possibility of an Idea) or some new distinct phase of 'late' capitalism. In art, generally, the break is very visible. The work of Warhol (in the 1960s), Beuys or Nauman is

immediately evident as different in its intentions and mechanisms from that of, say, Rothko or Matisse, the other side of a conceptual divide. That some artists straddle the divide, that contemporary art has precursors in practice in the modern era (Duchamp, Dada) and found its theoretical support in writing that goes back to the 19th century (Nietzsche, Freud), does not alter the idea that in the passage between modern and contemporary 'something happened'. What and when are the final questions we address here. For Badiou, 'an intellectual revolution took place at the beginning of the sixties, whose vector was mathematics, yet whose repercussions extend throughout the entirety of possible thought.'[73] The 'Cohen-event' (Badiou's explanation) is not normally thought of as the basis of the sixties revolution. An alternative event is proposed here, taking place at the beginning of the sixties, whose vector, in a sense, was mathematics, but where the realization of its material implications is the revolutionary event.

The contemporary in art, we propose, can be given a precise birth date: 31 October 1962. The reception of a specific exhibition marks a contemporary moment whose repercussions, generalized in culture and extending through the entirety of what is thought possible, marks the emergence of a new now.

> '… on 31 October 1962 – Halloween – pop art, which had always taken a strong, positive attitude towards America, exploded in the media at a group show at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York. To James Rosenquist the artists were 'post-beat and not afraid of an atomic bomb'. They thought fear passé. To Robert Indiana, 'Pop was a re-enlistment in the world. It was shuck the Bomb! It was the American dream – optimistic, generous and

[73] Alain Badiou. *Being and Event*, tr. Oliver Feltham, London and New York, Continuum, 2005, p. 16.

naïve.' The curator Walter Hopps recalled how exuberant the opening was. 'Jean Tinguely showed an icebox that had been stolen from an alley outside Marcel Duchamp's secret studio. When you opened it, a very noisy siren went off and red lights flashed. It set the noise and tone that was to continue all the way through the sixties.

Andy [Warhol] had three paintings in the show, including '200 Campbell's Soup Cans'. People pointed and whispered his name. Warhol claimed, 'I feel very much a part of my times, of my culture, as much a part of it as rocket ships and television.' However, to at least one onlooker that night he seemed more 'like a white witch, looking at America from an alien and obtuse angle'.

The Janis Gallery opening marked a changing of the guard. The older abstract painters affiliated to the gallery – Guston, Motherwell, Gottlieb and Rothko – held a meeting and resigned in disgust. On the other hand, de Kooning, who was also a member of the Janis Gallery, came to the opening. He paced back and forth in front of the paintings for two hours and left without saying a word. James Rosenquist:

'After the opening, Burton and Emily Tremaine, well-known collectors, invited me over to their house on Park Avenue. I went and was surprised to find Andy Warhol, Bob Indiana, Roy Lichtenstein and Tom Wesselmann there. Maids with little white hats were serving drinks and my painting 'Hey! Let's Go for a Ride!' and Warhol's Marilyn diptych were hanging on the wall next to fantastic Picassos and de Koonings.

> Right in the middle of our party, de Kooning came through the door with Larry Rivers. Burton Tremaine stopped them in their tracks and said, 'Oh, so nice to see you. But please, at any other time.'
>
> I was very surprised and so was de Kooning. He and the others with him soon left.
>
> Now Mr. Tremaine had never met de Kooning, and probably didn't know him by sight, which was surprising because he had bought some of his paintings, but it was a shock to see de Kooning turned away. At that moment I thought, Something in the art world has definitely changed.'[74]

The significance of Rosenquist's insight is that it took place at the house of 'well-known collectors'. It is in the reception and not production of Pop art that a contemporary moment can be recognized. The New Realists show at Sidney Janis included 54 artists, of whom 12 were American. The title of the show came from the French movement *Nouveau Réalisme*, as the label 'Pop' was borrowed from the British, but the international artists were to feel that they had been downgraded, used as a prop for the younger American artists. To an American critic, the European work, less innovative than the American, had been included to certify the existence of a new 'International Style' now led by the New York Artists.[75] The focus of critical and popular response to the show was on the latter. While Dine, Rosenquist, Lichtenstein, Segal and Warhol had shown earlier in 1962, the impact of the Janis show was of a different order of

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[74] Victor Bockris, *The Life and Death of Andy Warhol*, Fourth Estate, London, 1998, pp. 154-5.

[75] Bruce Alsthuler. *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century*, Harry N. Abrahams, New York 1994, p. 214.

magnitude. 'In the New Yorker, Harold Rosenberg said that the show 'hit the New York art world with the force of an earthquake. Within a week tremors had spread to art centers throughout the country.'[76] He attributed the 'sense of art history being made' to the prestigious venue.[77] The name Pop (as opposed to the 'Factual artists' or 'Commonists' that Janis had proposed) became the label of a movement. The New York Times: 'Pop Goes the New Art'. Time Magazine: 'Art: Pop Pop', and, more prosaically, 'Pop Art – Cult of the Commonplace'.[78]

While some critics, such as Dore Ashton, tended to view the exhibition as just more neo-Dada of the sort seen at Martha Jackson, the recent work of Lichtenstein, Warhol, Indiana, Wesselman and Rosenquist clearly pointed in a new direction. As Tom Hess reported: 'The point of the Janis show… was an implicit proclamation that the New had arrived and that it was time for the old fogies to pack… the New Realists were eyeing the old abstractionists like Khrushchev used to eye Disneyland – "We will bury you" was their motto.'[79]

If it was immediately recognized after the Janis show that 'something changed', this was as much by the public as by critics. Pop art gained 'mass popularity'[80] as rapidly as it did critical acceptance. What had changed? The extension of its audience suggests a change in the viewer as much as in the work, with new conditions in the work resonating with some new condition in the viewer.

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[76] Barbara Haskell, *Blam! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism and Performance 1958-64*, W.W. Norton, New York and London, 1984.

[77] Alsthuler 1994, p. 214.

[78] Alsthuler 1994, p. 214.

[79] Alsthuler 1994, p. 214-5.

[80] Haskell, 1984, p. 89.

Certain formal changes in the work, we propose, represent and resonate with a different condition of being in the aftermath of a revolution in 'the entirety of possible thought', whose proximate cause is not in art but a different event. A consideration both of the formal conditions of typical Pop art of the time (Warhol and Lichtenstein in 1962) and of the world-historical events that coincided with its reception provides, in combination, a conceptual differentiation of the contemporary.

Pop, relative to the previously dominant movement of abstract expressionism, is novel in its subject-matter (in that it has subject matter), its handling and formal construction, and, as an effect of these, in its affect and implied viewing subject-position. The objects in the work are commonplace (hence 'commonists') and already part of the visual landscape of the viewer. In their manner of depiction, there is an apparent absence of transformation, a deliberate refusal to represent the presence of the artist by gesture. Lichtenstein: 'I want my work to look as if it has been programmed. I want to hide the record of my hand'.[81] Both of these decisions, as was immediately commented on, marked a change from the norms of abstract expressionism. Neither, however, account for why the work was considered both new and of its time. The elimination of gesture in the impersonal style adopted by the artist, in practice, only returns painting to the academic manner that expressionist (and impressionist) modernists had reacted against but which continued in commercial art. Equally, the commonplace, everyday subject matter, though representing the objects of its time as opposed to the 'tragic and timeless' subjects of abstract expressionism, does nothing different from the futurists or

[81] Quoted in Haskell, 1984, p. 91.

any of the 'painters of modern life' of the 19th century. The Pop art of 1962 does propose a different and an impersonal subject that is both the subject-position of the artist and, through identification in the work, of the viewer. The principal technical means through which this is achieved is neither subject matter nor handling.

The critical difference between the contemporary art discussed here and its 'modern' predecessors (Abstract Expressionism) is, we propose, articulated through a spatial relationship in the work, through the relation of figure and ground. De Kooning's *Woman 1* (1950-2) typifies the basic trope of aesthetic modernism. Figure merges into ground, their difference barely sufficient to establish a distinction between them, with expressive gestures equally in both. The relation between figure and ground, whose disjunction is necessary for a figure to appear, is marked in the tradition of painting since the Renaissance by an equally powerful conjunction, a bringing together of figure and ground into a single compositional unity. The affect of the figure and the type of subject it is, is confirmed by the ground, such that the ground becomes another figure – the subject of the work – and the work achieves a unity and consistency that invites the viewer to suspend their own separate identity and be absorbed by the work. A dual absorption takes place. In the distinction Fried makes between absorption and theatricality (originally in respect of 18th century painting), absorption aims to promote 'the fiction of the beholder's non-existence'.[82] The figures are absorbed in their own activity, as they are also absorbed in their setting, existing in a separated, unselfconscious world into which the viewer is

[82] Michael Fried. *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot.* University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1988. p. 153.

also absorbed. The means by which, in the work, figure is absorbed into ground is composition – a harmony of the parts and completion of pictorial unity that constitutes the aesthetic. Contemplation, the basic mode of viewing of aesthetic works, involves the suspension of the self and the absorption of the subject into the work: a loss therefore, but also redemption in the transformation and transfiguration of the subject in the aesthetic realm. Fry, for example, makes explicit this aim: the work of art represents 'a world by itself, independent, complete, autonomous'[83]. Its aim is the aesthetic transformation of the subject, to remove the viewer from everyday life. This dual absorption, of figure into ground in the work, and thereby of viewer into the work, is the characteristic trope of modern art (since Hegel's time). A progressive diminution and disappearance of the figure is visible in Romanticism, in the sublime, in expressive landscape (where a figure is no longer necessary and the landscape becomes the figure – Cezanne's landscapes are self-portraits) and finally in abstraction: the logical end of this progression is the Abstract Expressionist paintings, unspecified landscapes that, through their scale and over-all composition, become 'environments in their own right'.[84] This movement comes to an end in 1962.

If modernism (in this strain) had as its primary trope absorption, Pop art, in the disjunction of figure and ground, represented a different subject-position. A common feature of the (1962) work of Warhol, Lichtenstein and Dine was the plain, white ground. The object (soup can, comic strip, sink) sits against this zero-point of painting, but does not (as it cannot) merge into it. In terms of the

[83] Roger Fry. *Transformations* 1926 p. 8.

[84] Haskell 1984, p. 18.

absence of transformation, the 'forfeiture of artistic decision-making' and 'death of affect',[85] the ground achieves this to a greater degree than the figure in the work, where misalignments and other errors of hand and making represent, for Foster, the return of the real.[86] Whatever the perfection or imperfection of the object image, the relation between figure and ground is disjunctive. The figure appears against a ground that is not merely abstract or metaphysical but empty. Haskell claims that the lack of transformation in the object 'transferred subjectivity to the viewer'.[87] It is instead, we suggest, the ground of the work, against which the object is set and from which position, as it were, it is viewed, that proposes a subject-position – the subjectivity of the affectless artist that invites the recognition of the viewer. The affect of the work is in the self-recognition of the viewer of nothing as the ground of their own subjectivity. Warhol himself, in answer to a friend who asked him why he painted soup cans, replied 'I wanted to paint nothing. I was looking for the essence of nothing, and that was it.'[88] The transcendence here is of a different type to the modernist one.

The no-ground of Pop art is an irreconcilable disjunction between figure and ground, subject and work, that presents a fundamental spatial reconfiguration and represents an equally fundamental temporal reconfiguration. The Janis show opened on Wednesday, 31 October, three days after the resolution of the

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[85] Haskell 1984, p. 77.

[86] Hal Foster. *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1996, ch. 5 pp.127-136.

[87] Haskell 1984, p. 84.

[88] Bastien, Heiner, 'Rituals of Unfulfillable Individuality – The Whereabouts of Emotions', in H. Bastien, *Andy Warhol Retrospective*, London, Tate Publishing, 2001 p. 26

Cuban missile crisis on Sunday 28 October. For the previous week, 'TV newsmen displayed maps with sweeping arcs showing every large city but Seattle to be in the range of Cuba's missiles. Schoolchildren practiced hiding under their desks. Each day tension grew as missile-bearing Russian ships approached the blockade line. Would they try to cross it? Would they be stopped or sunk? Would Russia strike back then? On retiring no one knew if he would live to see the morning. Was the country, perhaps the world, to perish now?'[89]

The Cuban missile crisis introduced into general consciousness a new temporality, introducing in history the realizable idea that human existence, by its own actions, might come to an imminent, premature end. Every child learnt that the world might come to an end at three minutes notice. Thus the end of history is not some happy state of universal understanding, nor some distant planetary extinction, but an imminent and mutually assured destruction achieved by human action. Whether a nuclear war in 1962 would have resulted in the total extinction of human life, a planet occupied at best by dragon-flies and cockroaches, is questionable. It was however believed. Nor was the idea in itself new, but had been a concern since the1950s. In the Cuban missile crisis, however, the idea, as an imminent actual threat became real.

Modernity, Jameson writes, in bringing the category of a distinct present into being, also opens up the category of the future. If the present is different from the past then the future may be different from the present. Creating its modern present in an act of separation and judgment that differentiates itself from the

[89] William O'Neil. *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960s.* Quadrangle Books, Chicago, 1971. Quoted in Bockris, 1998, p. 154.

past and asserts it superiority, this present then invites and lives in the shadow of the judgment of some future time. An element of guilt, Jameson claims, is inseparable from the modern condition, 'that anxiety in the face of an unknown future and its judgments for which the thematics of a simple posterity is a truly insipid characterization'[90]. The modern work is progressive to the extent that it iterates the judgments of a possible future – a 'gaze from the future'[91] – into its present production. It makes not only new work but also a new basis of judgment of work. In the conflicted temporality of modernity, the present is grounded in the future: while dispelling the past (in theory) it in practice retains its certainty through historic forms that it re-presents in modern dress. The completion of modernity is imagined as discarding these historic remnants, to be modern only in so far as the present is grounded in a different future, the future ground into which present subjects will be absorbed and transfigured. The contemporary moment, as we describe it, forecloses this future ground. It is not only that, in the possibility or likelihood of human self-extinction – autohumanicide – at some point in the future marks a point of closure of the future, but it eliminates a point of judgment of the future. Even the willful extinction of humanity cannot be considered a crime, as there would be no 'last man' to declare it so or consciousness to think it. The future 'ancestrality' of absolute extinction is literally unthinkable. The end of history is also the end of consciousness, memory and judgment. It is also the end of guilt therefore, of responsibility as Jameson more neutrally terms it, occasioning the removal even

[90] Jameson 2001, p. 26.

[91] Jameson 2001, p. 26.

of ‘the present’s responsibility for its own self-definition of its own mission’.[92] The foreclosure of the future, as a time of human existence and judgment, brings into being a present whose relation to the past is also changed. No longer either valued tradition or a superseded history, the past becomes no more than a series of signs to be used or misused (there is no distinction) at will in the present’s irresponsible self-definition. The contemporary moment consists in the removal of any temporal ground, the absence of temporal categorization being represented in spatial terms by a ground that is absolutely disjunctive to the objects placed on it, which can therefore be safely ignored even as it renders them utterly contingent.

The aim here is not to ignore but to embrace this ground. The ‘end of the world’, either as dramatically staged in 1962 or as the inevitable consequence of economic processes in which we can all participate, is the limit point of the absolute transformation that is capital’s end and purpose. It is also the ground of comedy. Comedy embraces the logic of this loss and turns it round into the basis of collectivity, with objectlessness being the common object through which mutual recognition is mediated. As the future exists until it no longer does, but its judgments are nullified by its end, the present work is validated neither by the judgment of the future nor the values of the past, but by its own momentum and occasional moments of grace, when it transcends repetition and rigidity.

5.6. Conclusion: ‘The end of the world’.

[92] Jameson 2001, p. 26.

The aim of the work has been to identify a condition, a specific abstraction in language. A categorical collapse and emptying out of the full signifiers that construct meaning in a situation fractures the connection between things, leaving objects in place but coloured over with an affective cast of unreality. The Freudian example locates this trauma in the family situation. For the child, whose family is its world, its abstraction and loss is the loss of a world. The event that Freud generalizes as object-loss, in its pathological instance, is the loss of a love object but also 'a loss of a more general kind'. It is not, as in normal mourning, that an object of love has been lost, but that the spatial and temporal categories that orient the subject's world have been shattered. Triangulated in the relationship of what Deleuze and Guattari call 'mommy-daddy-me' the family is for the subject a spatial category; it is these coordinates that are rendered moot in object-loss. Equally, in the inconsistency of the event, the expectation of temporal continuity –literally of familiarity –is undermined.

Object-loss and objectlessness are equated here with non-objectivity, abstraction, a loss in language and representation of which the event that Freud locates in a familiar context is but one example. The family in practice is interpellated by political economy; it 'works by itself' to act out the separation that capital, by colonizing even the unconscious, dictates throughout economic society. The trauma of object-loss is not due to an event that once occurred, but that the child, sensitized by an unreasonable premature exposure, re-encounters this separation everyday, dispersed in economic life. Abstraction is reproduced in capital, as the affective core of emptiness that drives surplus production. Real abstraction, an abstraction that is 'readymade' – that is, an abstraction that is not the result of the failure or collapse of a system of representation and

production but is inbuilt in the system – is the modern form that capital produces. In the cash nexus, money as an agent of unbinding substitutes the quantification of an abstraction for any and all particular forms. Instead of a system where individuals relate to each other in a collective exchange of differences (an experience now that only commodities have, as only they speak to each other in this way), in capital the individual comes to mean the same thing as the self, a self which relates not to other individuals but, as its other, to a generalized abstraction.

Abstraction, as both a real loss and a continuing disturbance in language – an inability to articulate something and to articulate what it cannot articulate – belongs to the inexpressible and therefore the mystical. As such, it doesn't constitute a subject, a figure or object that stands out against a ground, because it is itself an empty ground. That there are categories of experience that are not informed by a presence, an identifiable thing, but by an absence, is sufficient to justify the empirical claim for abstraction. The primary concern here (concerning the nature of art) is the forms of production that abstraction generates, forms that are objective, tangible and material but whose logic can be best explained by reference to an absent term. Abstraction, an absence (the absence of what is the point at issue) is manifest in specific generic forms, in a habit of idealization (the 'epic' form) but also (which is the principal 'target of destruction' of the present work) in all the different ways in which the genre of tragedy manifests itself. Tragedy, which plays out the founding conditions of abstraction over and over again, is, we claim, the dominant modern genre of production, the form of capital, of the spectacle, and distributed in culture as a general romanticism, dynamically operative in production as the play of the

‘individual’ and ‘abstract necessity’ – the form of consciousness of our present day masters.

If abstraction is the premise of the present argument, tragedy, read as a particular representation and expression of abstraction, is the objective form that the present work takes issue with. An attempt has been made to describe various modes in which the tragic structure (the tragic argument) is expressed. These include, in the aesthetic realm, an autonomous and compositional aestheticism in art and a type of essentially formal abstraction that sometimes comes to be identified with modernism itself, of which Kandinsky is an early example and abstract expressionism the culmination. Rothko, for example, is a supreme representation of the tragic view, the work precisely appealing in its traditional mysticism. The prime locus of tragic abstraction is however capital, with the dramatic production represented in the spectacle, where the spectacle is not only ‘aether’ (films, TV, media etc.) but all forms of production – goods, architecture, infrastructure, modes of transport, practices of work – including necessarily the consumption that is part of work in the spectacle. Capital itself, in our presentation, is the tragic hero of the drama, itself subject to the logic of division that is the ruling logic of this genre. Economics, as a force of ‘abstract necessity’ confronts the unlimited power of the ‘individual’ (in practice no more than the psychic equivalent of private property) in a dynamic contradiction that produces, as its good, only more abstract production, and ultimately the destruction of all individual forms, including its own. Tragedy, in its basic form, is the drama where the flaw in the hero, a one-sidedness and incompletion that is covered over and repressed by idealizations, brings about as its consequence the tragic ending, the ‘death and oblivion’ of the hero and

the other principals. The innate destructiveness of this form, with certainty, becomes more visible. In Freud's clear pathway, this melancholy formation incorporates death (whether actual or symbolic, in either case artificial) into its ego, its subjective being. Withdrawing fundamentally from anaclitic attachments, its mode of sustaining itself is narcissistic identification; its work therefore becomes the reproduction in objective form of itself – the value of itself – including the death and destructiveness that is the repressed term of its ambivalent being.

The critique of tragedy (not against real tragedy but its ideological reproduction in art and elsewhere) is coloured by the view that the 'epic' form, which is both an appeal to a tradition and a reference to the absolute and ideal, is itself implicit and complicit in the genre of tragedy. Idealization is the compensating move to the absolute loss that constitutes abstraction and the prosthetic means by which the individual stabilizes itself in the loss of substance. Covering over and repressing the void in the subject, the ideal terms provide a superstructure that the base then uses as its material. The tragic/epic synthesis is not only that the epic is tragedy in latent form, but that tragedy, in the real abstraction of capital, relies on epic forms ('universal' values, ethical practices, the rights of the individual etc.) to reproduce itself. Epic ideals are the material that capital is the corruption of; ethical opposition, human values and individualism become productive goods to be recuperated in exchange value. The tragic/epic nexus is the military-industrial complex of contemporary society, reproduced in culture to assist capital's own reproduction. The final form that the ideal assumes, translated through the lyric and romanticism to a minor key, is the individual – the cult object of our day. This is not, as Hegel would insist, an actual

(*wirklich*) individuality, but a one-sided representation that ignores its actual substance. Irony, the final, genial form of tragedy, is the expression of an individuality that, reducing everything except itself to equivalence, becomes abstract and without content.

In the context of art, comedy is proposed as an alternative form of abstract production (the creation and disposal of surpluses), arising in response to abstraction but, in this case, in a form that neither traps the abstract within an ideal nor uses it as a force of destruction. Total abstraction (as opposed to formal abstraction, which is a specific form of recuperation and response to total abstraction) has been read from the beginning as a collapse of the categories, comprising the spatial and temporal conditions of thought that orient the subject and allow it, in a structure of representation, to be read as a meaning, as an object that can be held. The epic and tragedy take this abstraction and loss as their material; they view it from another position; that of representation. The subject occupies the position of *before* in its view of its actual situation, its actual individuality. Comedy, we propose, takes categorical collapse as its opening premise. All the categories – the beautiful, good etc. – are brought into question and revealed as upside-down or absurd in some aspect. The joke typically occurs at the moment when some signifier, retaining the same outward form, is thrown into a different categorical structure where it makes equal but completely different sense. Bergson identifies comedy with the absence of repetition, through which, at its logical conclusion, literally nothing can be taken for granted. A certain grace is the correlate of the performer operating in this void.

To the extent that abstraction is total, comedy is total. In the Greek example, comedy questions the validity of any and every form: as with capital, there is nothing that does not fall under it. All gods, sacred cows, conventions, ethical standards are turned upside-down and brought to their lowest value. The comic performer – who unlike the ironist is invested in the work – must also bring himself to nought (while remaining serene in the process). The individual is the form that disappears at the moment of comedy, reappearing as a complete, universal absurdity in its lightness. In the democracy of comedy, any and every individual can fall sway to the comic scythe. The comedian leads the sacrifice. Comedy here may be dissociated from laughter, where often a hysterical note, a too violent release from repression, is present. Our humour is cool to the extent that it is continuous. The basic condition of comedy, as narrative, is a happy ending – and the lightness that arises in the light of this.

Comedy, abstracted theoretically as the moment when the subject assumes the position of the void, is identified with a position in art that is essential to the contemporary understanding of art. It is not only that critical moments in art history entail a fundamental categorical shift (from the ideal to representation, from representation to the object), but that, in its individual moments (Uccello, El Greco, Goya, Blake, to pick more obvious examples), there is a vacuity of categorical affirmation that produces both a comic affect and a curious objectivity. Comedy, we have proposed is both rational and real. Its objectivity however is not a relation to the real, but a relation to signs, seeing through them but only to the void beyond. Comedy is a form made out of the contingency of forms. Western art, in its Greek beginnings, Renaissance revival and classical age, up to the point at which it is identified in aesthetic theory as art, is a

mixture of cartoon and facture; it is at its highest points both representation and a parody of representation in equal measure. The comic spirit – the individual beginning that comes from a categorical vacuity – is what distinguishes art from skilled making. It becomes critical (in a Kantian sense) to the extent that it addresses the categories of thought.

Comedy, as a form of consciousness evident in art, is also a vehicle for liberation. 'Jokes produce freedom, and freedom produces jokes'. Jokes, for Freud, are a means of overcoming repression, but unlike symptoms and unconscious slips, they do not sidestep repression but attack it directly. The return the unconscious to the social, its primary and prelapsarian condition. The abstraction of comedy implies a different relation to time and to history, which is its record. The original moment of abstraction – the loss of the continuity and indifference of past, present and future in traditional society – opens up these categories, creating a cleavage between past and present, but also in this loss of temporal innocence opens up an idea of agency, of the work of a future as different from the present as the present is from the past. In the epic, a new tradition re-stabilizes the social order. In the modern re-valorization, the past becomes a split object, part a bad, primitive time of ignorance and superstition, but also the repository, in carefully selected moments, of timeless values. If, in the modern idea, the present is valorized as containing a greater quantity of these values, it equally imagines a future that surpasses the present. Such a progression, extended in the practical infinity of cosmological time, implies a final point of resolution, of the absolute wisdom that lies at the end of history. Utopia, a displaced search for tradition, finds its reflection in the modern's search for origins, itself a displaced attempt to define the future. The end-point,

as Jameson points out, confers a responsibility and guilt on the present – a duty of labour – but also casts this production in the genre of tragedy as, at the end of time, this human good also comes to nought. It is in the disappearance of this endpoint, of the natural end to the human (the inhuman)[94] that comedy appears.

This thesis has attempted to suggest that the 'contemporary' (recognized in art) is coincident with the different temporality that arises in the technological ability of the human species to destroy itself, in *toto*. The terminal point of human consciousness, the point at which nothing can any longer be known, remembered, thought or judged, is no longer some distant cosmological event, following the evolution of the human to a point of resolution, but instead an imminent (3 minute warning), premature and unjust ending of everything. This new, artificial end throws into doubt any natural, futural end. In the context of cosmological time, human history, the sum of everything to date, is a speck. As a fraction of total possibility, it is closer to its beginning and absolute ignorance than to absolute wisdom. The modernistic hubris was to apply a millennial time frame to the end point of history. The west, *das Abendland*, recognizes itself at the evening of the day. Both an impossibly distant cosmological end and the imminent technological variant reinforce the message of knowledge as error, in its actually existing form as infinitesimally provisional. That the summit of educational, scientific, technological and industrial competence is 'mutual assured destruction' guarantees the objectivity of comedy.

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[94] Lyotard's essay, *The Inhuman* (J.F. Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, tr. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) concerns the existential effect of this future cosmological event (the end of our solar system).

Comedy, as the suspension of all categories and a demonstration of their ability to shift purely by chance and accident, advertises the flimsy conditionality of understanding (the things and powers we stand under). Absolute ignorance, about something in particular but turned into a ruling principle of the character, is what is funny. The principle of ignorance, where nothing is more than it is, returns language to itself. Formed in the moment, it now appears as no more than an attempt, whether for pragmatic or non-instrumental purposes, to establish a connection with another, a temporary translation of the not-knowing, not-being individual into the sphere of the social, where knowledge and being exist. The disappearance of the individual, the one that thinks and 'knows' itself in the powers it claims in its name, returns language to its being as a collective medium, a mutually assured construction that in its moment supports a pragmatic and social collectivity. The signifier (including any pronoun) in itself is nothing but a form of convenience and a temporary vessel that lightly carries, in its individually different presentation, a moment of connection. Language, as a butterfly floating above the void, achieves this lightness because there is nothing beneath it. Wit is the freedom of the signifier (freeing itself also from the existing concept of freedom): because it is nothing, it only has a future.

Illustrations to the text

Figure 1. Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition V*, 1911
Oil on canvas, 190 x 275 cm. Private Collection.

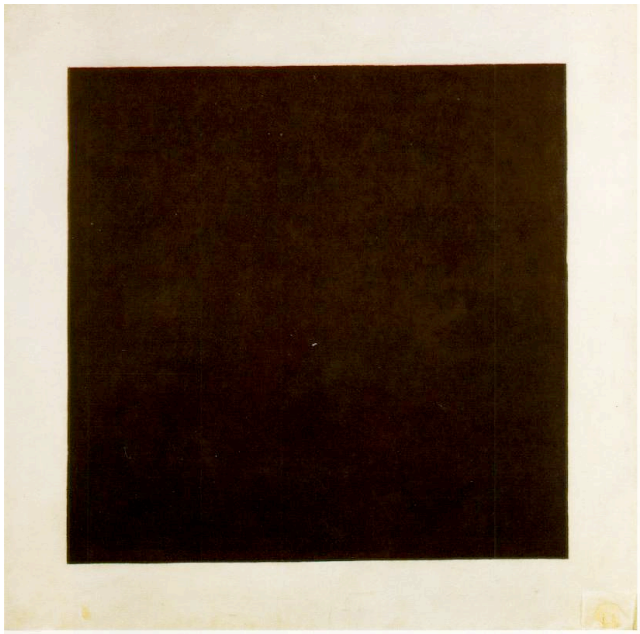

Figure 2. Kasimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915
Oil on canvas, 53.5 x 53.5 cm. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

Figure 3. ‘The abstract work of art’
Kouros 530/520 BC, National Museum, Athens.

Figure 4. Marcel Duchamp, *Readymade: bottle rack* 1914/64
Galvanized iron, 59 x 37 cm. Original lost. Replica. Private Collection.

Figure 5. Willem de Kooning, *Woman 1* 1950-2
Oil on canvas, 192.7 x 147.3 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York

Figure 8. Andy Warhol, *Campbell's Soup Can*, 1962
Synthetic polymer on canvas, 50.8 x 40.6 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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Appendix: Notes on artwork and images

Notes on artwork

The work presented as part of this thesis consists of a number of photographs, taken with a large-format (5 x 4") film camera; these are shown as same size contact prints. 134 photographs are shown, which together constitute a single work. The photographs are of different objects, placed on a pale grey ground. Variations in natural light, exposure and printing, plus the reflections cast by the coloured objects, produce some small variations in the shade and tone of the ground. The format of the images is constant: a single object – in a few cases more than one, in one case none – is placed on a ground that is neutral and devoid of context. The objects are photographed from above, though the position of the camera is not constant. The contact prints are presented uncropped, and mounted to show the mark of the negative slide-holder and film type. Each individual photograph is 10 x 12cm., held in a 20 x 20 cm. mount. Presented in 5 rows and 37 columns, placed contiguously with irregular gaps, the total dimensions of the work are 1.0 x 7.4 m.

The photographs are different, but of the same sort of objects. These objects, which appear as coloured shapes, are constructions made of Styrofoam and coloured paper. They are straight edged, rectilinear and simple. Collectively, they are coloured in a limited range of primary and secondary colours, white, black, and grey; individual objects may be monochrome, a single colour and white, or multicoloured. The scale of the objects is not immediately apparent: details and defects of manufacture suggest they are small.

The set of photographs presented here constitute a single unfinished work, In its present state the work has the title *Toy Zoo* (2010-13); in a different state or presentation it might have a different title. Each of the individual photographs also has a title. An accompanying list gives these titles together with a number and thumbnail image for reference. The titles of the works consist sometimes of a single letter, punctuated or unpunctuated (1. *'H'*, 20. *T*, 26. *'I'*, 124. *Y?*); a single word (5. *Sea*, 7. *Vertical*, 27. *Carefully*); a pair of words, for instance a qualified term (21. *Strong man*, 55. *Broken dollar*, 107. *Alien dog*); or a phrase or sentence (52. *Time flies like an arrow,* 119. *In god we trust*, 130. *Why so twisted?*). In some cases the relationship between title and image is clear: *'H'* (1.) is an image of an object in the shape of an H. Why *'H'* is in inverted commas or why the object is photographed on its side is not immediately apparent. In many cases the relation between title and image is not so obviously descriptive. An orange and white shape is titled *Up* (4); a similar shape, in a different colour, is titled *Stealth* (98.) An image that appears to be of a bone is called *In god we trust* (119) An irregular coloured shape is titled *False economy* (121).

At a distance the work appears like a coloured form of lettering, broken up into dots as if to be machine-readable. What this might say in ordinary language is not apparent. A closer view shows the individual images as part of the sequence or pattern created by their relation to the others surrounding them. Some sequences appear formally related (5, 6, 7); some appear to spell something out (79, 80, 81); in most cases the logic of the pattern is not immediately evident. A closer study of individual images reveals details of their manufacture: that they

are photographs of actual objects rather than digital images; that the objects are constructed of paper or thin card on some substrate; that they are made by hand and not in an industrial process. Although the images are all different and the objects in them not generally re-used or repeated, the photographs and objects appear as products of a consistent process of manufacture.

The work is a record of its making. The lack of cropping or digital editing are intended to leave the material process by which they are made as far as possible visible in the finished work. As some of this information is lost in digital reproductions appended here, these can usefully be supplemented by a description of the process.

The work is made in a consistent process that consists of separate stages of drawing, manufacturing, photographing, printing, and arranging on a wall. It starts with a scribble. Each photograph begins with the thought of a shape – image or words – quickly drawn or written down. Sometimes the thought is of a shape alone, and appears as much out of the hand as the brain. Sometimes the thought is initially of a word or phrase, a title that asks for a shape. Sometimes the shape and the word appear together as one thought. None of these small drawings is much considered; they are not the outcome of a process nor defined by a purpose. The thoughts that provoke the drawings appear as an event whose significance is undetermined and does not suggest itself to any category. They arrive and suggest themselves for making.

Some of these initial drawings go into production. Many are abandoned and remain forgotten in notebooks. As the process of manufacture is laborious, and reluctantly undertaken, a criteria of selection is applied before a drawing is

manufactured as an object. If on revision the idea retains some element of humour or strangeness, and adds, in our imagination, a different concept to the work, a scribble is taken forward into production.

Making the objects is the most lengthy and laborious part of the process. It consists, with little variation, of making decisions about colour; producing a scaled drawing; cutting Styrofoam on a hot-wire cutter; gluing the pieces of Styrofoam together; priming and sanding the bare object; and measuring, marking, cutting and gluing small pieces of coloured paper to it. Colour decisions reflect a limited available range of coloured papers. Apart from the base, all the surfaces of the object are covered including those not visible in the photograph, in order for the object to retain its three-dimensional dignity. The manufacturing is precise, using sharp instruments and straight edges, but subject to the fallibility of a hand-made process. In the photographs, the objects look from a distance as if mechanically or digitally made, but show their faults close-up. The objects are generally 12-18 cm in diameter. Their scale dictated by economic considerations, larger objects requiring more materials, smaller ones more labour. More complex objects are generally a little bigger than simpler ones.

The objects are then photographed. A large format (4 x 5”), film camera is used. The objects, placed on the same grey paper ground, are generally centered in the image frame as a default position. Where they are off-centre (9. *Into*) or spill out of the frame (61. *Rain*), this is for conceptual and not aesthetic reasons, Care is taken about scale. Although the objects for pragmatic reasons vary somewhat in scale, they are photographed at a distance so they appear the same size. If they

are smaller or larger in the image (14. *Stop*, 41. *Second sun*) it is because their concept implies this size, not because of the actual size of the object. Attention is paid to the angle from which the objects are photographed. The degree to which the camera looks down on it varies from object to object, and the objects rotated or camera position moved to vary the horizontal aspect. The plane-shift mechanism of the camera is used to adjust the perspective view. The position of the camera relative to the object is different in each photograph. These variations, however, aim for a neutrality in the view of the object. They are dictated by the concept, which appears as a demand of the object.

The photographs are taken at the smallest aperture (f64) to minimize depth of field effects in the image. Natural light is used, supplemented sometimes with halogen lamps, where natural light levels are low. Exposures are generally 1-15 seconds. In photographing the different objects, a consistency and evenness of effect is aimed for.

Processing of the negatives and printing is done by a third party. Negatives are processed neutrally – neither pushed nor pulled. Contact prints are made, with different trial versions of exposure and colour settings. A consistency of tone is aimed for. Photographic prints may be rejected and not go on to form part of the work on a number of grounds. Technical flaws may render an object unusable and require the object to be re-photographed. Some images, though technically acceptable, may be rejected because they do not adequately represent a concept. This may be a fault of the photograph, or in the object, and either may be subsequently reworked. Other works, though adequate to a concept, cannot make a place for themselves in the work.

The work as whole consists of an arrangement of individual photographs. The work shown here consists of original contact prints, arranged as they were in the studio immediately prior to their exhibition. This arrangement the result of a process of development over the period the photographs were made (2010-13). The present result was not anticipated at the outset. The work started as four photographs (1-4), arranged in a row. As additional photographs were made they were added below to form a page of 20 images and a second page added. At a certain point this format was revised. The separate pages, which introduced a formal disjunction and made the work appear to consist of separate discrete parts, was abandoned in favour of a continuous arrangement. Gaps were introduced by moving or removing various images to act as punctuation. As new images were subsequently added a revision may also be made to the existing arrangement. The work as a whole is fluid. The arrangement shown here is its form of existence at a particular moment. In this form it retain elements of its original chronological structure. Earlier photographs are generally on the left and later ones on the right. Its vertical dimension – dictated by accessible viewing distance to the individual photographs – remains unchanged. It remains, however, a work in progress, its final form incomplete.

Prior to any question as to what the work is *about* – the problems it addresses – is the question of what the photographs are *of*. Literally, they are photographs of Styrofoam and paper objects, but even where these objects crudely resemble some actual thing – a banana or an airplane (51, 52) – they could not be said to be photographs *of* a banana or airplane. As photographs, however, whose indexicality is guaranteed by the negative's marks, they represent something.

The objects in the photographs are three-dimensional shapes. Some of the shapes are simple cuboids (5, 6, 46), or cuboids joined together at an angle (4, 8, 40). Some of these form letters (20, 97). More complex forms, made of several different pieces, retain an abstract geometric form (27, 37, 60). These objects are variously coloured. Among these geometric shapes some objects can be recognized as representations of actual things. *Carrot* (72), though crudely simplified, has the basic form and shape of a carrot. It is visibly not an attempt at representing any actual carrot. The form of production precludes such a possibility. It is a representation only of a generic carrot, a concept of a carrot. All the images equally represent a concept. Some of these concepts are of physical things (53. *Dinosaur*, 103. *House*, 113. *Cloud*); some are concepts of abstract things (8. *Democracy*, 50. *Synthetic*, 68. *Grace*); some are proper names. As concepts they are represented equally.

The representation of concepts in the images is crude and approximate. The objects are of simple rectilinear shape. In their form they resemble objects of simple engineering; as representations of concepts they resemble children's drawings. Two schematic eyes and a mouth are sufficient to represent a face, though here, with echoes of the Cheshire cat, this is titled *Disappearing face* (77). As representations of concepts, children's drawings are more accurate than academic drawings: they display the economic sufficiency of the concept – that it is just enough to serve its function in representation. The concepts represented in the images are given in the titles. Some correspondence or relation is suggested between image or title. The form of this relation is however neither consistent nor always clear. Where with some objects the relation is a literal, if

abbreviated, resemblance, in many cases the connection between image and title – the way in which an object represents a concept – is not immediate. An apparent arbitrariness of representation is felt. In practice, every image has a logic that, even if convoluted or obscure, offers itself to be read. The logic of representation in individual works is however different. Some representations are literal and isomorphic, some based on other more marginal correspondences. In *Sea* (5), a blue and white cuboid is sufficient because sea does not have an individual shape. In *Pool* (83), water is given a shape. *Money* (6) has the same basic shape as *Sea*, being equally fungible but its colour is different and it is placed at an angle to suggest ambition. The logic is given in the concept, rather than imposed by a fixed system of representation. Different modes of representation, in their inconsistencies, bring representation itself into view as a mobile object.

Each individual image is a representation of a thought that occurred in some form during the period the work was being made. Their diversity and range make them appear random. As a small fraction of a total content, they are not extracted from this mass by a method. Composed of the residues of everyday experience – of reading, media, personal encounters and situations, conversations, and the practical problems of making art – they appear as random condensations of material not recovered into a scheme. Individually, their appeal is their over-determination: as in a pun, they present in one shape different categorical determinations. Assembled together, they have the character of a dream. These seemingly random, diverse and over-determined thoughts are given an objective form in a consistent method of production. The process of

manufacturing is a form of abstract labour: the same materials are applied in the same repetitive processes irrespective of the content of the concept. In the unpredictable diversity of different concepts, the repetition of the form of production appears as an arbitrary constraint, a form that is therefore accidental rather than necessary to the content.

In the arrangement shown here, the work – in our concept – formed itself. It is not only that there was not at the outset any conscious idea of its future shape, but that it is impossible that the work, in its current form, could have been made at that time. At the start the intention was to make an alphabet of conceptual forms that could be shuffled like a pack of cards. The early images emerged from theoretical ideas about cultural beginnings and contemporary politics. As the work developed, other themes emerged, not in an ordered sequence but as clusters that only became apparent after the images were made and in their relation to others. In its present form the work is a history of its own making, but also a disordered and fragmentary universal history. Reading from left to right, it contains ancient, medieval and modern elements, though, as history is observed from a present that still contains old concepts, this chronology is not exact. A section of images relates to the 1960s (33, 34, 37, 40, 41, 45, 49-54). Another can be identified with the 1980s (55-59). In this aspect, the work can be considered as belonging to the genre of history painting, its contemporary concerns emerging only in its manner of representation and as an effect of the process. In the arrangement of the images, concepts are allowed to form their own affinities. Images are placed adjacent to others because their relation forms another concept in addition to the concepts of the individual images: their

addition produces an unpredictable multiplication in which the meanings of the work are formed by itself.

In the multiplication of concepts, modes of representation, correspondences, accidents and coincidences, the work creates its own subject. Though the work is the product of multiple decisions, these decisions are placed in an arbitrary method of production in which what they say – precisely – is nothing. The arbitrariness of the a mode of production appears in the work as another instance of the random. The multiplication of concepts and modes of representation refuses their recuperation into an organized scheme – into the constancy of a subject. Meaning, such as it is, is an effect located in the work, not in the position of the artist or viewer, which is left without conceptual determination but only affect. Formally, the gaps – the spaces between images – are where the affect of the work is located. These give it a mobility and lightness. The absence of abstract labour is given as the serenity of nothing. The wager of the work is of a vacuity of subject, the abstraction of the concept, that emerges into comedy.

Appearing to say something and in this to have a use-value, the work in practice represents a language where overdetermined concepts are without content and say nothing. The value of this nothing is what the work affirms.

Images of artwork

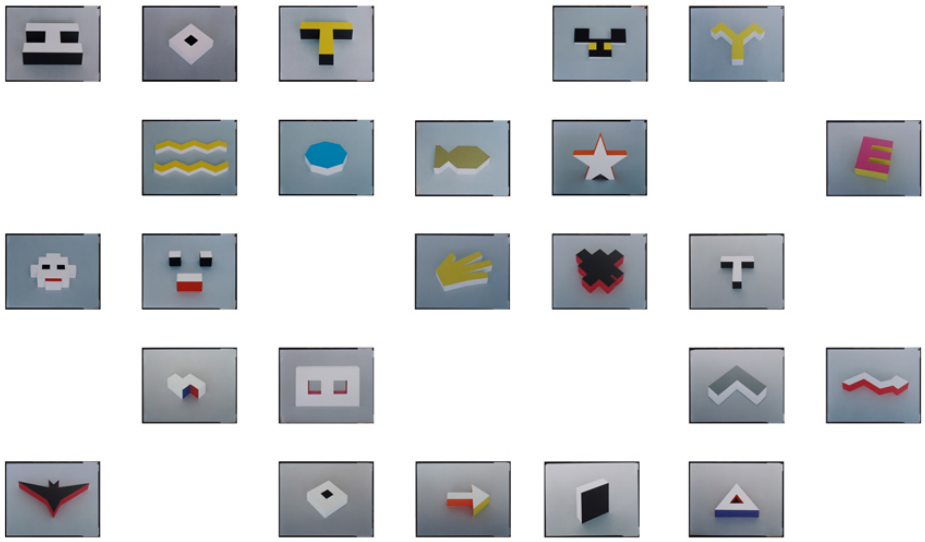
Toy Zoo 1-134 (2010-2013)

134 4x5” C type contact prints

Toy Zoo (detail 1)

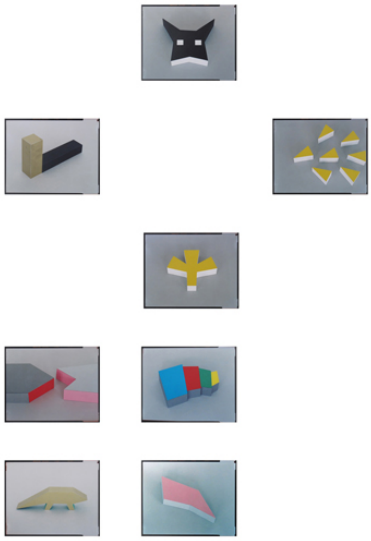
Toy Zoo (detail 2)

Toy Zoo (detail 3)

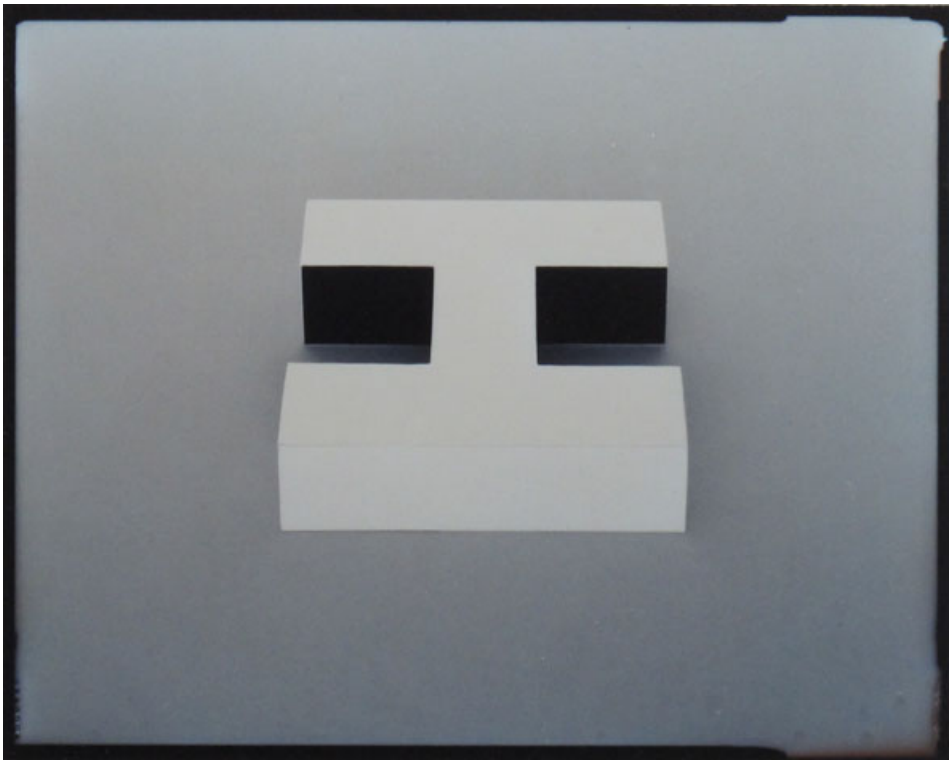


Toy Zoo (detail 4)

Toy Zoo (detail 5)



Toy Zoo (detail 6)



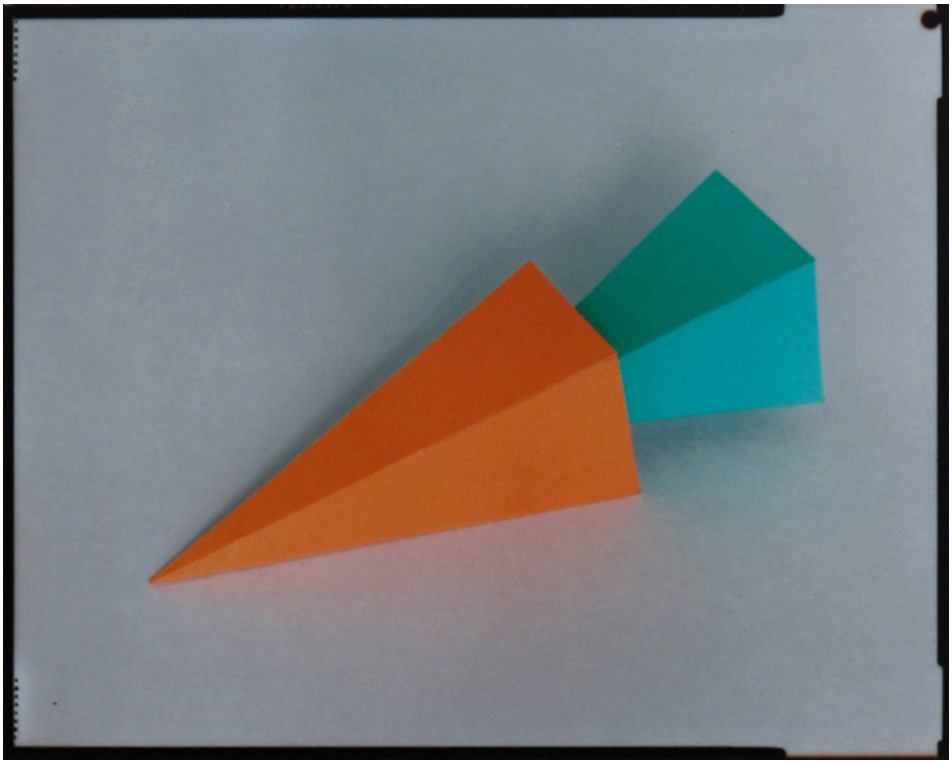
Toy Zoo (detail)

1. *'H'*
4x5" C type contact print

Toy Zoo (detail)

52. *Time flies like an arrow*

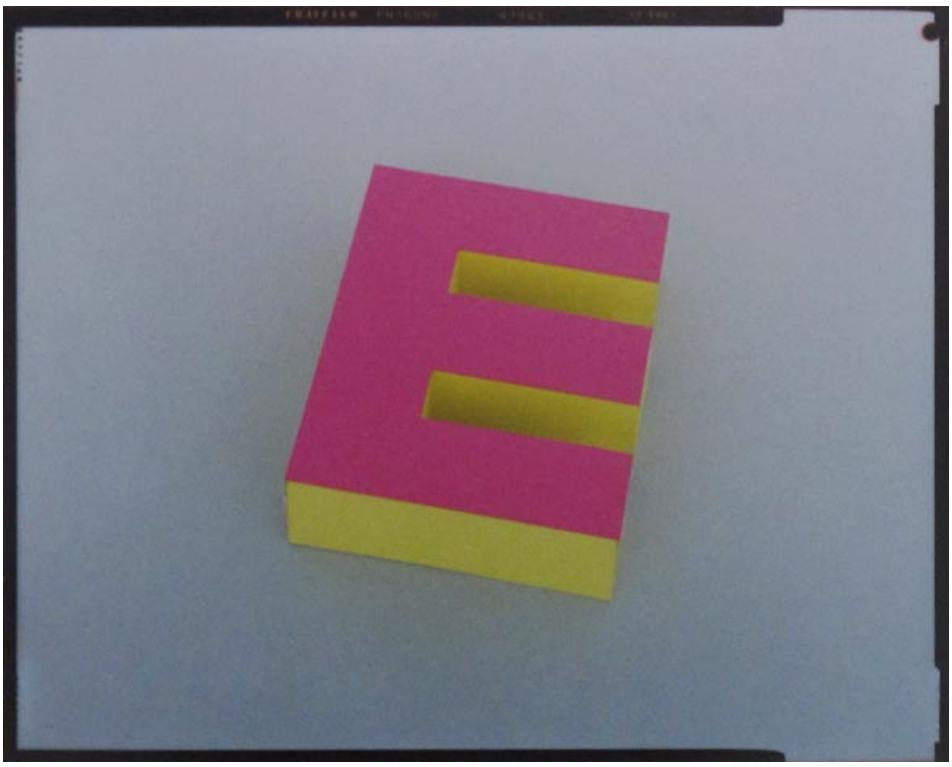
4x5” C type contact print



Toy Zoo (detail)

72. *Carrot*

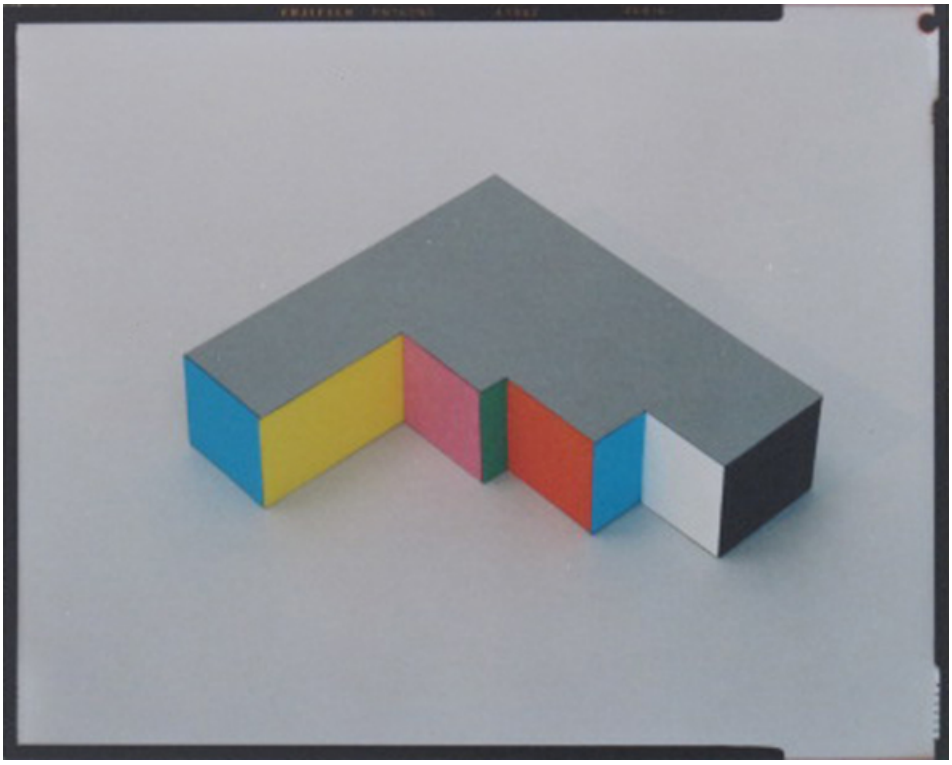
4x5” C type contact print



Toy Zoo (detail)

97. *E*

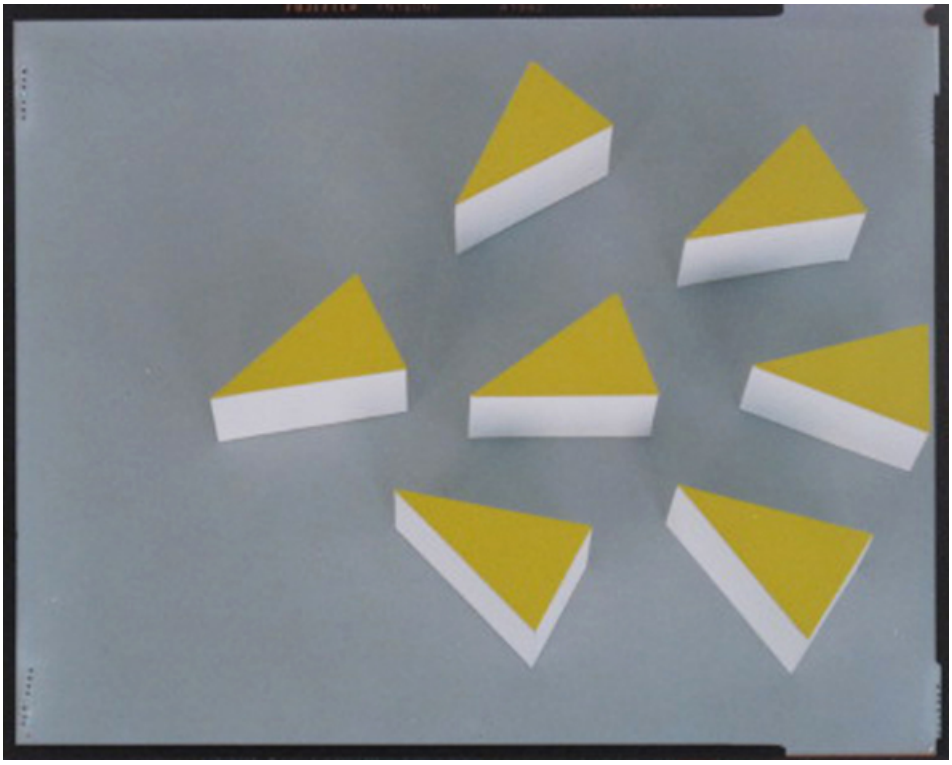
4x5” C type contact print



Toy Zoo (detail)

121. *False economy*

4x5” C type contact print

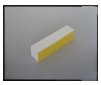


Toy Zoo (detail)

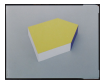
134. *Sparksperm*

4x5” C type contact print

List of works and titles

1.  ‘H’
2.  Red face
3.  Star
4.  Up
5.  Sea
6.  Money
7.  Vertical
8.  Democracy
9.  Into
10.  The green
11.  Pentagon
12.  Anarchy
13.  Zzz…
14.  Stop
15.  Go on
16.  Cross off
17.  Black square
18.  Unfinished state
19.  Ooh!
20.  T
21.  Strong man
22.  Conditional piece
23.  The sum of everything
24.  Bright sun
25.  Ratchet
26.  ‘I’
27.  Carefully
28.  Three blind mice
29.  3 colours good
30.  Cake

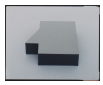
31.  Spastika

32.  House segment

33.  Purple heart

34.  Purple triangle

35.  Smile

36.  Silhouette

37.  Angel

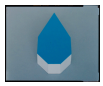
38.  Water

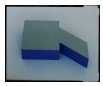
39.  Simple person

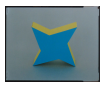
40.  Atomic

41.  Second sun

42.  Norman joke

43.  Large tear

44.  Long nose

45.  Swedish machine

46.  Lawn

47.  Bang

48.  Angel of history

49.  Balloon (deflating)

50.  Synthetic

51.  Fruit flies like a banana

52.  Time flies like an arrow

53.  Dinosaur

54.  Nuclear

55.  Broken dollar

56.  Equal

57.  Empty

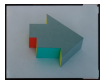
58.  Snake

59.  Stacked up, Donald

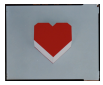
60.  Blood cancer

61.  Rain

62.  Cloud (silver lining)

63.  Forward

64.  Square zero

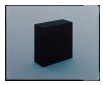
65.  Small heart

66.  German war machine

67.  Search light

68.  Grace

69.  Vertebra

70.  Black

71.  Gold

72.  Carrot

73.  Stick

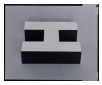
74.  Coca-coffin

75.  Ghost

76.  Ghislaine

77.  Disappearing face

78.  Bat

79.  H2

80.  Oh!

81.  Tee (hee)

82.  Electricity

83.  Pool

84.  Fish bomb

85.  Fallen star

86.  Chevron

87.  Daddy

88.  O

89.  Arrow

90.  Thin black square

91.  Mystic mistake

92.  Mickey moose

93.  Why?

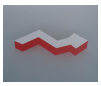
94.  Visible hand

95.  Blobitecture

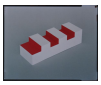
96.  T again

97.  E

98.  Stealth

99.  Red snake

100.  Mountain to climb

101.  The cuts

102.  Anarchist staircase

103.  House

104.  Boat

105.  3 party system

106.  Pink person

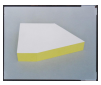
107.  Alien dog

108.  Red square

109.  Red dog

110.  Electric lightening

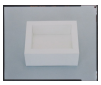
111.  Worker

112.  Eagle

113.  Cloud

114.  Lightning

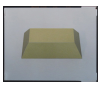
115.  Frog

116.  Kitchen sink

117.  Robot

118.  Plane now

119.  In god we trust

120.  Gold

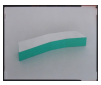
121.  False economy

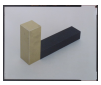
122.  Shapeless essence

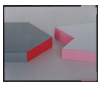
123.  Zooce

124.  Y?

125.  Temple

126.  Blade of grass

127.  Shadow

128.  The push and the pull

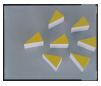
129.  Jessie

130.  Why so twisted?

131.  Droop

132.  Hello yellow

133.  Top dog

134.  Sparksperm