

## Comedy, Play and Theory

*Annual workshop of the ICLA Literary Theory Committee*

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What can comedy do for theory? The very mention of theoretical discourse evokes connotations of scientific rigour and methodological precision. Comedy may well offer such epistemic elements, but it also knocks the seriousness out of the inquiry by playing with the given and by playfully reimagining protocols of objectivity. Some of the most influential works of literary and cultural theory consistently draw on humour, comedy and gameplay as methods, as polemical and epistemic resources but these processes remain undertheorized. While theory has certainly done thorough work *on* comedy (e.g. Bergson 1900, Freud 1905, Purdie 1993, Zupančič 2008) and games (Huizinga 1947, Caillois 1979, Suits 1985), in this annual workshop of the ICLA Literary Theory Committee we would like to focus on explorations of the theoretical *in* comedy and games and, in turn, on the comedic and playful in theory.

These links can emerge in unexpected places. Can you imagine, “say, a Tomb of the Unknown Marxist or a cenotaph for fallen Liberals?”, asks Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* (1983), thereby effectively defamiliarizing the ubiquitous symbols of national military glory and exposing the profound strangeness of national imaginary. Countering the nuclear bomb and ‘end of the world’ fears of the 1960s, Maurice Blanchot quips “Apocalypse is disappointing” and thereby opens the unthinkable to thought and points a way out of a crippling surrender to inaction. Alenka Zupančič, by insisting that “apocalypse is still disappointing” today (2018), speaks of usefulness of *true* comedy in the realm of power, politics and subjecthood. Peter Friederici, in *Beyond Climate Breakdown* (2022), offers comedy as one of several modes of intervention into dominant narratives of human progress and a vehicle of narrative change. However, rather than open resistance to power or status quo, the inaugural gesture of comedy is that of “going with the flow” (Zupančič 2021), of exaggeration, of repetition *ad absurdum*. In other words, comedy offers its revelations by its own specific methods and resists on its own terms.

In the history of literary theory, comedy holds clear areas of overlap with playfulness, as has for example been made clear in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin on parody. We find this also in developmental psychology, where imitation and pretend play enable the development of new sociabilities (Harris 2000; Vygotsky 1937), but are also used in dramatic performance, as for example discussed under “mimicry” in Caillois (1979). Literary theory speaks of “games authors play” (Hutchinson 1994), and literary sociology addresses a “feel for the game” in fields of cultural production (Bourdieu 2003). These accounts address what it is that writers do in their role as creative agents

and cultural brokers. Literary theory is clearly not exempt from playing games, but what are the rules, and do we gain clarity making such rules explicit or do we lose the ease and fun of playing games?

Finally, what can comedy, play and theory do today, in a burning world that seems to demand serious and pragmatic responses? Can we be playful when everything is at stake? Humour, after all, has been particularly useful in the darkest of times and comedy has often risen to prominence in the face of great repression and violence. With this call, we invite further reflections on the work of comedy and play in the face of past and present crises. Approaching our topic in broad terms and across a variety of cultural modes, forms and genres, including literature, games, cinema and political satires, the workshop aims to inspire a rethinking of the multiple possible connections between theory, comedy and play.