

**The Philosophical
Dignity of Comedy,
Interview with
Robert Pfaller**

**Frank Ruda &
Agon Hamza**

1) Let's begin with a rather general question. Do you think the categories of the comic and the tragic, or of comedy and tragedy are still viable categories to characterize our times? And if so, in what sense?

One may argue, with the formula coined by Simon Critchley, that today we live under the predominance of a “tragic paradigm”. Yet one has to be precise here: This apparent bias for the “tragic” is based on a profound misunderstanding – a consequence of metaphysical presuppositions. “Tragic” is misunderstood here in the idealist, metaphysical sense that greatness is by necessity doomed to failure; that this world is so bad that nothing good or great can ever succeed. Every success then comes under suspicion. Good can, as a consequence, only be what has not at all – not even by the smallest success – contaminated itself with this bad world. Only he who is completely weak or a total loser can be good. We can observe this today in the moralist glorification of the “victim”, and the subsequent “victimhood competitions”, launched by the ideology of “progressive neoliberalism”; the struggles over who is the most pitiful victim: the woman, the homosexual, the person of color, the queer, the asexual etc.? Seen from a little distance, this is all of course not without a certain – yet sad – comicality.

As I have demonstrated in my book “What Life Is Worth Living For” (“Wofür es sich zu leben lohnt, Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2011), this same “tragic”, metaphysical philosophy consists in declaring that the world is just a play, or theater, or literature, and that truth is never to be reached and has to be kept under permanent doubt and “deconstruction”; or that its quest is misleading and has to be given up for postmodern “fun culture”. Due to its pessimist presuppositions, this metaphysical view of the world thus always leads to characteristic splits: it claims that we can only have either freedom or happiness, only either truth or fun; that someone can be only either clever or beautiful, that something can only be either functional or pleasant, etc.

The philosophical dignity of comedy, as I claim, lies in the fact that it opposes these metaphysical presuppositions and its consequences. Comedy demonstrates: success in this world is possible, and things can at the same time be funny and true; people can at the same time be good or smart and beautiful, etc.

Therefore I regard comedy as a representative, a “lieu-tenant” of philosophical materialism – and a remedy against our culture’s reactionary philosophical bias.

2) Hegel has argued that when tragedy reaches its conceptual peak, it transforms into comedy. Some events are just too tragic to be depicted in tragic form, and they seem to explode it. One could thereby maybe say that tragedy reaches its full

concept when it tragically disappears in another form, notably that of comedy and comedy is able to work differently with such a disappearance. How do you account for the relationship between these two forms?

The relationship between tragedy and comedy can be conceived of in different ways: for example, in sociological and ethical terms, as in Aristotle's take; or in logical terms, as in Hegel's. My approach is psychoanalytical, based on the works of Freud, of Lacan, and especially on those of Octave Mannoni. From this perspective, the question is: *what type of illusion is at work here?* Do we have to do with what people themselves believe in, or do we have to do with something that people do not believe in but just stage for others.

Comedy is a prime example for the second – for “illusions without owners”: in comedy, people always try to fool others, but later fall prey to this illusion which they have staged without believing in it.

Yet tragedy, at least in its modern form of “character tragedy” or melodrama, is of a totally different kind. Here the heroes believe in something; they have faith in an idea that they regard higher as themselves, and while they perish, the idea, we are suggested, lives on. There is supposedly some triumph in their failure.

From this perspective, as I have described in my book *“The Pleasure Principle in Culture. Illusions without Owners”* (Verso, 2014), comedy and modern tragedy are working with two different types of illusion, according to Mannoni's classification: Comedy works with *belief*; tragedy works with *faith*. When their actions lead to mix-ups (which happens not only in comedy, but also in tragedy – just think of Oedipus' mixing up his own father with some unknown road user, and his own mother with some foreign queen), the two genres draw opposed conclusions:

Comedy always lets someone who has arrived by chance be mistaken for someone quite specific. It tells us: whoever it is, he is taken for the one whose place he takes. (For example, a tax adviser, mistaken for a psychoanalyst, can successfully carry out a psychoanalytic cure, in Patrice Leconte's charming film comedy “Confessions Intimes”). Tragedy proceeds the opposite way. It lets someone quite specific suffer the fate of being mistaken for just anybody. It wants to make us think that its heroes were right against their environment for which they are indifferent.

Thus comedy reduces the character to the effect of a structure: Everyone is taken for the one whose place he takes. The message is: *‘You are much more confusable than you like to think.’* Comedy takes the side of the symbolic structure against the imaginary of the individuals. Character tragedy, on the contrary, says: *‘You are in truth more than anyone believes.’* It thus takes the side of the characters' imaginary ego.

We can thus say, tragedy provides ego-libido; whereas comedy provides object-libido.

Under these premises, there seems to be no possible point of transition or “progress” between the genres. Yet there is another genre which uncannily borders (and sometimes even shifts) to the comical: the uncanny. Typical comedy elements, such as, for instance, the double, or repetition, also appear in horror stories as well as in uncanny situations in everyday life. What appears uncanny can, under slightly different conditions, be utterly comical. Tragedy does not have the same object as comedy, but the uncanny does. Freud, in his essay on the uncanny, comes to this point several times.

Due to these givens, the ability of tragedy and comedy to represent terrible events in life is certainly different. Massacres and catastrophes are not “too tragic” for tragedy; instead, they cannot be called tragic at all. They do not have anything to do with heroes, or with their strength becoming the very reason for their self-inflicted fall. These catastrophes and mass crimes befall people completely “externally”, without any regard of their guilt, or dignity, or strength. Therefore tragedy is utterly unable to account for such horrors. It could only play them down. Comedy instead, being itself quite indifferent about the who is who of its characters as well as about their responsibility, can quite well account for this indifference of fate. And the fact that comedy makes us laugh does not have to make us blind against the horrors it refers to. Lubitsch’s “To Be or Not to Be” for example, maybe the most hilarious comedy ever, provides a quite astute awareness of the threats and mass crimes of the Nazi regime.

3) Another, at least implicit theoretician of their relationship, is Karl Marx. He famously stated that history sometimes repeats itself and, in the case, he had in mind – the France of the coup of Napoleon III – it repeats itself first as tragedy, then as farce. This is an almost downgrading repetition, where the second Napoleon brings out something that was latent already in the first. But the relationship between tragedy and farce and tragedy and comedy is certainly not the same. Where does for you the comic dimension sit in this concatenation?

One should never forget that describing the real world in literary categories is always a witticism. Otherwise what started as a clever joke could easily repeat itself as a sad stupidity. Marx is only flirting here with Hegel’s remark, but he is not working out some supposed “iron” laws of history’s irony.

Things become different, of course, as soon as some real person imagines herself as a figure on “history’s stage” and starts acting in an accordingly theatrical way. As Alenka Zupancic has rightly emphasized,

what makes people comical is not what they really are or do (for example, that they slip on a Banana), but what they believe themselves to be. When somebody regards himself as the equivalent or legitimate heir to some historical figure, he becomes a candidate for comedy. When he does not only fail to live up to his model, but even succeeds to discredit it by his misrepresentation, it becomes farcical.

4) A long time ago, there was talk about the so-called death of the subject. But then today ever-new theories of subjectivity seem to reemerge. One could here raise the question of the trope of the death of the subject might have been a misidentification of something that cannot be saved (theoretically and practically), something like a tragic death of something that never properly existed in the first place. And then, with the prominence of theories of the subject, what never properly existed and died not even on the cross seem to have survived its own disappearance and insisted. Is there something tragic or comic in (theories of) subjectivity? Or both?

What appears comic to me is the fact that precisely those philosophies who were the loudest to proclaim the “death of the subject” are exactly the same that have lead to today’s excessive subjectivism. Today many people renounce any idea of objectivity and refer to their “feelings” as their ultimate truth – without ever considering whether they might possess some capability to check if their feelings could not deceive them.

It is true, this discourse of the death of the subject presupposed a very limited notion of the subject. The subject could only be believed to be dead by people who had never heard of Spinoza’s or Marx’, or Freud’s or Althusser’s criticisms. These criticisms revealed a double sense that pertains to the notion of the subject – a double sense that was, for example, forgotten in German, whereas it can still be formulated in French and English language: in these languages one can distinguish between “subject to...” (for example, an illness), and “subject of...” (for example, one’s actions). The crucial point of criticism, first made by Spinoza, was that precisely where one is subjected to certain conditions (“subject to...”) the illusion arises to be “subject of...”. For example, the ignorance of determining causes brings about the illusion of freedom. In this understanding, a subject is precisely what imaginarily transforms the “to...” into an “of...”; a servant that regards itself as a master.

Such an analysis and criticism of the imaginary dimension inherent to subjectivity is far superior to the simple postmodernist declaration of the subject’s death. Yet I would not go so far as to state that the concept that has become untenable due to this criticism had never existed. As Gianni Vattimo has remarked, the persistence of this old, idealist notion of the subject reveals itself whenever a theory’s guiding idea consists of

reappropriation” of some allegedly “alienated” substance (such as, for example, freedom, or nature, or “second nature”, “technology”, “reason”, “progress”, or “economy” etc.).

6) What would for you be a tragedy or a comedy that allows us to grasp something unique and singular about our present (even if it might be the absence or disappearance of what makes it singular)? We are especially thinking of this, as one of your most recent books addresses the concept of shame (and in this context wide-spread phenomena like shaming) and shame does seem to have a direct relationship to both, tragedy and comedy (we here also think of the end of Kafka’s “The Trial” where K. is surprisingly survived by his own shame).

What comes to my mind as instances of such contemporaneity are comedies like “Don’t Look Up” which lovely depicts our contemporary inability to take serious warnings seriously, or the French TV series “Parlament” which wonderfully describes the ‘functioning’ of the European Union’s utterly impotent political apparatus. Not exactly a tragedy, but a good, clear-sighted description of contemporary universities’ sad, stupid and politically reactionary practices of “shaming” and “cancelling” is provided by the US TV series “The Chair”.

I have for a long time been thinking that our time is poor of good comedies (with a very few excellent exceptions, such as Barry Levinson’s “Bandits!”), and I always explained that to myself by Critchley’s thesis of the currently dominating “tragic paradigm”. Yet now I think that we lack tragedies even more. And the reason is quite interesting.

Of course, I have first to lay open what, in my view, would be examples for (good) tragedies. Here is a first interesting point I came upon. As is known, Aristotle stated that tragedy presents people who are better than people in real life, whereas comedy presents people who are worse. “Better” and “worse” have to be understood here not in a moral, but rather in an ethical and (what is for Aristotle the same) sociological sense. They mean something like “more noble” and “less noble”. At first sight, this seems pretty evident – since tragic scoundrels would hardly evoke pity and fear. Yet if we look at 20th century cinema, things are quite different. In the first place, comedy’s heroes are now often people from the highest social classes – just think of screwball comedies like “The Awful Truth”, “Libeled Lady”, “Bringing Up Baby” and “The Thin Man”; or of films like “High Society”, or Hitchcock’s “North by Northwest” and “To Catch a Thief” which are – secretly or more obviously – structured by comedy-logic.

But, and this may appear even more surprising, what can be called tragedies in modern cinema have got heroes who are gangsters. Think for example of “High Sierra”, or Jean-Pierre Melville’s “Le deuxième

souffle”, or “Le samourai”. Or, more recently, and – a great movie just as a great tragedy – Michael Mann’s “Heat”.

These films are in my view tragedies, and I think they reveal the essence of tragedy: Tragedy’s heroes always make a fundamental choice. Forced to choose between, either, a life without honor, or honor, they choose honor. Antigone, for example, could have a more or less comfortable aristocratic life, but she cannot stand the shame not to have buried her dead brother. Antigone thus shows, as Bertolt Brecht would have put it, that she fears bad life more than death. Oedipus, too, could have a pleasant life with this beautiful and clever queen, but instead he takes the challenge to investigate who killed the former king. Again honor prevails against a life without. This is in accordance with Juvenal’s rule that one should never, for the sake of bare life, give up the causes that make life worth living (“summum crede nefas animam praeferre pudori et propter vitam vivendi perdere causas”).

In psychoanalytical terms this type of choice is particularly interesting, since at first sight it appears to imply a kind of revocation of “symbolic castration”. Symbolic castration, as Lacan has put it, forces us to accept a loss, just like a robber who forces us to choose between “money or life”. Clearly we have then to give up “money” (i. e. the imaginary phallus and its enjoyment) and accept a “reduced” life, characterized by lack. Yet the choice made by the heroines and heroes of tragedy carries out the opposed operation. Since the tragic alternative is not, as it may appear, that between life and death, or success or failure, but instead it is always that between a reduced life, lacking of honor, and death. And then the heroes go for the second option, thus refusing the option of a reduced life. Honor is their “money”. They do not accept a life deprived of it. In a certain sense, one could therefore say that not only comedy, as Aristotle and Lacan have remarked, lets the phallus appear, but tragedy does as well. It aims at something great, maybe even impossible, and it refuses what it may regard as a reduced, “castrated” life.

Yet what is crucial here is the fact that this is not a regression into primary narcissism and the enjoyment of the imaginary phallus. On the contrary: sticking to a reduced life, without honor, remaining in the comfort zone of Thebes’ aristocracy, or a life with one’s queen-mother-wife would be the narcissistic choice. It is narcissism that brings one to opt for bare life and to sacrifice the causes that make it worth living. Going for these causes instead brings about symbolic castration of this narcissistic comfort. And what tragedy lets appear is the agent that carries out this castration – a phallus that is not to be described as imaginary, but as symbolic. Tragedy’s heroines and heroes demonstrate that heroism is not at all a narcissistic position, but a symbolically castrated one. Yet what castrates them is not their failure, but their audacious choice.

Now exactly the same type of choice can be observed in crime movies, carried out by the gangsters played by Lino Ventura (in “Le deuxième souffle”) and Robert de Niro (in “Heat”): they could take the money and retire to a peaceful life, but they cannot live with the idea of not having taken revenge on a traitor. They refuse the comfort zone, preferring honor to a life without it.

So, why are tragedy’s heroes in recent times mostly gangsters? – Because we find honor as a guiding system of social control today mostly in the criminal milieu, and hardly anywhere else.

And why is it then that we have got such few tragedies in cinema or series today? – I think the answer is that in our postmodern culture today we have totally lost any idea of honor. It may seem otherwise, especially if one thinks of the enormous presence of issues of “shame”, “shaming”, “cringe” etc. in our culture. And shame is just the flip side of honor (the ancient Greek word “aidos” meant both). But our postmodern understanding of “shame” is completely shameless. For instance, we do not hesitate to point with our finger at somebody whom we find embarrassing, and we “shame” people relentlessly, especially in the so-called “social” media. A true shame culture would do exactly the opposite: It would always be concerned to save people from getting ashamed. Examples for such attempts can still be seen in the movies that stem from the period and the spirit of modernity: just think of how Cary Grant in “Bringing Up Baby” desperately tries to keep public shame away from Catherine Hepburn who unknowingly walks around in her torn dress in the restaurant.

Either / or (you can also refuse the alternatives!):

- 1) Comedy or Tragedy?**
- 2) Lacan or Althusser?**
- 3) Aischylos or Sophocles?**
- 4) Lubitsch or Chaplin?**
- 5) Comedy or Stand-up Comedy?**
- 6) Films or Series?**
- 7) Perversion or Hysteria?**
- 8) Classical or pop music?**
- 9) Shakespeare or Molière?**

I would like to give you the answer of Groucho Marx (when he was asked, “Tee or coffee?”): “Yes, please!”

Dundee/Prishtina/Vienna