COMEDY

Second edition

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INTRODUCTION

Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall down an open sewer and die.

Mel Brooks

Answering the question 'what is comedy?' is not so easy. On the one hand, comedy is a relatively stable literary form with a lengthy history, a form that Alexander Leggatt has called our most consistent genre, 'surviving centuries of cultural change with its basic conventions stubbornly intact' (Leggatt, 1998: 1). Understood this way, comedy is a type of drama that uses stock characters in scenarios that require some kind of problem to be resolved. These plays end happily, often concluding with a communal celebration like a feast or a marriage, and the characters generally manage to resolve their differences without anyone being killed. Yet even the most cursory glance at how we apply the term in the present day tells us that such a simple definition falls far short of describing all that comedy can be. Of course 'comedy' applies to a type of drama, but it can also refer to a range of styles as diverse as they are numerous, including traditional categories such as pastoral, farce, burlesque, pantomime, satire, and the comedy of manners, but also many modern subdivisions: cartoons, sitcom, sketch comedy, slapstick, stand-up, panel shows, game shows, impressionists, caricatures, drag acts, even silly walks.

Perhaps comedy is best defined not by its formal qualities but by its ability to induce laughter, surely the most obvious barometer of its success or failure. But even laughter does not belong to comedy uniquely, as not only do comedies regularly fail to rouse a laugh, but many have succumbed to laughter at moments of guilt, fear, or embarrassment, or as a result of having their feet tickled or being stupefied by laughing gas. As any definition that allowed for all these considerations would have to be so broad as to be meaningless, is 'comedy' even definable at all? Certainly, 'the comic' is a notoriously elusive quantity, one that evades scrutiny and has a tendency to bolt the moment critical attention is turned towards it. As the American philosopher and poet Max Eastman once wrote, 'the correct explanation of a joke not only does not sound funny, it does not sound like a correct explanation' (quoted in Holt, 2008: 119).

So why a book about comedy at all? Because comedy permeates every aspect of human life and is as common to living as breathing. As such, it is better understood as a tonal quality rather than a structural one, something related to narrative, character and plot, but also independent of them. Considered this way, comedy is a mood, viewpoint, or sentiment capable of manifesting itself in many places and at any time, irrespective of genre. Frequently it appears in a series of themes that seek to question the things that we take for granted. Like water in rocks, comedy has a particular talent for finding the cracks in the world and amplifying them to the point of absurdity, rendering life, in the words of John Bruns, 'strange and open' (Bruns, 2009: xv). Common comic themes include social inversion, the 'world-turned-upside-down' scenario where slave governs master or man bites dog; the ridiculing of foolishness, narrow-mindedness, and the rigid insistence on inflexible systems of living; and comic transfigurations that permit the investigation of alternative identities or the suspension of laws governing the body. Even the matter-of-fact ability of language to more-or-less describe the world is brought into question by comic contortions
and linguistic non-sequiturs that create parallel or nonsensical forms of meaning. In all of these examples, irrespective of when and where they appear, a notion of ‘comedy’ is at work. For the purposes of this book, then, ‘comedy’ is a term that can refer equally to a genre, a tone, or a series of themes that manifest themselves in diverse environments. As such, it will require us to think of comedy multi-laterally, as at once a literary tradition with identifiable structural qualities, and a way of describing isolated events or passages within other types of work.

THE ROOTS OF COMEDY

What we know of the historical development of comedy appears to confirm the idea of it as a permeable form that has adapted to suit the demands of the day. Cordatus, the moderator of Ben Jonson’s play Every Man Out of His Humour (1600), offers us this potted account of its development from its origins in ancient ritual:

‘tis extant, that which we call Comedia, was at first nothing but a simple and continued Satyre, sung by one only person, till Susario invented a second, after him, Epicharmus a third; Phormus and Chionides devised to have foure actors, with a Prologue and Chorus; to which Cratinus (long after), added a fifth and six; Eupolis, more, Aristophanes, more than they: every man in the dignity of his spirit and judgment, supplied something: and (though that in him this kind of Poeme appeared absolute, and fully perfected) yet how is the face of it chang’d since, in Menander, Philemon, Cecilius, Plautus, and the rest; who have utterly excluded the Chorus, altered the property of the persons, their names, and natures, and augmented it with all libertie, according to the elegancie and disposition of those times wherein they wrote?

(Jonson, 1920: Induction, 261–275)

In this version, comedy begins as a simple song for a lone voice gradually accumulating interlocutors as each authorial generation adds to the form. In so doing, Jonson, whose own comedies were innovative and markedly different from those that preceded him, suggests that comedy is by definition open to continual adaptation, and as such offers greater opportunities for freedom of expression:

I see not then, but we should enjoy the same Licentia, or free power to illustrate and heighten our invention, as they did; and not be tied to those strict and regular forms which the niceness of a fewe (who are nothing but Forme), would thrust upon us.

(Jonson, 1920: Induction, 275–279)

Our knowledge of the origins and development of comedy has not advanced far beyond Jonson’s. A clue to its beginnings may be found in the etymology of the word itself, which is generally agreed to be derived from an amalgamation of the Greek words ‘kōmos’ or ‘kōmai’; and ‘ōda’, words that reflect comedy’s roots in the Greek peninsula. ‘Kōmos’ translates as ‘revel’, while ‘kōmai’ comes from the word for ‘village’. Aristotle (c.384–322 BC) preferred this second definition, remarking that the Dorians ‘call outlying villages kōmai ... the assumption being that comedians were so-called not from the revel or kōmos, but because they toured the villages when expelled from the town in disgrace’ (Aristotle, 1996: 6). ‘Ōda’ is uncontroversially translated as ‘song’, and so comedy is either a hymn of celebration or, as the poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) styled it, ‘a rustic song’ (Dante, 1984: 31).

Most critics and historians agree that comedy appears to be the product of a rural environment rather than an urban one, and to have come into being in association with seasonal agrarian fertility rites. At some stage, comedy also began a long association with the god Dionysus, whose divine characteristics and patronage are clearly impressed upon the form. Dionysus, the son of Zeus and Semele, was originally a god of the fertility of nature, a vegetation-spirit who died and was reborn yearly. His cult reached Greece from either Thrace or Phrygia at around 1000 BC, and was particularly notable for its devotional use of wine and the orgiastic revels of its votaries, especially women, who withdrew into the wild to make contact with nature. Dionysus was often described as having a minor god, Phales, as his companion, of whom little is known except his obvious association with the word ‘phallus’. By the fourth century BC Dionysus had outgrown his association with organic
fertility to become a sponsor of human sexual behaviour. The temperament and qualities of Dionysus and the nature of his worship appear, then, to have exerted a significant degree of influence on the principles of festivity, inversion, sexual freedom, and travesty that we find in comedy. Also significant is the removal from the city he encourages, placing him at the fringes of the civic environment and drawing his followers away from urban jurisdiction and inducing them into conduct that would be unacceptable in the city. Echoes of these Dionysial themes can still be heard much later, as in the libidity, rusticity, and altered consciousness of William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream (1595).

Dionysus's most important function in terms of the performance of comedy was as the divine patron of both the Lenaea and the 'Great Dionysia', annual Athenian theatrical festivals at which prizes were awarded to the best dramatists. Initially, the Dionysia, the more important of the two, was for tragedians only, with comedians performed only at the winter Lenaea. From around 486 BC, a comedy competition was initiated at the Dionysia, the point at which we may say that comedy is institutionalised as a significant literary form. We can say this because the Dionysia appears to have played an important role as a civic gathering and statement of national identity aside from the presentation of theatrics, a platform wherein the achievements of the state might be annually reiterated, honours granted to citizens of distinction, and the lines of social division and hierarchy be graphically represented in terms of seating and participation. A sense of collective involvement in the issues of city and government might also be raised through the debates aired in plays (Palmer, 1994: 31–32).

THE USES OF COMEDY

The organised, civic dimension of Athenian comedy then begs a further question: what purpose does comedy serve, and what, if anything, is its social function or philosophical value, aside from giving pleasure? Whereas the comedy of Aristophanes (c.448–380 BC) engaged in an overt political and satirical commentary, comic drama was encouraged to move away from current affairs at an early stage in its development. Aristotle tells us that it was Crates (active 450 BC) who 'first abandoned the form of a lampoon and began to construct universalised stories and plots'; and by the time of Menander (c.342–c.291 BC) nearly a century later, comedy had ceased to intervene in the issues of government, at least explicitly (Aristotle, 1996: 9). Instead, comedy was commended for its realistic representation of the human condition, famously moving the early Alexandrine scholar Aristophanes of Byzantium to ask, 'O Menander and Life / Which of you is imitating which?' (Segal, 2001: 153). By the fourth century AD, literary theorists thought of comedy as a primarily instructive form, as in the work of the Roman grammarian Donatus, who wrote enormously influential remarks on the comedies of Terence, works he would have never seen performed and would have only known as texts. Under these sterile conditions, Donatus declared comedy to be essentially didactic, mirroring everyday life and schooling us in practical ethics. He also emphasised the academic qualities of comedy, arguing that good comedy should be built according to sound rhetorical principles (Herrick, 1950: 65). Donatus's scholarly and moralistic method fortified comedy with some of the technical respectability of tragedy, and the principal arguments of comic theory from the Renaissance onwards are based on his ideas. That its primary function is corrective is argued in 1698, for example, by William Congreve in response to the clergyman Jeremy Collier's attack on him in particular and theatre in general. 'Men are to be laughed out of their vices in comedy', wrote Congreve. 'The business of comedy is to delight as well as to instruct; and as vicious people are made ashamed of their follies and faults by seeing them exposed in a ridiculous manner, so are good people at once both warned and diverted at their expense' (Congreve, 1997a: 515). Two centuries later, in his 'Essay on Comedy' (1877), the playwright George Meredith made a similar point, although metaphysically enlarging it by personifying comedy as a benign spirit monitoring human behaviour. 'Whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate', he writes,
short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit ... the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign, and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit.

(Meredith, 1980: 48)

In the twentieth century, critics have been less keen to subscribe to comedy’s didacticism. Some, like Maurice Charney, see a central lack of agreement in modern discussions of the form that leaves us with ‘no common assumptions and no set of conventions by which we could agree on how to speak about comedy’ (Charney, 1978: vii–viii). More assertive critics, like Harry Levin, see comedy as a conflict between the emotions of joviality and sobriety, a ‘perennial war of the laughers against the non-laughers’, of playboys against killjoys, ‘locked in an eternal battle of world views’ (Levin, 1987: 40). For Erich Segal, the history of Western comedy plots a long line of descent from the euphoric highs of ‘Aristophanic triumph’ to the resignation of the ‘theatre of inadequacy’, represented by the work of Samuel Beckett. According to this thesis, vigorous expressions of life begin to fade and become more complicated and contingent as history and experience instill us in cynicism to the point that once boisterous, optimistic comedies are rendered increasingly untenable. Samuel Beckett’s play Waiting for Godot (1953) epitomises comedy’s fate:

The drama will have no happy ending. Indeed, it will have no ending at all. There will be no revel, renewal, or rejuvenation. For whatever Godot may represent, whether salvation or erotic rebirth, one thing is clear. The traditional happy ending is no longer possible – because comedy is dead.

(Segal, 2001: 452)

Rather than proposing narratives of comic function that are intended to hold true in all times and places, some critics, especially those with an interest in poststructuralist theory, are drawn to its apparent ambiguity and resistance to definition. Andrew Horton claims that ‘like language, and like “texts” in general, the comic is plural, unfinalized, disseminative, dependent on context and the intertextuality of creator, text, and contemplator’ (Horton, 1991: 9). Kirby Olson adopts a similar approach, reading comic fiction through the work of French philosophers Jean-François Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze, and finding in comedy an affront to rationality and meta-narratives that attempt to exhaustively explain or incorporate all aspects of the world:

Comedy is an immanent form that does not make us look into the heavens or to God for answers to questions ... Comic theory traces a larger discourse over politics of the body and, within that discourse, between orthodoxy and heresy. Like desire, laughter is strangely fluid and cannot be contained by rational thought.

(Olson, 2001: 5)

For Olson, the slippery problem of defining comedy and comic action satisfactorily is evidence of its postmodern virtues: ‘Comedy is precisely a certain freedom from definition’ (Olson, 2001: 6).

Perhaps the only formulation that remains appropriate is also one of the vaguest. In 1900, the French metaphysician Henri Bergson (of whom more in Chapter 1) argued that ‘the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human’, a statement that maintains that in all instances, events must at some point intersect with human consciousness to become comic (Bergson, 1980: 62). The humanness of comedy was noted by Aristote who observed that we are the only creatures who feel compelled to laugh. Comedy is certainly a social activity first and foremost, conceived of always with some kind of audience in mind, and everywhere produced from the matter of dominant cultural assumptions and commonplace. The question of how or why things come to be funny is similarly determined by culture. Even though comedy often seems to be suspending, inverting, or abandoning dominant norms, these inversions are produced in relation to the cultural orthodoxies from which they must always begin. It should therefore be possible to trace comic events back to the significations they have transformed. In this way, the comic can be thought of
as a means of opening up the possibility of multiple perspectives, as each concept culturally established as orthodox simultaneously presents itself for the possibility of comic subversion, a silent but parallel conversation that might erupt at any moment. Take the traditional story of the Greek poet Philomon, who, we are told, died laughing after he saw a donkey eating figs. The lethal quality of this scene was the perceived incongruity of a beast eating what was categorised as human food. What killed Philomon, therefore, was an event that violated certain pre-fabricated categories of decorum and appropriateness applicable to figs and donkeys, coupled with his ability to perceive that violation as ludicrous and culminating in dangerously high levels of amusement. We can understand this as an experience of division within the poet that allowed him to interpret multiple layers of significance instantaneously and simultaneously. For Bergson, the division between the perceived and the actual, and the possibility of reading situations in a number of different ways, was a phenomenon he isolated as one of the three principal triggers of laughter. What he labelled ‘the reciprocal interference of series’ is a scenario that ‘belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time’ (Bergson, 1980: 122). Examples would include Oliver Goldsmith’s play *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773), where Marlow mistakes the Hardcastles’ house for an inn, or Monty Python’s film *Life of Brian* (1979), where Brian’s life so parallels that of Jesus Christ that he is mistaken for the son of God. What is amusing is the tension caused by the co-existence and interplay between ‘the double fact of coincidence and interference’ (Bergson, 1980: 124), such as Brian’s unwittingly amassing a devout following while his mother insists that ‘he’s not the messiah, he’s a very naughty boy’. That both Brian’s followers and his mother should be confirmed in their contrasting beliefs is made plausible by the setting and the action of the film, and thus *Life of Brian* demonstrates a continual awareness of the possibility of reading a scenario in two different ways, of a division in comprehension and the co-existence of parallel ideas.

The theme of comedy as a divided and doubled experience is even embodied for us in the double-act, a staple of comic performance since the appearance of Dionysus and his servant Xanthias in Aristophanes’s *Frogs* (405 BC). Double acts present a perfect embodiment of the uneasy doubling and bi-focal perceptions of comedy. Similarly, we might look to the disparity between place and self that is continually used in comedy, stories in which people are geographically, linguistically, or in some profoundly existential way misplaced, ‘fish out of water’ comedies like Molière’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670), Buster Keaton’s *The General* (1926), Eddie Murphy’s *Trading Places* (1983), or Simon Pegg’s *Shaun of the Dead* (2004). Another stock situation presents a discrepancy between the way a character presents himself or herself and the substance of their actions, as is the case with Shakespeare’s pompous Falstaff, or the hypocritical devout in Molière’s *Tartuffe* (1664), or David Brent/Michael Scott in the UK and US versions of *The Office*. A recurring technique of the comedy team Monty Python (1969–1974) was the discussion of quotidian topics in an elevated register, exploiting discontinuity between form and content, as in this sports report that blends philosophy with soccer:

Last night in ... Jarrow, we witnessed the resurrection of a great footballing tradition, when Jarrow United came of age, in a European sense, with an almost Proustian display of modern existentialist football. Virtually annihilating by midfield moral argument the now surely obsolescent catenachio defensive philosophy of Signor Alberto Fanfino. Bologna indeed were a side intellectually out argued by a Jarrow team thrusters and bursting with aggressive Kantian positivism ...

(Chapman et al., 1998, vol. 1: 139)

All these examples utilise some form of incongruity, and rely upon a culturally defined sense of incompatible orders, such as the displacement of people or discourses, to produce ambiguity and the feeling that normality has been momentarily domesticated for pleasurable ends. This has been studied by Mary Douglas in her work on joking relationships in traditional cultures. Douglas argues that a joke cannot simply jump from nowhere, but derives from a sense of reality that pre-exists it, and which it seeks to distort:
a joke is seen and allowed when it offers a symbolic pattern of a social pattern occurring at the same time ... all jokes are expressive of the social situations in which they occur. The one social condition necessary for a joke to be enjoyed is that the social group in which it is received should develop the formal characteristics of a 'told' joke: that is a dominant pattern of relation is challenged by another. If there is no joke in the social structure, no other joking can appear.

(Douglas, 1975: 98)

Jokes therefore emerge from within the social framework and necessarily express the nature of their environment, which means that all jokes are necessarily produced in a relative relationship to the dominant structures of understanding and the epistemological order. Despite the violation of the social order implied by joking, the joker enjoys a kind of immunity through the belief that his or her wit represents insight into a different type of consciousness:

The joker's own immunity can be derived philosophically from his apparent access to other reality than that mediated by the relevant structure. Such access is implied in the contrast of forms in which he deals. His jokes expose the inadequacy of realist structurings of experience and so release the pent-up power of the imagination.

(Douglas, 1975: 108)

Douglas's conclusions suggest that joking is an imaginative exploration of alternative social formulations, and a recognition of lack in the 'realist structurings of experience' that usually represent it. Through joking, the joker appears to gain privileged insight beyond the social construct where its meanings are neither exhaustive nor absolute, but are simply choices. Joking reveals the practical limits of cultural structures; for all systemic choices, other choices might equally have been made.

Joking is quite different in Freudian psychoanalysis, but nevertheless similarly revealing of an underside to socially constructed 'reason'. For Sigmund Freud, a joke is an example of 'parapraxis', an act like a mistake or slip of the tongue that exposes something of the repressed thoughts hidden in the unconscious. Like dreams, jokes contain significant information about unconscious thoughts and the nature of inhibition, where the production of a joke is a means of negotiating the psychological barrier between the conscious and unconscious mind. Freud points out that jokes have a tendency to spring from nowhere, suddenly appearing like little emissaries of the unconscious. 'A joke', he writes,

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], 2001: 167)

Making jokes is an almost involuntary act; they come across the joker in an instant, fully formed and with no explanation as to how they were made. In Freud's analysis, joking is symptomatic of the division in the psyche that characterises human beings. Once again, the comic acts as a parallel conversation, tracking reason and subverting it.

COMEDY AND ECCENTRICITY

So what does this strange ability to at once recognise the social order and subvert it amount to? Existential philosopher Helmut Plessner cites the perception of the comic as evidence that human beings are intrinsically 'eccentric', as they are the only animals with the capacity to reflect on their thoughts and experiences. Plessner argues that our experience of the world is a result of information mediated through the purposeful management of our speech, thoughts, and control of our limbs, all of which, organised around a coherent sense of self, leads us to believe in our mastery of the immediate environment. The world outside, however, is unconcerned with the individual ego, and treats the human body as yet more matter. Thus we are at once convinced of our control of the environment, but simultaneously aware that we are subject to disinterested nature:
Just as the world and my own body are revealed to me, and can be controlled by me, only insofar as they appear in relation to me as a central 'I', so, on the other hand, they retain their ascendency over their subjection in this perspective as an order indifferent to me and including me in a nexus of mutual neighbourhoods.

(Plessner, 1970: 36)

The subject, then, comes to reflect upon itself as both ego and matter, and is divided in this knowledge. As Simon Critchley puts it, 'the human being has a reflective attitude towards its experiences and towards itself, living `beyond the limits set for them by nature by taking up a distance from their immediate experience' (Critchley, 2002: 28). The title of Plessner’s work is *Laughing and Crying*, because these effects, both largely involuntary, involve moments when the bodily intrudes into the sense of self and overruns it, disturbing the conscious mind. Human eccentricity is the product, therefore, of discontinuity between the world in our head and the world outside. 'In this respect', says Plessner, 'man is inferior to the animal since the animal does not experience itself as cut off from its physical existence, as an inner self or I, and in consequence does not have to overcome a break between itself and itself, itself and its physical existence' (Plessner, 1970: 37). We could attribute to this phenomenon of being 'cut off' the often remarked-upon cruelty of comedy, which requires a certain degree of desensitisation. If it is generically appropriate for tragedy to ask us to be sensible of human suffering, then comedy, as Mel Brooks’s quote shows, allows us to stand back and look upon human misfortune from an emotional distance, sometimes even deriving great pleasure from it.

In a discussion of irony in a 1969 essay entitled 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', the literary theorist Paul de Man (1919–1983) develops a further idea of the discontinuity between what we might understand as material nature and human consciousness. In this essay, de Man explains that Baudelaire’s notion of irony is not an intersubjective concept, something produced between people, but an internalised relationship, a ‘relationship, within consciousness, between two selves’ (de Man, 1983: 212). Where comic relationships often imply positions of superiority and inferiority, there are no proper 'selves' within the internalised ironic relationship to occupy those spaces, and so it is not possible to think of one as 'superior' or more knowledgeable than another. Therefore, says de Man, irony 'merely designates the distance constitutive of all acts of reflection. Superiority and inferiority ... become merely spatial metaphors to indicate a discontinuity and a plurality of levels within a subject that comes to know itself by an increasing differentiation from what it is not' (de Man, 1983: 213). This is especially pronounced when a human being differentiates him- or herself from the non-human world. When a person falls over, for example, the inauthentic nature of the relationship of identity to its surroundings is exposed:

The Fall, in the literal as well as the theological sense, reminds him of the purely instrumental, reified character of his relationship to nature. Nature can at all times treat him as if he were a thing and remind him of his factitiousness, whereas he is quite powerless to convert even the smallest particle of nature into something human.

(de Man, 1983: 214)

Human beings, prone to treat the world around them as if it were a thing that they can control (de Man uses the word ‘reified’, to suggest that nature is incorrectly perceived as a malleable commodity), find themselves made into a thing by nature. De Man continues by adding that humans largely know the world as a ‘language-determined’ experience, in which everything is perceived through a linguistic framework. Ironic language, the language of the fall, is language that expresses the 'inauthentic' nature of the subject’s relationship to the world:

The ironic language splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity. This does not, however, make it into an authentic language, for to know authenticity is not the same as to be authentic.

(de Man, 1983: 214)

Thus in irony, the subject is divided into an inauthentic self, and a self that knows itself to be inauthentic. In a different but
similar vein, the Slovenian psychoanalyst and critic Alenka Zupančič argues that comedy works not because it punctures our illusions and reduces us to our basic animal essence, but because it reveals the lengths we go to to perpetuate our delusions, even in the face of the evidence that reveals them as illusions. 'If humans were only human,' she writes, 'there would be no comedy' (Zupančič, 2008: 49). For Zupančič, the principal mode of comedy is excess, asserting itself through hyperbole, grotesqueries, surprise, and exaggeration, and the pairing of illogical or contradictory ideas. As such, it brings opposing ideas together and holds them in tension, refusing to reduce them to a logical singularity.

Take, for example, the notion of an aristocrat slipping on a banana peel or repeatedly falling into a muddy puddle. A traditional view might see this as evidence that comedy can level even the loftiest among us to their core humanity. According to Zupančič, however, to concentrate on the fall itself is to mischaracterise what has happened. Instead, she notes the endless resilience of comedy figures, who, like Buster Keaton, Wile E. Coyote, or the unfortunate Kenny in South Park, are able to endure any number of violent accidents or traumatic affronts and keep moving, pursuing their objectives regardless of the setbacks. In the example of an aristocrat who falls into one muddy puddle after another, Zupančič claims that the force of comedy lies not in the fact that he falls, but in the fact that he gets back up completely unchanged, as convinced of his rank and status as he ever was. The fall, therefore, reduces the baron to nothing, but rather highlights the excess of identity and the persistence of an ideology that allows aristocracy to exist in the first place. Another important aspect of the fall for Zupančič is the fact that it exists as an instant outside narrative. Comedy, she argues, does not unfold like a story, but is rather explosive and terroristic. 'Things that really concern us,' she writes, 'thing that concern the very kernel of our being, can be watched and performed only as comedy, as an impersonal play with the object' (Zupančič, 2008: 182).

In various ways, all of the ideas discussed above suggest that in some experience of the comic there is a division of consciousness that enables the subject to see the world with bifurcated vision. Instances of humour, joking, or irony invoke a separation between 'authorised', egocentric, or rational versions of the world and their revealed alternatives, commenting on established conventions as they go. This does not mean that joking opens up a path to 'truth', or even that it has the ability to cut through untruths, as it generally does not provide coherent counter-arguments and its efficacy as a platform for change is questionable. Indeed, we would have to say that the duality enabled in joking and comic scenarios opposes any univocal interpretation of the world. Given this principle, this book will not attempt to explain comedy in accordance with a single methodological framework or narrative of literary development. Instead, we shall approach comedy thematically, accepting what appears to be its bifurcated nature by treating it as a multi-faceted and diverse series of events, rather than a generic totality, and evoking particular theories or concepts only whenever they might usefully help us to better understand comic ideas.